



# A Liturgical Philosophy for *Christian Worship*

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After careful and thorough study of the Scriptures and of public worship in the church, past and present and near and far away, the framers of *Christian Worship* have proposed that the main orders of service, i.e., the settings of the Lutheran liturgy found in print and digital resources, consist of a standard liturgical text, an expansive set of propers, and a variety of musical settings.

## Objective of Christian Worship

In Christian worship, universal priests and public ministers gather together to praise God by proclaiming the gospel in Word and sacrament to summarize truth and plant it deep in the heart by means of ritual and the fine arts.

## Presuppositions

Trusting in the truths of Scripture and observing the objective of public worship over the millennia of faith, Christians have created forms for public worship which include several presuppositions.

As an act of faith, Christians gather together in public worship to announce the forgiveness of sins in Christ so that the Spirit may work through the gospel to call unbelievers to faith and strengthen the faith of believers. The action of heralding the good news for the salvation of humankind is the highest form of praise we can offer to God. We praise God by recalling and retelling the great things he has done.

Christians observe in the Scriptures that the gospel is proclaimed to head and heart, to intellect and emotion. Like all other messages, the message of salvation has a psychological dimension: it implants itself in the intellect and emotions by means of psychological stimuli, e.g., logic, repetition, beauty, etc. Unlike all other messages, the message of salvation has a supernatural dimension: a power by which the Spirit moves minds and hearts to believe and live the gospel.

With these observations in mind, Christians value psychological stimuli which serve as vehicles for the gospel message, e.g., rites, music, art, and ambiance. While vitally important for gospel communication, such vehicles remain servants of the Spirit who uses the message conveyed in these vehicles to open hearts and minds to faith. In other words, a rite may add clarity to the message, but only the gospel leads the mind to faith. Music may touch the heart, but only the gospel empowers the heart to believe.

It is vital that we observe the distinctive domains of the supernatural and the psychological in matters of faith. Based on observation, psychology can predict the outcome of psychological stimuli on intellect and emotion. Psychology cannot predict the miracle and mystery of faith. Christians are being faithful as they observe the psychology of communication—the operation of the Spirit is not magical. We dare not, however, put effective and wise psychological methodology into a cause and effect relation with faith. The Spirit works when and where he will.

The worship rites which the Lord commanded the nation of Israel to observe were created by him for a single nation located in one corner of the world with a single language and were to endure for a specific time—until Christ came. Because it was his will that the everlasting gospel be proclaimed to every nation, tribe, language, and people, the Lord did not establish a worship rite for the New Testament Church. As they develop practices and patterns for worship on the Lord’s Day, Christians understand that the rites, language, music, art, ceremony, ambiance, etc., of public worship will be different from people to people, place to place, and time to time. They also understand that the message of the forgiveness of sins in Christ must stay the same forever and will endure even in the worship of heaven.

As much as they value their freedom to make decisions about the forms of public worship so that the gospel can be heard and proclaimed by all, Christians 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, both a clear and concise confession of the gospel in all its facets as well as forms which carry the gospel to the minds and hearts of people. The former task we do with faith; the latter task with love; both tasks with joy.

## A look back

During the days after Pentecost believers in Jerusalem gathered in their homes and “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:42). In so doing, they established a simple pattern that would eventually inform the earliest Christian worship rites. They relied on the pattern they knew from the synagogue for reading and preaching the Word; they remembered the Savior’s words and actions as they participated in his holy Meal. They recalled psalms and hymns created by Old and New Testament believers. As the gospel spread and the Church grew, the role of rite, music, and art evolved to serve large assemblies in significant churches. The simple outline

that presented Word and sacrament remained intact, however, even as Christianity became the dominant faith in the Mediterranean world.

As the Roman empire divided into East and West, the church divided as well, with Rome taking the lead in the West. Differences in worship attitudes became obvious even before political divisions, however. Worship in the East reflected the exuberance and mystery of the Orient, while in the West, worship took a more cognitive course.<sup>1</sup> A certain soberness and sense attached itself to public worship as rites and music became simple and compact.<sup>2</sup> As the Christian calendar developed, worship began to focus on the life and ministry of Jesus, and churchmen developed sets of readings, prayers, and psalms that complemented the theme of the day's Gospel. The Proper became the distinctive feature of public worship in Rome and North Africa. By 400 AD we observe an order of service that WELS Lutherans would find very similar to the order of service used in their churches today. This is Western Rite.<sup>3</sup>

