

## Why Do We Worship Like This?

Many years ago, when I was a missionary in Colombia, I took a family through our adult instruction class. I hoped they were going to join. But when I met with them at the end of the class, it became clear that our church wasn't what they were looking for. They had some doctrinal concerns. But then the wife described our services as *muy solemne* – “very solemn.” She preferred a church that was much more energetic in its worship services. That's not the only time I've heard that criticism. Some people don't appreciate, understand or just plain like the way that Lutherans usually *do* church. So **why do we worship like this?**

Of all the topics in this series, this one is the hardest for me to address. Partly, that's because I don't want to reignite the worship wars in the WELS. I accidentally did that earlier this week. There's a Facebook WELS discussion group and someone was ranting about some WELS pastor somewhere who didn't wear a robe or have a traditional service. He was getting a lot of “amens” from like-minded people. And I made the mistake of questioning whether that meant he was a bad pastor. Since then, every day, my inbox has had multiple messages from people firing away at one side or the other of this debate. Here in our circuit and conference, the worship wars have been fierce, and some of our members have been in the thick of it. I don't want to start that all over again. Rather, I want to explain to the best of my ability the basic approach that most WELS congregations take to worship in hopes that you'll understand it better. Then if there are things we need to talk about, we at least have a place to start.

I think I'm a pretty conventional WELS pastor. I am personally committed to liturgical worship because I believe it's the best tool we have for “doing church.” But I don't want to be a slave to anything. That really is the ancient position of the Lutheran Church. The Augsburg Confession says: “*It is not necessary that human traditions, that is, rites or ceremonies instituted by men, should be the same everywhere.*” It does go on to say that rites and ceremonies and festivals are profitable and should be observed. But no one should think that we earn anything by them. We don't get any points with God because we use those rites and ceremonies. We're free to change them if that is what's best for our congregation.

But most WELS congregation do choose to practice liturgical worship. The liturgy is our order of service. Now, it didn't drop from heaven the way it appears in our hymnal. It's part of a great river of services and practices called the Rite of the Western Church. It developed over centuries and there are lots of variations and innovations within it. But there is a basic structure. Maybe the simplest way to understand liturgical worship is that it means a service that's within that broad tradition and that follows the church year and that emphasizes the word and sacraments.

What ties all those things together? They all put Jesus at the center of our service. The church year takes us through the life of Christ every year. We're going to start over again soon in Advent and wait for his arrival. We'll see his birth at Christmas, his ministry in Epiphany, his sufferings and death in Lent and then his resurrection and ascension in Easter. Then we'll spend the second half of the church year focusing on what it means to know Jesus. The Rite of the Western Church also focuses us on Jesus. It's made up of two kinds of things: things where we serve God and things where God serves us. That's really important. Many people who don't practice liturgical worship forget that dynamic. They often make church all about us serving God. Certainly, we do serve God when we worship. The offering and hymns are us giving praise and service to God. But the biggest part of the liturgy is God serving us.

Think about it: what else is in a typical church service here at Peace? Readings, right? That's God serving us. The law condemns our sin and the gospel forgives us. The sermon. If it's done right, the same thing applies. The sermon brings the Holy Spirit to condemn us and drive us to repent and then to forgive us and heal us and strengthen our faith. Even when the sermon gives us direction for our lives, God still works through the gospel to give us the power to make those changes. What else is in the service? The Lord's Supper. Baptism. Those are pure gospel. God comes to us personally and assures us that all our sins are forgiven. Confession and absolution. We stand here and admit that we deserve nothing but death and hell. And then God speaks through the pastor and forgives us.

The Creed is us confessing. But again, it's rich in gospel content, so the Holy Spirit works. The liturgical songs we sing do praise God. That's us again. But even then, true praise for God is to confess what

he has done for us in Christ. Everyone who hears those words – everyone who sings those words and thinks about what he or she is saying – is served by the Holy Spirit working through the gospel. When we pray, we speak. But we appeal to God to save us and help us because he loves us and wants to serve us.

Now, when it comes to the liturgy itself, some things are always the same while other things vary. The idea is to give you a framework so that you don't get lost in a sea of "what's coming next?" We could talk about robes and stoles and banners, all of which emphasize where we are in the church year, which is to say, they're all designed to focus us on Christ. Even robes and stoles do that, because this is the only situation where you see them. They remind you that this isn't a social club or a charitable foundation. This is church. This is a worship service where God comes to us through his called ministers and serves us with word and sacrament.

There is one more thing to say about the liturgy: it connects us to the broader church. If you go to Germany or South America and attend a liturgical service, you can get an idea of what's going on, even if you don't speak the language because you know the liturgy. That's also where tradition comes in. We're part of a continuum of worship that extends back two thousand years to the early church. Now that can be grossly overstated. The Rite of Western Church is constantly changing and adapting. So there is a tension between tradition and innovation. If it's done right, that dynamic of the old and the new is always there.

