

CONTEMPORARY WORSHIP - PRO AND CON

Part 1 - Pro - Presented by Jeff Londgren

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When asked to do this paper I made some inquiries to members of the assignment committee regarding what they meant by contemporary worship. A comment was made: "When you see a church sign which says that a traditional service is at 8 am, and a contemporary service is at 10 am, we are talking about that type of contemporary service."

My personal participation in contemporary worship is limited to a visit made to the WELS congregation in Toronto, Canada where much of the music was provided by the congregation's steel drum band, and I don't remember the details of the service very well. Most of my research has been done by contacting congregations in our circles who use contemporary services in an attempt to clarify what we are talking about in this paper. I have contacted the campus ministry in Madison, WI (WELS), Abiding Shepherd, Cottage Grove, WI (ELS), St. Marcus, Milwaukee, WI (WELS), and St. Mark, Green Bay, WI (WELS). The website for St. Mark Ev. Lutheran Church (WELS), Green Bay, WI posts an good explanation of the difference between their traditional and contemporary services.

What will you experience at St. Mark Lutheran traditional worship service?

The traditional worship service at St. Mark Lutheran Church is centered on the worship of the true God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The style of the music and worship follows a liturgical format based on the Western rite (600 A.D.) printed in Christian Worship - A Lutheran Hymnal. The organ is the main instrument used for the service filled with beautiful Lutheran hymns and chorales. The pastor wears an alb. The teaching is centered on the Bible and provides practical applications to life's situations. The messages are inspirational and will encourage and challenge you in your relationship with God, family, and friends. The traditional service worship experience is not only intended to facilitate worship for you during the service time but also to inspire and prepare you in your daily worship throughout the coming week. St. Mark offers members an opportunity to approach God's table in Holy Communion - His supper in which he blesses us with strength and forgiveness bi-weekly. This service is attended by people of all ages. Most attendees dress in business attire. However, more casual attire including the jean style is also common.

What will you experience at a St. Mark Lutheran contemporary worship service?

The contemporary worship services at St. Mark Lutheran brings together dynamic music, compelling dramas, moving real life stories, and stirring Bible-based teachings. In a sense there is something for everyone. (There is) a praise ensemble consisting of an electronic piano, electric guitar, acoustic guitar, drum kit, bass guitar, violins, woodwind instruments and three or four singers. The music is upbeat, vibrant and worshipful. The music is performed in a professional manner and with relevancy yet, there is always a sense that God is the focus. You will also experience children's sermons for those 5th grade and younger. The children's sermon is a brief message geared to reach into the hearts and lives of our young children! The majority of the service is displayed on the screens. The pastor wears a suit. On non-communion weekends the service offers a Question & Answer period to help apply God's timeless truth to daily life. The teaching is centered on the Bible and provides practical applications to life's

situations. The messages are inspirational and will encourage and challenge you in your relationship with God, family, and friends. Entertaining and thought provoking dramas relating to the message are regularly presented and enhance your worship experience. The dramas bring the theme for the service to bear upon everyday life situations. St. Mark offers members an opportunity to approach God's table in Holy Communion - His supper in which he blesses us with strength and forgiveness bi-weekly. Dress is often casual with some people wearing jeans and others wearing suits and dresses.

In talking with various churches I have concluded that there are three major differences from traditional services when we speak of contemporary worship. One is that the traditional order of service is not used. The other two differences deal with the musical style and an informal atmosphere.

The Musical Style Is Modern

The primary instruments will be the guitar or piano rather than an organ. Some churches use pre-recorded music. The style is more “upbeat” - not hymn style, nor chant style - using modern harmonies and patterns. The lyrics are modern English usage in a popular song style. Overhead screens are the popular way to display the lyrics. I have had a difficult time describing what appears to me to be the the musical style. My take on the the modern popular style of contemporary services would be something like that of the 70’s pop group, the Carpenters, or the recordings of singer Amy Grant arranged in a simplified manner for group singing.

Less Formality

The Pastor does not wear a robe. The pastor does not chant nor are there sung responses. The atmosphere of the service is more relaxed.

TRADITIONAL WORSHIP DEFINED

As a definition of “traditional worship” the common consensus seems to be that when we use our historic liturgies and orders of service from our hymnal that this is the traditional service. Marks of the tradition service will be pastors in robes, chanting, hymns from the hymnal, and organ accompaniment. The sermon would typically be a lecture style rather than powerpoint presentation. Perhaps another term for our traditional services might be “classic” which I believe captures the enduring beauty, appeal and power of our worship heritage.

THE UNIQUE STRENGTHS OF CONTEMPORARY WORSHIP.

