

In Defense of Historical Worship - From a Former Advocate of Contemporary Worship

By Pastor Sean L. Rippy

As one who has written contemporary worship (CW) services in three different congregations, started it in one congregation, who has been raised on much of its music through radio and worship services, who sought for something in CW that he thought could not be found in LW, who actually likes much of the music of CW and who believed firmly that you could make contemporary worship, Lutheran, but has now rejected CW as profane, allow me to chime in.

The primary question in relation to any kind of worship style is to determine whether it is Christian and to what extent it is Christian. For example, Voodoo rituals are said to be a mixture of Roman Catholicism and pagan rites. To the extent that their rituals are "Christian" it would still not be wise to use their worship styles or rites, as most of us would agree that there is way too much paganism (even evil demon worship) involved. I think most of us would agree that even a drop of unchristian theology or worship would be intolerable.

Furthermore, as Lutherans, we understand and believe certain things about the scriptures and about what the scriptures say about worship. In relation to the question of worship, it is important, in order for us to be Lutheran, that we determine what kind of worship is Lutheran. In essence, as Lutherans, we seek a worship that conforms to the Word of God and the Lutheran Confessions; which, in our understanding, is synonymous with Christian worship. (i.e. Lutheran worship and Biblical Christian worship are one and the same)

To this end we ask the question: "What does the Word of God say about worship?"

The Word of God teaches us:

1. To use doctrinally pure material - i.e. no heresies, nor even a hint of heresy (Gal. 1:6-10; 1 Tim. 1:3-7; Titus 1:9-2:1, etc.)

2. A particular form which includes:

Hymns (Col. 3:16; 1 Cor. 14:26; Eph. 5:19, etc.)

Prayers (2 Chron. 6:40; 7:15; Psalm 141:2; Luke 1:10; 2:37; Eph. 6:18; 1 Tim. 2:1; 1 Kings 8:33; Rev. 5:8; 8:3-4, etc.)

Reading of Scripture (Acts 13:14-15, 27; 15:21; 1 Tim. 4:13; Luke 4:16-22; Col. 4:16; 1 Thess. 5:27, etc.)

Preaching which is focused on Christ (Acts 15:21; Matt. 4:23; Mark 1:39; Rom. 10:14; 1 Tim. 4:13, etc.)

Worship which is focused on Christ Jesus (Hebrews 9:1-10:25; Matt. 2:2; Phil. 3:3; Heb. 1:6; 3:1; Rev. 5:1-14; 1 Cor. 1:22-24; 2:2; 2 Cor. 4:5; Ps. 29:2; 95:6; Zech. 14:16, etc.)

The Lord's Supper (Acts 2:42; 1 Cor. 10:16-21; 11:17-31; Rev. 19:9)

Confession of faith/Creed (Rom. 10:9-10; Phil. 2:10-11; 13:15; 1 Tim. 6:12)

Confession of sins and Forgiveness (1 Kings 8:33-34; Prov. 28:13; Ezra 10:11; Neh. 1:6-7; 9:3; Dan. 9:20; 1 Sam. 7:6; Neh. 9:2; Matt. 3:2, 6; Acts 3:19, 19:18; 1 John 1:8-10; James 5:16, etc.)

Grace and mercy coming from God, followed by our praise and thanksgiving (Ezek. 11:19-20; Ps. 103:11-14; Isa 1:18; Heb. 13:15; Ps. 9:11; 47:6; 147:1; Jer. 31:7; Heb. 2:12; Rev. 5:12; 7:12; 19:5, etc.)

3. That the worship service must be done in decency and in good order (1 Cor. 12-14, esp. 14:26-40)

4. That the worship service be reverent (Lev. 19:30; Joshua 5:14; Ps. 5:7; Heb. 12:28; Eccl. 8:12; Heb. 5:7; 1 Pet. 1:17, etc.)

The Lutheran Confessions teach us:

1. The proper, highest worship is to acknowledge one's sins and to seek forgiveness--the ebb and flow of worship: God forgives, we praise Him. ([Ap. IV, par. 154](#) ; [Ap. IV, par. 310](#) ; [LC 1, par. 16](#)

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[AC XXI par. 3](#)

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[Ap XXIV, par. 71f](#)

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2. Christ is the center of worship. ([AC XXI par. 3](#))

3. Outward ceremonies do not make one righteous. ([AC XXVII par 40f](#) ; [Ap XV par. 20-21](#))

4. Outward ceremonies ("such as the liturgy of the Mass and various Canticles, festivals, and the like") which serve to preserve order in the church may be changed, reduced or increased without sin. ([AC XXVII par. 40f](#) , [FC X](#) ; [SD X](#))

5. "We should not consider as matters of indifference, and we should avoid as forbidden by God, ceremonies which are basically contrary to the Word of God, even though they go under the name and guise of external adiaphora and are given a different color from their true one" (SD X par. 5). (I believe CW falls under this.)

