

**FROM POP STARDOM  
TO LITURGICAL STEWARDSHIP:  
A PASTOR'S PERSPECTIVE ON POP CULTURE AND  
LUTHERAN WORSHIP**

**Mark C. Anderson**

## **CONTENTS**

<b>AUTHOR'S PREFACE</b>	<b>Page 3</b>
-------------------------	---------------

<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>Page 4</b>
---------------------	---------------

## **CHAPTERS**

<b>I. The Melody of Faith: God's Work in Us</b>	<b>Page 9</b>
---	---------------

<b>II. Captive To Sin...And the Word</b>	<b>Page 13</b>
--	----------------

<b>III. Hits or Hymns? Worship in the Age of Pop Culture</b>	<b>Page 17</b>
--	----------------

<b>IV. The Soundtrack of Rebellion</b>	<b>Page 21</b>
--	----------------

<b>V. The Battle for Harmony: Can Traditional And Contemporary Worship Coexist?</b>	<b>Page 26</b>
---	----------------

<b>VI. Navigating Pop Culture: The Challenge For Lutheran Worship</b>	<b>Page 34</b>
---	----------------

<b>Final Thoughts</b>	<b>Page 39</b>
-----------------------	----------------

## **APPENDICES**

<b>Appendix A: Incorporating Pop Music And Language Into The Traditional Liturgy</b>	<b>Page 42</b>
--	----------------

<b>Appendix B: The Nuts and Bolts of Worship Planning</b>	<b>Page 44</b>
---	----------------

<b>Appendix C: Gearing Up - Guitars, Basses, Drums, and Keyboards</b>	<b>Page 50</b>
---	----------------

<b>Appendix D: Good Hymn, Bad Hymn</b>	<b>Page 57</b>
--	----------------

<b>Questions</b>	<b>Page 65</b>
------------------	----------------

## AUTHOR'S PREFACE

Emerging from the whirlwind of 1960s Hollywood pop music culture, I found myself at a crossroads. The glitz and glamour of the entertainment world had been my playground. It was an era marked by vibrant creativity and explosive rebellion. Popular music was not just entertainment; it was a powerful form of expression that challenged the status quo and pushed boundaries.

Pop music has become a dominant force in the musical landscape, shaping the tastes and preferences of several generations. The accessibility, emotional character, catchy melodies, and wide reach of pop music have contributed to its pervasive presence in everyday life. This widespread exposure has created a preference for the styles, rhythms, and structures commonly found in pop music.

During that era, many churches were eagerly embracing elements from popular culture, unaware of or downplaying the impact of the conflicting values. The essence of pop music—celebrating youth, glorifying rebellion, and chasing fleeting moments—clashed starkly with the solemnity and stability of Lutheran worship.

The church's initial enthusiastic embrace of pop music in worship settings often stemmed from a desire to remain relevant and attract younger congregants. However, this well-meaning adaptation has been a slippery slope, often leading to a dilution of the church's theological, liturgical, and musical heritage.

The uncritical incorporation of pop music and pop culture elements into traditional worship has resulted in distancing individuals from the foundational traditions that originally nurtured and sustained their worshipping communities. As a result, many people today find it challenging to connect with or appreciate the traditional music of the church.

This essay isn't meant to be an exhaustive analysis of pop music and the church. That is beyond my competency, at any rate. What I offer here are a collection of personal reflections, my 'second thoughts' drawn from my experience, aiming to spark thought and conversation.

These reflections are an invitation to rethink and reclaim the power of traditional worship. I make the case for preserving our musical and liturgical tradition even as musical and cultural tastes keep shifting beneath us like quicksand. And at the heart of it all, I underscore the critical need to sync our worship practices with the divine, proactive initiative of God's Word.

My journey from being raised in a Lutheran parsonage, to the electric energy of the rock n' roll stage, to the sacred space of the pulpit gives me a unique lens to scrutinize the clash and blend of contemporary musical tastes with the traditions of Lutheran worship.

Like many from my generation, I embraced the transgressive solidarity of youth by joining a garage band in Southern California. It was 1961. By the time I headed off to college in 1967, my rapid rise as a bass player in Hollywood had led to records (yes, actual vinyl!), concert tours, TV appearances, a movie credit, and connections with rock star names you would instantly recognize. I was completely immersed in pop culture, happily isolated in my adolescence by a support system that effectively defied the adult world.