Music that is more appealing to our culture

The music seems to be the most distinctive appeal of contemporary worship. The style of music of our liturgy and hymns of our classic worship with organ accompaniment is unappealing to many in our culture today, especially to those not raised with the traditional service. The organ is a turn off for many people. Many people do not enjoy the chanting type of liturgical music nor do they enjoy the typical hymn style of songs.

Contemporary services avoid using the organ, chanting, and hymn style of songs. Since contemporary services would appeal to those who have been turned off by the traditional styles of music in our church we can call this different style of music a strong point. This style of music is not just for the young or newcomer; I have been told that many long time members of churches prefer the contemporary musical style.

In dealing with the lyrics some have commented that many praise song lyrics are simplistic. That may be true but that does not make them necessarily improper to use. Some might say the "I am Jesus' little lamb" or "Jesus Loves Me This I Know" are simplistic, but they both made the Hymnary and most of us find them appropriate for worship. On the other hand there are hymns that have confusing lyrics. Note hymn #462 from the hymnary: "As after the water-brooks panteth The hart, when it sinks in the chase. So thirsteth my soul as it fainteth For Thee, O my God, and Thy Grace." These lyrics probably befuddle the average American. The same issues with changing to modern English Bible translations apply to our lyrics and liturgy. I wonder if one of the appeals of using contemporary worship songs is that they are so much easier to follow than many of our hymns.

Less formal and more genuine atmosphere in worship.

Contemporary services usually try to avoid the formalities associated with traditional worship. The pastor does not wear a robe. The order of service is simpler with the words for singing typically on a screen in the front of the church. The formality of the traditional order of service gave an impression to some that the church was just going through the motions - empty ritual. For many, a contemporary service seems to breathe a spirit of genuineness when compared to the traditional service.

In talking to pastors and others about this aspect of traditional worship most have quickly assured me that it is unfair to portray the historic liturgy and traditional styles that we use as overly formal and not genuine. Those who understand the forms and the meaning can and do find great and genuine satisfaction in this style of worship. An apparent reality in our culture is that many do not. It is unfortunate that the perception many have of our classic service is one of empty ritual.

I recently had a discussion with a high school teen in my church in which I was telling her the classic bit of humor about the pastor having trouble with his cordless mike during the service and having said, "The Lord be with you," he added softly, "There seems to be something wrong with the mike." The congregation responded. "And also with you." Since we use the phrase "And with thy spirit." I explained how some churches have updated the response to "and also with you."

This teen is confirmed and fairly sharp. However, she told me as I explained my feeble attempt at humor that she thought, "And with thy spirit." meant the Holy Spirit or something. I am not bothered so much by her not understanding a part of our liturgy as I am bothered by the "or something." This member and probably many others seem to accept the notion that our liturgy is an acceptable blur at times when it comes to having a meaning. We may need to do more explanation of our liturgy and hymns, or replace some of these mysterious phrases with things that are clear. Perhaps the preaching advice should be applied to our worship, "Don't have a service that can be understood, have a service that can't be misunderstood."

A small debt we might owe to contemporary worship is that it does force us to re-evaluate our classic worship and make sure we do not have bits and pieces of rite without meaning.

More Background And Setting In The Teaching

Comments from those doing contemporary services imply that the message and theme of the service is more pointed and the approach more “didactic” as one pastor put it. Typical sermons that we usually preach for our congregations assume a fairly good background of Bible history and doctrine. Many have come to the conclusion that this assumption is no longer as true as it might have been a generation ago. Our culture has become less Christian and more Biblically illiterate. A high school teen in my church is on the Quiz Bowl team. Recently the question for his team was “What color robe was put on Jesus while on trial.” A fellow teammate answered purple. No, the official correct answer was scarlett. True, Matthew 27:28 in both the KJV and NIV does say that Jesus was wearing a scarlett robe, but there are also several references of Jesus wearing a purple robe.

Another quiz bowl question. Who said, “A house divided against itself cannot stand.” The teen answered, “Jesus”, which was followed by snickers from his teammates. No, the official correct answer was Lincoln. Yet Lincoln was quoting the words of Jesus recorded in the Bible.

I assume people that do things like come up with questions for quizbowl are somewhat intelligent. However, the knowledge of the Bible seems to have been extra thin regarding these questions. No wonder a recent issue of *Time* had for its cover story an article about teaching the Bible in public schools. The point - people are not educated if they don't have some familiarity with the Bible. It appears that even *Time* magazine can see that our culture is becoming Biblically illiterate and considers it is a problem.

I have been encouraged not to assume the people listening to me preach know the Bible story or Bible character that I might mention in the sermon. I was admonished to give more of the background so everyone knows what I am talking about. If the culture is becoming more and more ignorant of the Bible, “didactic” preaching may be a strong draw in contemporary worship. When I talked to a member at the WELS Campus Ministry in Madison, Wisconsin, the comment was made that it is a regular occurrence for people to come to visit their services that have never been to church before and have no idea of what is in the Bible. The service was designed to be meaningful to such guests.