Between the formation of the Western Rite and the Reformation, medieval theology heaped ritual upon ritual and prayer upon prayer, so that the simplicity and sense of the Western Rite—to say nothing of the essence of the gospel—was first obscured and eventually overturned. It isn't our purpose to trace the tragic decline of theology and worship over this thousand-year span. What catches our attention, however, is that this order of service, called the mass or the liturgy, became the exclusive worship rite of churches throughout Europe.<sup>4</sup>

Unlike some of the reformers, Martin Luther had no interest in abandoning the Western Rite. He respected the voice of the ancient church and the beauty of its worship forms, but his love for the gospel as God's gift made Luther unwilling to accept the medieval additions that turned gospel into law and the sacrament into a sacrifice. In two orders of service, one a revision of the Latin mass and a second, based on the mass form but entirely in German, Luther retained the basic form of the liturgy of the Word from introit/hymn to the Creed.<sup>5</sup> In both orders, he also stripped the sacramental liturgy of all elements of sacrifice and retained only what proclaimed the gospel—with special emphasis on the Words of Institution. In so doing Luther reclaimed the soberness and sense of the Western Rite, and his two services influenced<sup>6</sup> the liturgical rites of the Lutheran Church throughout the world.

Although beset by influences from both the Reformed and Arminian branches of Protestantism,<sup>7</sup> the Lutheran liturgy, based on the Western Rite and reflecting Luther's revisions, remains the regular order of service in almost all Lutheran denominations and congregations around the world. There is no "standard" rite or "standard" musical setting, of course, just as there is no standard language for all

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<sup>1</sup> Luther D. Reed, *The Lutheran Liturgy* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1947), page 42

<sup>2</sup> See Edmund Bishop, "The Genius of the Roman Rite," in *Liturgica. Papers on the Liturgy and Religious Life of the Western Church* (Oxford, 1962; originally published 1899). Pages 1-19.

<sup>3</sup> Frank Senn, *Christian Liturgy: Catholic and Evangelical* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1997), page 142.

<sup>4</sup> Reed, page 58.

<sup>5</sup> Reed, page 72

<sup>6</sup> Reed, page 89

<sup>7</sup> A relatively brief survey of these influences is available in *Christian Worship: Manual*, Gary Baumler and Kermit Moldenhauer, editors (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1993), pages 27-36.

Lutherans or standard church design in which all Lutherans worship. The primary tenets of the Lutheran liturgical service, however—the Ordinary, the Proper, the Meal, and the historic progression of the Western Rite—are easily observed in literally all versions of the Lutheran service.<sup>8</sup>

The early leaders of what we know today as the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) struggled to see the value of the Lutheran liturgy. With roots in Pietism, many WELS pioneers found both confessional Lutheranism and liturgical worship to be confining and unnecessary.<sup>9</sup> Even after the synod’s confession of historic Lutheran teaching became firm in the 1870s, WELS did not publish a standard order of service to be used in its congregations—as almost all other Lutheran synods had done. Thus, there was little continuity in public worship from one WELS congregation to another. Each congregation or pastor used—and often translated into English—an order of service brought to America from localities in the old country. A 1917 hymnal, *Book of Hymns*, offered an order of service in English, but it bore little resemblance to the liturgical orders of other confessional Lutheran bodies which were based on the Western Rite and the Lutheran liturgy.<sup>10</sup>

In 1941 *The Lutheran Hymnal* (TLH) provided an order of service which all WELS congregations could—and eventually would—use. Essentially, the liturgical text in TLH was the Common Service (CS), published in 1888 for English-speaking Lutherans in North America.<sup>11</sup> With its roots sunk deep in the history of the Christian Church, especially the Reformation, the Common Service became the standard rite for almost all Lutheran congregations in the United States and Canada and continues to be the most compelling influence for liturgical forms in the 21st century.<sup>12</sup> With a single liturgical text and a single musical setting, *The Lutheran Hymnal* brought liturgical continuity to worship in WELS. Large city congregations and small congregations in the country all used the same service. The order served new mission starts and was translated into the languages of WELS world mission fields.

Several factors influenced an impetus in all Lutheran denominations to revise long-standing worship rites and music in the 1970s. The first was the Liturgical Movement, a world-wide effort to make the liturgy more relevant to 20th century Christians.<sup>13</sup> The second was the advent of Bible translations in contemporary English. A third was a growing desire for a degree of musical variety in worship. As WELS embarked on hymnal revision in 1985, planners recognized the need to update both the language and the music of the TLH liturgy. Published in 1993, *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal* (CWLH) offered a revised version of the Common Service alongside two new liturgical settings, the Service of Word and Sacrament (SWS) and the Service of the Word (SW). Both new services felt the influence of the most

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. recently published hymnals of major Lutheran bodies.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. the Constitution of Grace Lutheran Church, Milwaukee: “Be it resolved that our congregation, founded on the ground of the apostles and prophets, whereon Jesus is the cornerstone, makes confession of the Augsburg confession and Luther’s Small Catechism. However, never may or shall a preacher of the said congregation use the Rite of the Old Lutheran Church, whether in Baptism or the Lord’s Supper.”