During my college and seminary years, the spirit of popular culture that I had soaked up during my rock 'n' roll days initially tempted me to see the traditional worship and music of the Lutheran church as outdated and irrelevant, maintained by old 'fuddy duddies', like my pastor father, who I was convinced were stuck in the past. At the stubborn insistence of a rebellious generation the stable, churchly world of worship I had grown up with was giving way to endless, restless, experimentation. When that older world was discussed, it was often in adversarial terms. It wasn't hard to

keep up this tantrum of rebellion, largely because the adults had surrendered the battlefield! To put it a bit too broadly, but to make a point, the "Greatest Generation" who had firmly said "No!" to fascism couldn't muster the same resolve with their own children.

At the same time, I'm grateful for the influence of pastors, seminary professors, and laypeople who held the line. They helped me remove the curtain that had been drawn over the rich inheritance of Lutheran worship. They helped me cross the barrier into adulthood. They helped me grow up, understand the value of wisdom, and in that sense, embrace the words of the mature apostle, "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became a man, I gave up childish ways."

I don't want to give the impression that I became a stubborn traditionalist. Throughout my years in pastoral service, I often used my skills as a bassist and guitarist, and though I did it somewhat reluctantly, I worked on integrating good popular music into worship. Now, defining what exactly qualifies as 'good' is a whole other story! And we'll get to that.

I write out of love for the Gospel of God's free, unmerited grace in Jesus Christ and a genuine concern for the well-being of God's people who journey within the Lutheran tradition. For over five decades, I was entrusted with the task of teaching and nurturing the liturgical legacy of the Lutheran church, first as a youth director and later as a pastor. And let me tell you, it's been quite a journey!

Sure, pop music can bring fresh energy and ideas to worship, and its use in the church today is widespread. So, I have no illusions about turning the tide! But I am not attempting a balanced analysis here. I am not writing as an objective observer. I've been on both sides of the revolutionary barricade. It is my contention that, despite its popularity, the uncritical use of pop music and other popular elements in worship can

compromise the core theological integrity and the value of the liturgical practices that have defined Lutheran worship.

There are many congregations today devoted to maintaining the Lutheran liturgical inheritance. But that does not guarantee that it will survive. For if it is to survive at all, if it is to be more than pastiche, imitation, or nostalgic gesture, it must survive in *us*. Pastors today, if they're up for the challenge, carry the weight of championing and safeguarding this worship legacy that past generations took for granted. It's not an easy task—not because the tradition has lost its value, but because the forces working against it are formidable, and they are on our hands.

Pastor Mark Anderson

## INTRODUCTION

We'll begin by delving into the theological foundation of Lutheran worship, the bedrock upon which everything else rests. This foundation centers on the belief that worship isn't something we drum up ourselves, but rather a response to God's initiating grace in His Word. We'll then build on this foundation, examining the grand narrative of grace – the overarching story of God's undeserved favor that forms the very heart of Christian worship. We'll look at the complexities that arise when translating theology into the practicalities of worship. We'll explore the delicate balance between praising God's glory and the centrality of Jesus' sacrifice on the Cross. Throughout this journey, we'll grapple with questions that have sparked lively debates, all with the goal of understanding and preserving the rich tapestry that is Lutheran worship.

In Chapter 2 we explore how the very methods and mediums we choose for worship can shape the message itself, for good or ill. We'll delve into the impact of different worship styles, considering how they influence the overall worship experience. Furthermore, we'll examine how cultural shifts influence musical preferences within worship. This will include a look at the specific musical influences and preferences of younger generations, exploring the implications of the “adolescent soundtrack” for worship.

Chapter 3 explores the tension that arises when modern sensibilities clash with the established traditions of worship. How do we foster a sense of deep connection with a liturgy that might seem like an unfamiliar, alien language? We'll examine the implications of incorporating multiple worship styles within a single congregation. Can congregational harmony be achieved amidst the potential dissonance of these preferences?

In Chapter 4, we'll explore how worship has acted historically as a bridge between generations, fostering a sense of authentic community that transcends societal disconnection. In essence, this section will grapple with the question of how worship can provide a space for meaningful connection in a world that often feels fragmented.

Chapter 5 explores the tension between traditional and contemporary worship styles in Lutheran congregations. It argues that while being mindful of younger generations is important, uncritically embracing pop culture music and aesthetics can dilute the theological core of Lutheran worship. It encourages a critical discussion about maintaining the theological integrity of Lutheran worship while engaging younger generations.