"Neither are useless and foolish spectacles, which serve neither good order, Christian discipline, nor evangelical decorum in the church, true adiaphora or things indifferent" (SD X par. 7). (I believe CW often falls under this as well.)

6. "The real adornment of the churches is godly, practical, and clear teaching, the godly use of the sacraments, ardent prayer, and the like. Candles, golden vessels and ornaments like that are fitting, but they are not the peculiar adornment of the church. If our opponents center their worship in such things rather than in the proclamation of the Gospel, in faith, and in its struggles, they should be classified with those whom Daniel (11:38) describes as worshipping their God with "gold and silver" ([Ap. XXIV par. 51](#)).

(These are not attempts at comprehensive lists)

Within these guidelines there are varieties of worship: Matins, Vespers, Compline, The Divine Service (I, II in LW & pg. 15 in TLH), The Service of the Word (a.k.a. the Half-Mass--pg. 5 in TLH), The Deutsche Messe (DS III in LW), Nones, Sext, evening prayer, morning prayer, etc.

Furthermore, there are other worship services which may be created for edifying use in the church--services which must follow the prescribed forms and orders of scripture and the Lutheran confessions.

Now how does Contemporary Worship fit into all of this?

While CW is sometimes very hard to define, over the years I have realized certain commonalities between each service that is called "Contemporary". I have learned these by reading books on the subject, attending conferences, being trained by my vicarage pastors and by trial and error. I have even been told when some of my services were not "contemporary" and why. Through this process of discovery I have learned that the Esse of CW is not Lutheran or Biblical. The Esse is that which is at the core and soul of a thing. It is that which if you took it away, it would cease to be what it was and become something else. In other words, what is it that distinguishes CW and sets it apart from Liturgical worship? And does that distinction make CW unlutheran and unbiblical?

1. CW is distinguished by a focus on emotion--often referred to as "meaningful." CW has accepted the Pentecostal theology of spirituality and has therefore defined deeply-felt emotions as true spirituality. Whether it is more "emotional/meaningful" music, or more emotional/meaningful" sermons, or a more "emotional/meaningful" service, it's still the same

focus on the subjective self and emotion. In this line, charismatic preaching is important to CW. Charismatic choirs are important to CW. Enjoyable, charismatic songs are important to CW. It may be possible that the pastor who engages in CW does not have this specific understanding of spirituality; however it is reflected in his actions and in his CW.

The primary goal of CW is to pump you up, to make you feel more emotional and charged about Christ and this becomes "true" spirituality. It's a pep rally of sorts. Even when this "pep rally" mentality is toned down, the goal is still some form of emotional, uplifting experience. From the CW perspective, excitement supposedly shows your commitment to Christ.

This is contrary to the Biblical and Lutheran understanding of the Holy Spirit and true spirituality. True spirituality is not a function of emotion, but rather a function of the Word and Sacraments. True spirituality is not subjective, but objective. True spirituality cannot be found in a song but only in the means of grace.

This is also contrary to the Biblical and Lutheran understanding that the proper, highest worship is to acknowledge one's sins and to seek forgiveness. Which means more than that confession and forgiveness are offered in the service, but rather, that the entire service is one of confession and forgiveness through Word and Sacraments. The Lutheran service is penitential and joyous at the same time.

One might also argue that this is also contrary to the Biblical and Lutheran understanding that the worship service be reverent and done in decency and good order.

2. CW is distinguished by "Self-Help" or "How to" sermons: "How to be a Better Christian," "How to be a Better Husband," "How to be a Christian Leader."

This is contrary to the Biblical and Lutheran understanding of Law and Gospel preaching centered on Christ and Him crucified.

3. CW is distinguished by a lack of reverence--often referred to as less stodgy and "more spiritual" (see emotions above).

This is contrary to the Biblical and Lutheran understanding of reverence in worship.

4. CW is distinguished by Pentecostal and Baptist music. By Pentecostal I mean, the style of music was created/brought in by the Pentecostal church, the majority of authors are Pentecostal or Evangelical and/or the songs reflect Pentecostal and Baptist/Evangelical theology, especially as it relates to "meaningful/spiritual" worship (see emotions above). There's a lot of focus on the individual and what we do for God (usually praising Him) rather than on what Christ does for us. There's a lot of focus on the Holy Spirit (from the heterodoxical Pentecostal theological perspective).