<sup>10</sup> *Book of Hymns*, Form I, (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1917).

<sup>11</sup> Reed, page 182-199.

<sup>12</sup> Senn, pages 640-643

<sup>13</sup> Senn, chapter 17, pages 609-636.

recent Lutheran orders and were based on historic liturgical patterns, although Service of the Word did not include the Sacrament.

The three liturgical rites in CW share the same versions of the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds, the same Propers matching the church year, the same set of seasonal and topical Prayers of the Church, and the same general progression of the Western Rite. The Common Service and the Service of Word and Sacrament share the same order for Confession as does the Baptism rite which replaces Confession in all three services. The desire for variety was addressed by including two orders of service for Holy Communion (CS and SWS) and two orders for services without Communion (CS abridged and SW). Variety was also introduced in the musical settings of the Ordinary and the general Verse of the Day. For the first time in WELS history psalmody became a part of the liturgical rite and Verses of the Day specific to the Gospel theme became available in musical settings.

*Christian Worship: Supplement (CWS)*, published in 2008, offered a new musical setting of the Common Service: Divine Service I. A second liturgical rite, Divine Service II, considered to be somewhat experimental, included a responsive version of the Kyrie, metrical (hymn-like) settings of the Gloria, Sanctus, and Nunc Dimittis, and a Prayer of Thanksgiving following the Sanctus. The latter innovation brings the Lord's Prayer to the liturgy of the Sacrament and detaches it from the Prayer of the Church.

With its publication of the print edition of CWS in 2008, the WELS Commission on Worship produced a digital version of the new worship resource. Three years later Northwestern Publishing House completed the digital version of *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal*. These resources encouraged and expanded a practice which already had begun in WELS: producing all or part of the Sunday service in a service folder or bulletin. The printed service enables worship planners to incorporate variety from WELS and non-WELS sources without the inconvenience of inserts and page turns. Religious publishers meet copyright challenges with inexpensive and easy-to-use internet reporting systems.

## Observations

The WELS Hymnal Project approached its liturgical decisions well aware of the historic worship emphases of the Christian Church and the Lutheran Reformation as well as the practices in WELS that have developed over the past centuries.

We value the role of *The Lutheran Hymnal* which led WELS to the use of the Western Rite for the first time in its history. We note, however, that most WELS members knew very little of the meaning and history of the liturgy and were unable or unwilling to add the kind of liturgical variety which TLH anticipated. The language of that hymnal, based on the Church of England's *King James Version* and the *Book of Common Prayer*, seemed out of touch as congregations opted for new Bible translations. While some congregations became entrenched in their use of TLH, others began substituting local orders of service for the hymnal's liturgical rite. Some have described the 1970s and 1980s in WELS as the "liturgical period of the judges, where everyone did what seemed right in his own eyes."

The committees that prepared *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal* were acutely aware of a need to enable and encourage some sort of liturgical consensus in the synod. The task was challenging. On the one hand, they had to respect loyalty to the Common Service—in some cases almost a fanatical loyalty. On the other hand, they needed to include the variety so many were seeking—and they needed to do this in a single printed book.

The 1993 hymnal turned out to be a phenomenal success. Within several years of its publication almost all WELS congregations were using it. *Christian Worship: Supplement* was also well received fifteen years later. Keys to the success of both books were the updated language, the wider variety of hymns, and the pleasing musical settings of the various liturgical rites.

The publication of these two worship books, together with their digital resources, enabled and encouraged a quest for variety which the framers of the two books may not have anticipated. The orders of service in both books edit easily at the hands of experienced and inexperienced worship planners. The ability to edit liturgical settings has also revealed inconsistencies in the orders themselves. In the Common Service, for example, the Kyrie functions as part of the Confession of Sins; in other services, it functions as an independent responsive prayer. In the Common Service the Creed follows the Gospel; in other services, it follows the sermon. Divine Service II includes a Prayer of Thanksgiving and the Lord's Prayer in the liturgy of the sacrament. Other services do not include these prayers. This kind of variety makes it difficult to explain the meaning of the liturgy to adults and children and compromises a sense of personal ownership. Worshipers struggle with a lack of liturgical consistency not only within their own congregation but also from congregation to congregation in WELS.