Variety

I enjoy singing the old songs. I came to love the Te Deum in our hymnal from Bethany chapel where we sang it every Wednesday. I don't know if I had ever sung it before coming to Bethany. One of the joys of worship for me while going to school at Bethany was learning the “Bugenhagen” service and experiencing the custom of having the pastor chant much of the liturgy. It was new and refreshing to me. The church I grew up in had no pastoral chanting. I especially enjoyed the way in which Wilhelm Peterson sang when he was serving Mt. Olive.

I enjoy singing the new songs. I was introduced to the contemporary piece, “First Song of Isaiah” at a Reformation Festival at this church (Holy Cross, Madison, WI) when I vicared in Sun Prairie in 1981. It was a choir piece and I liked this one so much that over the years I have

tried to regularly incorporate it into worship when I can get a choir to learn it. Apparently others like it as well. A simpler version made it into NPH's *Let All the People Praise You*. A part of this song also made it into Christian Worship as part of the sung psalms. My impression is that there are many more songs like it - doctrinally sound and musically powerful. I would hope we would make the most of these treasures.

Variety in worship may also help our members understand parts of our service better. Saying the same thing a different way may help clarify the meaning. If we occasionally use, "The Lord Be With you. And Also With You," then most people will understand what "And with thy spirit," means. (I actually followed my own advice and in my recent Easter service had the congregation speak, "And also with you.")

Youth

Contrary to what many believe, I am not convinced contemporary services are especially appealing to our teens but it does give at least one more worship option to a segment of our culture that is often considered nearly impossible to please. I like to think that, just as an occasional teen develops an appreciation for classic music over time, that many of our youth come to appreciate our classic worship as well. I was pleased when in the past year a high school senior in my congregation told me how he enjoyed the musical setting of the Te Deum. But for the many who don't develop this love for the liturgy and feel out of place in our classic service, a contemporary worship may provide an alternative where teens and others may feel more at home with piano and guitar and look forward to praising the Lord singing the "First Song of Isaiah" and other songs of that style. If so, "Hallelujah!"

Involvement of congregation

Comments have been made that people don't sing along with contemporary songs because the songs are not very singable. That is certainly possible. However, I believe a number of members do not sing much with our classic hymns and liturgy either. It almost seems like singing, except for the professionals, went out of style - most notably for males. If that is the case contemporary worship might be more conducive to singing because of the more familiar styles of songs done in a less intimidating setting.

Technology

Technology is not exactly part of contemporary worship. However, it seems as though contemporary worship more easily incorporates things such as computer generated lyrics on an overhead screen and powerpoint sermon presentations. Most authorities agree that multi-sensory teaching helps get the point across more effectively and remembered longer.

Drama in Worship

The only time I have done anything close to drama in worship is the children's Christmas service in which there is occasionally some acting, costuming and props. It can be very precious, and when done even remotely well, drama can really drive home a message and make it memorable.

In Touch with Today's World

Using modern language, modern technology, modern instrumentation for music and a current cultural preference for informality certainly helps convey the truth that the church and its message are also as current and needful today as in the past. This may be an effective approach to those who perceive the church as a quaint relic of the past.

More Worship Preparation

This may seem to be a criticism of contemporary worship in that it can take more time and effort to prepare this type of worship service than the traditional service. Computerized lyrics for singing and various audio/visual presentations must be done ahead of time. Musicians need to rehearse. If there is a drama, it needs to be prepared. However, I suggest that the extra effort might make pastor and congregation take the worship service a bit more seriously and provide a discipline to do the best possible presentation of the Word along with offering our best in corporate worship.

Removing Obstacles

I have been told that members of churches that have contemporary services are more comfortable inviting others to come to a contemporary worship service than they were inviting members to a traditional service. The combination of more modern music, less formal service and the more didactic approach all seem to work together in making the visitor feel more comfortable about being in church and members more comfortable inviting unchurched friends and family. I find this to be a very strong plus for contemporary services. I wonder how many of our people don't want to invite people to church services because we are convinced people are not going to feel very comfortable in our classic worship. I know that I have suggested that members should invite the unchurched to attend my Adult Bible Class rather than our worship because my sermon and service is usually geared for those who have a background of the Bible.

CONCLUSION

Contemporary worship, as we have defined it in contrast to our classic worship, may not stand the test of time. However, there are indications that it may find a permanent place in our churches. Perhaps some of you, having heard some of the possible benefits of using contemporary worship, may want to consider it a bit more seriously. For those who cringe at the idea of possibly losing our classic worship, I suggest that it is very possible that the explorations into contemporary music may heighten the appreciation of the traditional service in the long run.

Whatever form, style, format, setting we may use, let the faithful proclamation of the Word of God be the foundation and there will be God-pleasing worship.