In chapter 6 we consider the challenges pop culture presents to traditional Lutheran worship, focusing on music, technology, the pastor's role, and symbolism.

The Appendices offer practical insights and suggestions as to how pop music might be integrated into worship.

Those who shepherd congregations on the ground level, the pastors on the "pastoral frontline," are uniquely positioned to observe the interplay of theology and real-world practices within worship. How do we thoughtfully adapt worship practices to better serve our communities without sacrificing those things that are essential? Do certain traditions hold such deep significance that they should be preserved? How do we ensure that popular music and cultural expressions in worship reflect the sound theology of our Lutheran tradition?



## Chapter One

# THE MELODY OF FAITH: GOD'S WORK IN US

### **The Divine Initiative: Where Lutheran Worship Begins and Ends**

Whether you find yourself moved by the timeless melodies of traditional hymns or caught up in the energy of a modern pop song, one thing remains paramount for Lutheran worship: keeping the central things central. At the heart of it all lies a fundamental question about the relationship between worship and faith. And this is where theology comes into play.

To recognize that God is the subject of the action is to read Scripture rightly and to receive the entire biblical witness as the narrative of God's initiative on behalf of humanity. It's all about the direction. From creation to the final consummation, the Bible proclaims the story of a God who takes the lead in forging a path of redemption and reconciliation. God's initiative stands as the unchanging thread that binds our story to the heart of the God who we may love "because He first loved us."

From the opening pages of Genesis to the concluding chapters of Revelation, the Scriptures unfold the drama of God's love, redemption, and restoration. The Bible reveals the consistent theme of God taking the initiative to reconcile with the ungodly, despite our sin and rejection.

Martin Luther knew his Bible. He fully grasped this key biblical insight into the primacy of God's initiative in the grand work of salvation. This led him to insist that worship is fundamentally about God's coming to us rather than our coming to God. Luther emphasized that 'in, under and with' Word and Sacrament God initiates and sustains the relationship of faith. In what is perhaps the most often remembered section of the Small Catechism among Lutherans is this gem from Luther. His explanation to the third article of the Apostles Creed.

“I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. In the same way He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. In this Christian church He daily and richly forgives all my sins and the sins of all believers. On the Last Day He will raise me and all the dead and give eternal life to me and all believers in Christ.”

Notice how God is the subject of the action. It's all about His gracious initiative. This was a big deal for Luther when it came to understanding worship, especially compared to some practices of his time, like viewing the Eucharist as a sacrifice to God. Luther's reading of Scripture led him to highlight God's active role and the more passive role of the worshipper. This focus on the Gospel as the "power of God for salvation," this idea that salvation is a freeing, liberating force initiated by God is woven into the fabric of how we worship, build community, and live out our vocations.

### **The Grand Narrative of Grace**

From the gracious action of giving, which results in the ongoing reality of Creation, to the compassionate pursuit of a sinful humanity, the Bible proclaims the story of God's relentless, unwavering, gracious, initiative. In the opening chapter of Genesis, God speaks Creation into existence. The mere utterance of His Word brings forth light, separating it from darkness, and shapes the expanse of the heavens and the earth. From the majesty of celestial bodies to the intricate details of terrestrial life, all things bear witness to the divine word and will.

In Genesis 2, we witness an even more intimate portrayal of God's engagement with Creation. The Creator breathes life into Adam, forming him from the dust of the earth, and later creates Eve from Adam's rib making the first human couple. God's initiative is not only seen in the cosmic order but in the very breath that animates humanity, signifying a relational closeness between the divine and the human. Every breath we take is a reminder that we are God's creation and that we do not have life in ourselves. Every breath serves as a constant call to acknowledge our dependence on God's grace, to let go of any illusions of self-sufficiency, and to embrace our identity as beloved creatures wholly reliant on the mercy and love of our Creator.

As the narrative progresses, however, a discordant reality enters God's harmonious Creation. Faith in God's Word is broken. The trusting relationship with the Creator is shattered. Despite this act of rebellion, God's initiative takes an unexpected turn—not one of abandonment but of promise.

Genesis 3:15 introduces the seed of the woman, a prophetic promise of a Redeemer who will come to crush the head of the serpent, the embodiment of evil. This promise reveals God's relentless initiative to have mercy in the face of human unfaithfulness. The consequences of disobedience are a redemptive plan set in motion by God Himself.

