

## Seven Reasons Why Lutherans Should Not Jump on the "Contemporary Worship" Bandwagon

It seems as though a lot of Lutheran churches these days are ditching the historic liturgy and jumping on the "contemporary worship" bandwagon. This post details a number of reasons why I think that this is a bandwagon that Lutherans should avoid. My experience as an evangelical has mainly been with non-liturgical worship of a "blended" type - i.e. praise songs with a few hymns interspersed here and there. However, the following criticisms still apply. They are not in any particular order.

1. *Theological Shallowness.* Modern "praise songs" are, by and large, very theologically shallow compared to hymns. They tend toward the vague and many of them speak generically of God rather than Christ - and even when they do speak of Christ they can be remarkably vague about what He did. "There's Just Something About That Name" and "Bless That Wonderful Name of Jesus" come quickly to mind. This sort of thing encourages, in my mind, the assumption of the Gospel that is all too prevalent in evangelicalism.

2. *Definition of Contemporary - How does one define "contemporary"?* The truth is, most folks who want to introduce "contemporary" music into their churches will never be up on what is contemporary enough to really be cutting-edge and relevant to today's youth. I hear Lutherans discussing the merits of praise songs from the eighties! How is this relevant, exactly? It might be relevant to those who are in their forties and fifties, but certainly not to teens! In twenty years we might be debating the merits of a song that came out in 2009.

The problem with selecting songs on the basis of "relevance" and how "contemporary" they are is that today's "relevant" and "contemporary" songs are tomorrow's moldy oldies. It is much better to select songs on the basis of Christian content than on the basis of something as fickle as "relevance."

3. *Inward focus vs outward focus.* In my experience and observation, praise songs tend to be very focused on what is happening inside the person singing rather than focused on what is outside of us - the objective reality of what God has done, and continues to do, through Christ. For example, here's a song we used to sing at my old evangelical church:

Surely the Presence of the Lord is in this place;  
I can feel His mighty power and His grace.  
I can hear the brush of angel's wings,  
I see glory on each face;  
Surely the Presence of the Lord is in this place.

In this song, how do you know the Lord is present? Because you feel it, you have an experience, etc. As Lutherans, our feelings are not the gauge of whether God is present among us. God is present among us in His Word and Sacraments. This is an objective reality whether I feel it or not. Christ died for my sins and rose from the dead for my justification, regardless of whether or not I feel it to be true.

4. *False assumption that new is good, old is bad.* This is an artifact of our constantly changing society. The assumption is that people will think the liturgy and historic Christian worship is old, crusty and boring, so we should change it to accommodate what modern people like. However, the false assumption here is that people want the same thing they get day in and day out in their everyday lives. Lots of people are looking for something deep, meaningful and stable. In my view giving up the liturgy for contemporary worship is like trading a priceless treasure for a cheap trinket someone bought last week at the dollar store. The world's thinking is already only two inches deep. Why should we want the church to be that way too?

5. *Focus on human activity rather than on God's activity.* The fact is many praise songs seem to have a sort of "me" focus - on me and my acts of worship and service rather than on what God has actually done. "Everything within me worships you" is a line I particularly remember having trouble with as an evangelical when what I was really feeling was "everything within me is tainted with sin." Many praise songs boil down to: I will do this, I will do that. I will serve You in any number of ways. I am worshiping, praising and adoring. Often missing or simply assumed is why we should be doing these things, and when it is present it is often vague. The emphasis is on what we are doing for God rather than on what God has done for us.

I recall a praise song that was popular years ago called "The Heart of Worship" whose chorus included the line, "It's all about You, Jesus." But ironically, the rest of the song was basically about us, what was going on in our hearts, and what we were doing to worship God. It was supposed to be all about Jesus but there was nothing in the song that said anything about what Jesus had done for us.

6. *False assumption that people are coming to church to be entertained.* If I want to be entertained, I will go to a concert, not a church. If entertainment is what I am looking for, I will watch my favorite TV program. Church is not the place I think of when I think "entertainment." And this is not a bad thing, because church is not about entertainment.

This point is somewhat related to point 4. Are people really looking for "church as entertainment" these days? When I can get megabytes and megabytes of shallow entertainment on my iPhone, why would I go to church to get more? And even if there are those out there who do expect the church to entertain them, here's the thing - people are not saved because we entertain them to make the message more palatable to their fallen human will. No, they are saved because the Holy Spirit, working through the Word, convicts people of their sin and creates faith in their hearts.

7. *What you confess determines how you worship (and vice versa).* I am convinced that behind "contemporary worship" is a different confession from that which Lutherans confess. This sums up all of the other points.

When I first started attending a Lutheran church I was struck by how participating in the liturgy was like being saturated in God's Word. Everything that is done gives the worshiper more of the Word - the hymns, the prayers, the chanting, the readings, the sermon, the Eucharist - it's like swimming in a sea of wonderful, life-giving Scripture. Why is this the case? Because Lutherans believe that the Word of God is what creates faith, that it's living and active, sharper than a two-edged sword, that the Gospel is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes. In Lutheranism, the Holy Spirit comes through the Word of God (and the Sacraments - the Word attached to visible elements).

There is a reason why evangelicals worship the way they do - because 1) they largely believe that the Holy Spirit comes apart from the Word of God and 2) they largely believe that faith is an act of the will rather than God's gift through the Word. Thus the songs that are more about God "touching your heart" and "drawing us close" during worship - the Holy Spirit coming in a mystical way through our emotions - than about what God has objectively done and is still doing in Christ. Thus all the frantic efforts to be culturally relevant in order to appeal to human will.

What does it say when Lutherans worship like evangelicals? It says, "we believe no different than what evangelicals believe." When Lutherans worship like evangelicals, they are confessing that they don't really believe that the Word of God is THAT powerful. They are confessing that what happens inside of us is more important than what was done outside of us. They are confessing that what we do for God is more important than what God did (and still does) for us.

What would I have done if, on that fateful morning when I first decided that I needed to see Lutheranism in practice, I had walked into a church full of Lutherans who were worshipping like Baptists or Pentecostals?

I would have walked away and never come back. At least not to that particular church.

Why?

Because there's no hope for me when all I am pointed to is myself - to my feelings, to my obedience, to my devotion, to my worship. Hope only comes from outside of me - through the external Word and Sacraments delivering Christ crucified for my sins.

"Contemporary worship" seems to be less about God's Word and more about entertaining us, making us feel good and pointing us to ourselves while at the same time claiming to be Christ-centered. But in my experience there is nothing more Christ-centered and cross-focused than the liturgy done by Lutherans who are not ashamed to be Lutherans.

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