This is contrary to the Biblical and Lutheran understanding of using only doctrinally pure materials.

This is not exhaustive, but sufficient, I think for the current discussion.

One may follow up by asking if it's possible to avoid some of these dangers and still use CW? In other words, "Is it possible to write a contemporary service using Baptist and Evangelical forms and make it Lutheran?"

After having been told by several "experts" in the field that one's form is predicated by one's theology and that it is therefore impossible to use Baptist/Evangelical worship forms and still be Lutheran (this principal is very old--so old it is known in Latin: "Lex orandi, Lex credendi," meaning: the law of worship is the law of belief or to put it more succinctly: "How you worship is how you believe." Form and substance are intricately united). However, after having been told that it was impossible to use evangelical forms and have Lutheran substance, I tried anyway. I followed Pastor David Luecke's understanding of "Evangelical style and Lutheran substance." I fervently believed that it was possible to blend Evangelical style with Lutheran substance and come up with a solid and unique Lutheran worship style.

This is where I got caught up in trying to write a Lutheran Contemporary Worship Service. I knew that one of the things to be avoided was this Pentecostal concept of Spirituality. It was certainly very difficult to avoid in the songs--almost impossible in fact, as most CW songs are predicated upon this singular concept (spirituality is feelings and feelings are given by the Spirit without means: "Spirit Rain," "Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me," "Blaze Spirit blaze, set our hearts on fire," etc.--which is obviously not the Lutheran understanding of spirituality or the means by which the Spirit comes to us.) Furthermore, as I was attempting to write a Lutheran liturgy which could be defined as contemporary, I quickly realized that one of the definitions of CW is that it had to be less reverent and more "spiritual" or emotional in nature. Note the titles of some of these contemporary services: "Celebration Service," "Spirit Song," etc. These titles reflect an unLutheran, dare I say unChristian emphasis upon feelings as opposed to the gift of forgiveness in Christ Jesus. (While a title such as "Celebration Service" can be defended as the celebration of Easter or Christ, sadly, oftentimes the service and sermon themselves reveal this is not the case. Also it is the juxtaposition between "celebration" and "traditional." If the "celebration" service is a celebration of joy, then what is the "traditional" service? Whether intended or not, titles teach!)

What I found was none of the "forms" for CW (for indeed there are general categories that are the same within CW) reflected a Lutheran view of spirituality and worship. It seems that while Lutherans believed and maintained that the Bible says worship must be reverent and holy, the esse (soul) of CW was less reverent (I believe it's actually irreverent) and more emotionally driven.

Coming to this realization, I tried to make a Lutheran CW which might avoid these pitfalls. Working on the principal that it surely isn't the unLutheran view of spirituality and irreverence which the people were requesting, I sat down to prepare the services. In the early days, I actually tried to write my own liturgies, working from CW sources and preprinted CW services, trying to remain faithful to the hymnal. It didn't take long before I realized: a. how difficult it is to write liturgies as opposed to sermons; b. how easily you can mislead people (heresy) when you thought you were writing something else and c. how quickly the people began to misunderstand

worship. For example, when one uses an "Evangelical" or "Pentecostal" term, such as "Praise and Worship," it carries certain meanings, which our people have learned from the Christian radio and popular Christian books, and which do not correspond to a Lutheran understanding of those words. Or when one sings "Spirit of the living God, fall fresh on me," it carries an unchristian/Pentecostal message, whether it can be understood correctly or not. The author is not saying, "Spirit of the living God, fall fresh on me, through Word and Sacrament. Oh, and by fresh, I do not mean that I have somehow lost the Spirit, since I don't feel Him right now."

Later, I began to use various combinations of already written liturgical forms. For example, I took a Gloria from one Lutheran hymn book and the Kyrie from another, trying to find more emotionally enjoyable settings--if we sang them at all (we often didn't because the more chant like tones were considered "a bland expression of the liturgy" to quote Rev. Dittmer). Also, I changed their names to reflect an easier understanding. I might place a popular hymn for the Sanctus (Holy, Holy, Holy). I printed everything out in the bulletin (a must for CW). In spite of the heretical dangers of most CW songs, we chose only "contemporary" music for the "hymns" and we had the whole band thing. I tried to choose the least objectionable "contemporary" songs and those that could at least be understood correctly. What I discovered is, they still led the people astray.