This promise of God's steadfast faithfulness becomes a recurring theme woven through the tapestry of history. God's covenant with Abraham, the Exodus, the establishment of the Davidic line, all are interconnected threads in the larger story of God's saving initiative. The unfolding drama of redemption, rooted in God's promise to restore what was broken, finds its culmination in the incarnation of the promised Seed, Jesus Christ.

In Genesis, the seeds of God's initiative are sown—both in the creative Word that brings the world and all Creation into existence and in the redemptive promise that follows the fall into the captivity of sin. This initiation of the divine narrative sets

the stage for the overarching theme that resonates throughout the entire biblical revelation: God's unwavering commitment to engage with, redeem, and reconcile humanity to Himself. The foundational chapters of Genesis are not merely the beginning of a story but the initiation of a coherent, redemptive purpose that unfolds across the pages of Scripture, revealing a God who will not break faith with His Creation.

The New Testament Gospels mark the pinnacle of God's initiative in the person of Jesus Christ. God enters human history to reconcile and redeem. Jesus' ministry, marked by healing, teaching, His death on the Cross and His Resurrection, underscores God's initiative in breaking the power of sin, death and devil and securing salvation for humanity.

The book of Acts illustrates God's initiative in the explosive outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost empowering believers to carry out the mission of God's kingdom, proclaiming the forgiveness of sins in the name of the Crucified and Risen Lord.

The culmination of the biblical narrative in the book of Revelation unveils God's ultimate initiative in the consummation of history. The imagery of a new heaven and a new earth, the defeat of evil, and the establishment of God's eternal kingdom underscore God's sovereign initiative in bringing about a glorious conclusion to the story of salvation.

The totality of the witness of the Bible, therefore, underscores this crucial matter of direction. We live, as Jesus said, by “every Word that proceeds from the mouth of God.”

## Chapter Two

### CAPTIVE TO SIN...AND THE WORD

#### The Medium Is the Message

During the late 1960s I was caught up for a brief time in the Jesus movement, that broad, nationwide revivalist wave that sought to combine evangelical Christianity with the countercultural ethos of the time. The use of pop music by the Jesus Movement was another form of resistance, this time aimed at the institutional church, which the youth culture quite predictably viewed as rigid, outdated, and disconnected from the realities of contemporary life.

It's not surprising that evangelical churches led the charge when it came to pop culture worship and being trendy. By emphasizing confrontational evangelism, entertainment values, individual experience, human possibility, and market-driven strategies for growth, evangelical churches positioned themselves, then as now, to exploit a core component of their theology and the American world view: free will. Pop music was and continues to be an effective vehicle for their theology of glory.

While contemporary worship styles might seem like a quick fix for becoming relatable, drawing in crowds, and boosting budgets, they come with some serious risks. These trendy practices can undermine the core theological principles and depth of Lutheran worship. Churches really need to think carefully about whether these 'here today, gone tomorrow' elements of culture fit with their beliefs and the important role worship plays in shaping and preserving the faith and life of the congregation and bearing witness to the Living God.

Lutheran worship has its own rich traditions and deep theological roots, and simply swapping those out for something more modern and trendier, to 'get with it', can end up watering down the core message. It might be useful to consider the

implications of changing from a tuxedo into a T- shirt! So, while it might seem like a good idea to keep up with the times, it's important to consider what we're potentially losing – or letting in - in the process. That, it seems to me, is the heart of the problem. In pop music the Trojan horse can enter the gate.

### **Glory Or the Cross? A Clash of Wills**

Evangelicalism comes at worship from the angle that people bring a free will to church. They put a lot of emphasis on personal expression, spontaneity, and what we must do to foster a deep, personal connection with God. The worship experience becomes a platform for soliciting decisions to accept Christ, encouraging individuals to strive for moral excellence, and pursuing spiritual growth through their own efforts. In this kind of setup, the whole point of worship is to promote the theology of glory and keep that free will going strong! The structure of such worship feeds the ego-seeking, narcissistic dimension of human experience.

That's why you see a lot of contemporary evangelical worship going down the route of informal settings, preaching that feels more like life coaching, emotionally charged pop music, and getting everyone involved with things like spontaneous prayers and sharing personal stories. Worship services tend to be geared towards promoting a sense of personal achievement or empowerment, emphasizing the individual's role in seeking and attaining spiritual fulfillment.

Everything is delivered in an emotionally comfortable package. It's all about putting the spotlight on the individual—it's like saying, "Worship is all about me and how well I am doing in my relationship with God." Faith comes before grace.