Maybe that's a good place to admit that there are difficulties to liturgical worship. I grew up with the old hymnal, and I was fully committed to it. But singing "Glory be to God on high" slowly and painfully week after week really got old. The first and greatest difficulty is when pastors like me just don't put enough time and effort and creativity into planning and executing the worship service. If it feels like it's always the same, that's probably why. I will confess that I do not put nearly enough time and energy into planning the service. That needs to change. A new hymnal is scheduled to come out in 2021, but can we really wait five years before we put the kind of energy we need into planning our service?

Another issue that I see is placing too much emphasis on the forms of the liturgy. When we act as if the tradition of the ancient church is a rule that we have to follow or we're dishonoring God, that's just wrong. When we assume that this is the only way that God can be glorified, we are departing from the historic confession of the Lutheran Church. Let me be clear: I have no desire or plan to institute contemporary worship here. I do not have the gifts or the training to lead that style of worship and I do believe that liturgical worship does a better job of focusing on Christ. But that does not mean that it's sinful to do something else. When we enslave ourselves to the forms of the past or when we condemn the choices other Lutherans make because we don't like them, that's a sinful attitude.

But there's a ditch on the other side of the road, too: our Lutheran forefathers were not stupid. They did not live in ivory towers. They were not legalists who were determined to enslave the church to ancient forms. They made carefully considered decisions out of deep love and concern for the people of God. For us to simply dismiss all that they've taught us because we think we're smarter than they were, is simply arrogance. We have every right to ask if what they did applies to us. But to dismiss them as irrelevant is to throw away gifts that God gave his church.

Finally, to slander people who think differently or to engage in white hot debates over things that God gave us to promote our unity is simply wrong. We could probably mention other practical problems. Maybe you'd like to talk about those more. The most obvious is people finding the liturgy to be confusing and hard to follow. But don't we have to admit that could be true with almost anything else we might do? We certainly can improve what we're doing. We certainly are allowed to move away from liturgical worship. But the real problem isn't having the liturgy or not having the liturgy. The real problem is our sinful hearts: they don't want to pay attention and work at getting something out of the service. They want to be entertained. They don't want to do the hard work of planning and being creative. They want to fall into the same old rote thing over and over again. Our sinful hearts just don't want to be served by God the way that he wants to serve us: with law and gospel, word and sacrament. They want God to do us favors, to stroke our egos and to commit to the cult of self-esteem. They want to remake God in our image and have an on-demand experience that we can sample when we feel like it and take what we want.

All that is sin and arrogance. And it deserves God's punishment in hell forever. But there is no better reason for us to come here than to confess our sin and arrogance and hear again that Jesus has taken all that sin away. You heard that when you confessed your sins at the beginning of the service. You will experience it

when you kneel for communion and receive the body and blood of Christ. At that moment, God will say to you, "You are forgiven." And God has called me to say it now: you are forgiven for having that sinful heart. You are forgiven for all the ways that sinful heart pulled you away from him. You are forgiven for all the ways you failed to take advantage of the gospel when God gave it to you. You are forgiven for griping and judging and condemning. You are forgiven for every sin that you've ever committed and for every sin in your heart and mind, even the ones you didn't know were sins. You are forgiven now and forever because Jesus lived in your place as the only perfect worshiper of God, just as he lived in my place as the only perfect worship leader. Then he died for all the sin in our hearts and all the sin in our lives. We are forgiven because Jesus rose and wiped away all record of our sin. And he gave us the gospel in word and sacrament and he gathered us into this congregation and he sent me here to announce that forgiveness again and again until we reach heaven.

So do you like liturgical worship? My guess is that people who come every Sunday probably do. People for whom it's totally foreign and confusing probably don't. But how much does that matter? The church is not about giving the people what they want, just like it's not about what I want or prefer. But at the same time, no pastor can ignore the desires and preferences of the people God called him to *serve*. So once again, there is a tension here. It's complicated by the need to reach out with the gospel. If we continue to do liturgical worship, we need to make it accessible to people who've never experienced it before, because worship needs to be about serving God's people with that good news: you are forgiven.

That is the whole point of all our church services. You have what Christ won. We are free to do things differently. But we are not free to lose the emphasis on Christ. We are not free to abandon the gospel for a feel good message or approach. We are not free to sacrifice the content of our worship service for a style that we might like more. We need to focus on Christ. And when we do, the Holy Spirit works. By the grace of God, I will strive to do a better job of planning and leading worship here. I call on you to commit yourselves to being here and participating and yes, contributing to discussions about how to make our worship better. And to immerse yourself in all the gospel God gives us here. Amen.