In spite of this, I was told repeatedly, "This is not contemporary worship!" I was frequently requested to add more feeling to the service (like the last pastor did) and make it more "spiritual." I received complaints like: "The service is too strict" (i.e. reverent). "I don't sense the Holy Spirit anymore." The music director repeatedly implored that the opening hymns were supposed to be "uplifting" so we can "lift the rafters" and the closing hymn had to be similarly "uplifting" lest we leave on a low note. And we had to have several opening hymns in order to achieve the "perfect" worshipful mood.

It is also of the essence of CW that the sermon not be a Law and Gospel Sermon, but rather a sermon about getting through life (as if Law and Gospel did not do this--in fact there might be something to the argument that CW sermons have changed the Lutheran understanding of how one gets through life--not by confession and absolution, but by trying harder). Oftentimes this is defended as preaching the third use of the law--however, Lutherans have always contended whether you have a section of third use or not, the Gospel must predominate. This is certainly not the case in the CW sermons I have heard. I received complaints that my sermons talked about sin. I received complaints that my sermons weren't applicable to daily life. I received complaints that I wasn't preaching 10 steps to greater health or a better marriage or whatever.

It was at this moment that I realized that what the people were requesting was not, in fact, Lutheran worship, but rather a mix of Lutheran and Evangelical/Pentecostal theology in their worship. They wanted Evangelical spirituality and Lutheran communion, two things that are not actually compatible. Eventually, one must replace the other. In fact, Pastor David Luecke has apparently realized the same thing for a few years ago he told a NOW district conference that we need to think of the means of grace as a failed strategy and adopt new forms and substance in order to grow.

What I learned in summary:

1. As a writer of liturgy you lead people astray. Even if you get one week "perfect" that's only 1 out of 52. (See below on writing liturgy.)
2. The CW songs lead people astray.
3. The people who request CW are not requesting Lutheran worship, but a hybrid of Evangelical/Pentecostal worship with a Lutheran understanding of communion added on. (Though this too shall change, I imagine, as the two theologies cannot stand side by side. The one must replace the other.)

It is often falsely believed that if a pastor can write a "good" (often defined as God-pleasing) sermon, then he can write a "good/God-pleasing" worship service. As one who has attempted to write contemporary worship services and as one who has spoken to those who "create" worship services for our hymnals, allow me to say, "This is not true." Besides the significant point that from my experience most of the pastors who go for contemporary worship do not write (or preach, or even seem to understand) "God-pleasing"--Law and Gospel sermons, and therefore do not write God-pleasing--Gottesdienst--besides that! Writing liturgy is a different task than writing a sermon. When you write a sermon, you have an entire 15-20 minutes (average) to get your point across. If you make a mistake, or misspeak, you can correct yourself. When you make a point, you can make it in several different ways, using different examples to make sure you don't miscommunicate. You can still miscommunicate, of course, however, it's less likely than when you write a liturgy. When you write a liturgy, you have one or two sentences to get it right and that without misleading anyone.

Oftentimes, you wind up writing what makes sense to you (the author) but not what makes sense to the people (a situation much easier to deal with in a sermon, where you have more time and more words to explain). This is why it takes liturgies years of writing, discussing and practice before they officially come out. Talk to the people who write liturgies for the hymnals--it takes a group (not 1 pastor) and about 2-3 years to get it right. And remember, for the most part, they're using already tried and trusted wordings! The simple truth of the matter is, pastors are not trained to write liturgies. We have not taken classes to that effect (primarily because no one thought we'd need to have that skill). And those parish pastors that attend conferences on writing worship services, often wind up taking classes from Reformed/Baptist/Pentecostal sources, thus absorbing their theology.

Furthermore, in the desire to make Christian concepts more understandable, CW has a penchant for using metaphors and language that are not scriptural and certainly not Lutheran and often misleads, even if they can be understood correctly. One series of CW services I was using used the example of a summer bus trip for the theme of the summer services. The metaphors used during the confession and absolution alone were down right ridiculous and would be humorous if not actually used in a worship service. In replacing the words of the Bible with the words of human understanding, we are leading our people further and further from the Word--a point which might be highlighted by recent Barna research indicating that Christians are becoming less and less able to understand the Bible. Could it be that we're taking away one of the primary helps to interpretation of the Bible--the Liturgy? Historically, this is how the liturgy has been used--as an interpreter of the Bible. The Liturgy helps us understand the Bible, but not

when you change the Biblical metaphors and words to "modern" metaphors and words.