## The Liturgical Rite in *Christian Worship*

The Hymnal Project holds to a liturgical philosophy which means to balance the textual consistency of *The Lutheran Hymnal* and the musical variety of *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal* and its *Supplement*.

We have produced and are promoting a standard liturgical text. This standard text:

- Includes the progression of the service, two forms of Confession, the texts of the Ordinary, the Creeds, the texts in the service of the Sacrament, and the Blessing;
- Is based on the priorities and order of the Western Rite and on the example of the significant Lutheran orders of the past and present;
- Enables worshipers to understand more clearly the meaning and use of the liturgy and its various parts;
- Encourages worshipers to become familiar with the most important parts of the liturgy so they can participate with ease and even from memory;

- Allows WELS members who attend other WELS congregations to experience a sense of unity as they worship with brothers and sisters in Christ;
- Presents a consistent liturgical confession to WELS members and non-WELS visitors and observers.

We have produced and are promoting Propers which have a consistent place in the liturgical rite.

The Proper is a set of readings, prayers, psalms, and hymns which adorn and complement the gospel event in focus at each service and festival.

In its own form the liturgy recognizes the value of variety and encourages it. The variety inherent in an annual review of the life of Christ is a unique feature of the Western Rite <sup>14</sup> and has been an important element in Lutheran worship since the Reformation.<sup>15</sup>

The liturgy anticipates that some elements of the Proper are set to music. Since music is an important aspect of worship, we have provided musical settings of psalms and verses which are easily accessible and useful in a variety of worship settings (*Christian Worship: Psalter*).

We have produced and are promoting a variety of musical settings of the Ordinary of the liturgy.

We sense that a desire for worship variety focuses on music more than on texts. WELS worshipers have come to expect repetition in worship forms: Confession, Creeds, the Words of Institution, the Lord's Prayer, etc., are the same Sunday after Sunday. The biblical truths in almost all liturgical texts are timeless.

On the other hand, music is not timeless. Music that flows from and speaks to the heart is different from place to place, from time to time, and even from person to person. If the liturgical texts of the liturgy are to serve in a way the liturgy intends them to serve, each congregation must select musical accompaniments that are best suited to carry the message of the gospel to the emotions of its own worshipers.

While the text of the liturgy stays the same, the musical setting may vary. The print edition of the hymnal includes three musical settings of the texts of the Ordinary, one based on the familiar settings of the Common Service and two from the wider liturgical experience. The hymnal's digital resources offer additional settings of these texts in a wider variety of musical styles, some more traditional, some more contemporary.

We have produced in both print and digital resources some textual variety besides what is available in the Proper, e.g., a set of responsive Prayers of the Church.

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<sup>14</sup> Reed, page 42.

<sup>15</sup> Reed, page 454-454.

While some opportunities for variety are in the print edition of the hymnal, a full use of musical and textual resources are available only where and when digital products are used. Pastors and congregations using only the print edition of the hymnal will have to decide how to balance the value of variety with the ease of using only the book in public worship.

## Conclusion

This article intends to summarize a liturgical philosophy for *Christian Worship*. The members of the committees that participated in planning this hymnal became convinced that at this point in WELS history the best way to achieve a balance between liturgical consistency on the one hand and desired variety on the other hand is to produce a standard liturgical text, an expansive set of propers, and a variety of musical accompaniments. It is not coincidental that this strategy affirms the balance promoted in the evolution of the Western Rite and by the Lutheran orders of the Reformation.

The liturgical philosophy for this hymnal is summarized as follows:

- We agree that the main rite for worship on the Lord's Day wisely follows the pattern of the Western Rite and the Lutheran liturgy. There seems to be little need in WELS to include or promote orders of service patterned after worship associated with Revivalism and Evangelicalism.
- We agree that the Lutheran worship rite wisely imbeds unchanging biblical truths in forms that are able to inform the intellect and touch the heart of worshipers.
- We agree that the liturgical rite in our hymnal wisely strives to balance textual consistency and musical variety.
- We agree that WELS members are best served by a single liturgical rite which invites variety by means of an expanded set of the Propers and various musical settings of the Ordinary made possible by a lesser or greater use of digital resources.
- We agree that Christian freedom guides the choice of worship forms in the New Testament Church. We agree that it is our task to testify to that freedom. We also agree that Christian freedom is guided by Christian love and responsibility and informed by the vast experience of the Church. We testify to those truths as well.

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October 2020

This statement was prepared for and accepted by the Executive Committee of the WELS Hymnal Project and first presented publicly at the National Conference on Worship, Music, and the Arts, July 13-17, 2017. It is slated for inclusion in *Christian Worship: Foundations*, a part of the 2021 hymnal suite of products. A version of this article will be published in a future issue of *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*.