Also, CW likes to use a lot of Bible passages from the O.T. to replace the wording of the liturgy (i.e. the confession and absolution) and while it is certainly laudable to use Bible passages in the liturgy which, of course, Lutherans do in the traditional services, due to the unfortunate and almost total stranglehold that Pentecostals and Evangelicals have on O.T. understanding through the radio, music and popular Christian books, and because CW often only quotes a part of a Psalm or O.T. passage (usually the praise parts--remember it's the emotional build-up that's important), it often misleads our own people into believing Lutherans have the same understanding. The Introits and Psalm readings in Lutheran Worship seem to avoid this by quoting larger sections of the Psalms, if not the whole Psalm. In other words, it's the question of how you quote the O.T. (or Bible for that matter). Are you trying to design an emotional response or center on Christ Jesus?

Very often the end result of Contemporary worship writing is Baptist/Evangelical/Pentecostal theology (form and substance) with the Lord's Supper thrown in. The Confession of sins is still there, however it is very often not a Lutheran understanding of the confession of sins (most I've seen are very weak on sin and either ignore original sin or make sin sound like we're apologizing rather than confessing. The Absolution is often very anemic and often comes off sounding like an "Oh, that's okay" sort of reaction to an apology.)

The Benediction is still there (now called a blessing), but it is not a Lutheran understanding of the Benediction. Benedictions in CW are almost always "encouragements" to go into the world and do better. This is not a Blessing!

The creeds are often vacant and if they are present they are either rewritten or simply torn down and built anew. They certainly do not represent the concept of an ecumenical creed which has been believed and confessed by all Christians for 2,000 years and unites us in that moment of confession with all those who have passed on in the faith.

Communion becomes McCommunion (a speedy version of lines where the pastor might not even commune some people at all! Certainly not Lutheran).

The vast majority of the songs (and yes I've seen a lot of them in my time as contemporary worship writer) are simply heretical. Sometimes they can be understood correctly, but that is no excuse to use songs which in their original understanding are contrary to our understanding of scripture and, without extensive study, lead the people astray. Those that are not heretical are simply not as good and solid theologically as the hymns we already have. Consider St. Paul's example of milk and meat. CW songs are, at their best, milk (or, as I like to use, cotton candy--it tastes sweet to the mouth but dissolves quickly and rots your teeth--not necessary for life and can be harmful) while hymns are meat (good, strong steak--good for you and necessary for life)--not a perfect analogy but useful. And, at worst, CW songs are heretical, leading people astray.

Popular CW songs like, "We exalt Thee" or "Great is the Lord" etc. are vague as to whom we are addressing. They can be sung by Christian, Jew and Muslim alike and are centered upon

the Reformed concept of the sovereignty of God, rather than the Lutheran emphasis upon Christ. An occasional song here or there which speaks of the sovereignty of God is indeed good, right and salutary. We have a few hymns along these lines. However, Lutheran hymnody is largely centered on Christ and rightly (ritely) so. Christ-centered hymns are a hallmark of Lutheran worship. Furthermore, it is the belief (theology) of the Pentecostal church that these songs are designed to "put God on His throne." They actually believe that you "must" begin your worship service with such songs, praising God's might and power so that God might see the great faith of the gathered congregation and come to that service with His power and might.

In trying to avoid many of these pitfalls, I found my "contemporary" worship services getting closer and closer to the Divine Service in the hymnal. The more pitfalls I avoided, the closer it got to the Divine Service.

In the final analysis I have found that, whether intended or not, the irreverence and unbiblical spirituality of CW has the ultimate effect of pointing us to our feelings and not to Christ. This makes CW profane, in the truest sense of the word.

"For profanity consists in this: for the sensual gratification or amusement of the moment to give up that which is spiritual and unseen; to be careless of that which is holy, so as to snatch the present enjoyment--in short, practically not to deem anything holy at all, if it stands in the way of present pleasure" (Edersheim, *Bible History*, Old Testament, p. 112). This was written in the context of Esau selling his birthright for a mess of pottage but has application to all things profane.

CW trades that which is truly spiritual and unseen for enjoyment (which CW defines as spiritual). Since CW defines deeply felt emotions as true spirituality, it is no surprise then that they trade true worship for felt needs--again, whether intentional or not.

Finally, remember this, CW is not new. Versions of CW have tried to come into the church through various means: Pietism, Pentecostalism, NeoPentecostalism, and now through the CW movement. As Lutherans, we have conscientiously and consistently rejected their attempts to move us away from our Christ-centered worship, until recently.

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Contemporary Worship, discusses the differences between historic and contemporary Christian worship, highlighting where contemporary worship falls short with Pr. Todd Wilken on Issues, Etc. Classics. ([mp3](#), ~25 MB, 53m48s, 2003-Oct-23) Issues, Etc., Classics were broadcast on KFYO-AM in St. Louis, and other stations around the country. Phone numbers mentioned are no longer valid.