Worship fueled by a theology of glory becomes a kind of ritualized pretense. The focus is on human achievement, success, and the visible triumphs of the Christian life, rather than acknowledging the unbreakable reality of human brokenness and the absolute necessity of God's grace. At its worst it is an opportunity for the so-

called free will to display itself in kitsch or fake, adolescent emotion, key elements of much of pop music.

The Lutheran tradition begins differently. We believe, teach, and confess that people are bringing a bound will to church. They are caught in sin, loss, suffering and death, and to one degree or another, are pretty much in denial about all of it! That's a whole different ballgame! It's through the stark contrast between human sin, loss, suffering and death that Christ's sacrifice and the magnitude of God's love and mercy becomes most apparent. In the traditional Lutheran view, it's all about recognizing that we're dependent on God to do for us what we cannot and, most importantly, *will not* do for ourselves. We come with empty hands, conscious that we have nothing to offer. So, we begin from a place of realism, advocating a theology of the Cross, looking to the preached Word and the Sacraments as the very concrete ways God brings His law and Gospel to us, from outside of us. The focus in Lutheran worship is upon God as the active initiator of faith through Word and Sacrament and the worshipper is the passive recipient. Grace comes before faith.

So, when you look at it like that, it makes you wonder: what's the real benefit in bringing pop music and evangelical style pop culture worship into Lutheran worship if we drag the theology of glory along with it? And what does that mean for the overall *direction* of worship, which is all about the God who does come to jump start our free wills but to *kill us and make us alive through His Word* in the face of our bound wills? In this respect, what theological considerations should be weighed when evaluating the introduction of pop music and pop culture into Lutheran worship services? What alternative approaches might make Lutheran worship more engaging and accessible without compromising the theological integrity of the tradition?

If it feels like I'm going against the grain by challenging the whole cultural obsession with evangelical style worship and its free will theology, I am! And I do so because ditching the belief in a bound will is a disaster for Lutheran worship and the

entire Lutheran theological construct. In Lutheran worship, the bound will doctrine serves as a theological cornerstone that underscores our dependence on God's initiative in salvation. This perspective fosters a sense of humility and reliance on God's grace rather than human effort or decision-making.

What I am advocating is that Lutheran worship ought to assist the self in finding a back seat as we identify with the larger community of saints, gathered in the presence of God through Word and Sacrament. From the standpoint of the so-called free will's desire to be in the driver's seat, this perspective can feel quite counterintuitive! In a culture that constantly pushes us to take control, be assertive, and lead the way, the idea of willingly taking a back seat can be challenging, even offensive. We are accustomed to steering our own paths, making decisions, and driving our lives forward. However, Lutheran worship invites us to step back from this need for control and let God take the wheel!

The emphasis in Lutheran worship is upon the work of God for us. We're not the ones doing the heavy lifting here—it's all about God's grace and mercy at work. We come to receive it, soak it in, and be brought from death to life by God's Living Word. That's the heart of Lutheran worship: God in action, and us along for the ride! In worship we are the objects of God's gracious work. The Good Lord, in all His grace and mercy, is the subject of the action - for us. It is God's active role in His Word and our essentially passive role that Lutheran worship aims to preserve. Everything in the structure of worship is held captive to the Word of God.



## Chapter Three

### HITS OR HYMNS?

### WORSHIP IN THE AGE OF POP CULTURE

#### **Musical Preferences and Cultural Shifts**

Musical tastes have always reflected broader cultural changes. By the late '50s, rock n' roll and traditional folk music were center stage, while the big band era of the '30s and '40s was fading into memory. Then, when the Beatles hit the scene in the early '60s, everything changed. I recall vividly that Sunday night when the Fab Four began their conquest of America. I had to be dragged away from the television set as the family headed out for a church gathering. My father was the pastor so there was no option to stay home! I entered the church that evening with 'I Wanna' Hold Your Hand' ringing in my ears!

As Beatlemania rolled on Elvis lost his grip on the throne. Bands like the Byrds and Simon and Garfunkel managed to give folk a rock spin, and artists like Bob Dylan, Gordon Lightfoot, and Joan Baez kept traditional folk alive. But for the most part, folk music and 50's rock were pushed to the margins. The guitar pyrotechnics of Jimi Hendrix not only blew away the mild strumming of the Kingston Trio, but also challenged rock guitarists to up their game! Even Dylan eventually fronted a rock band, much to the dismay of his folk music fans. The musical soundtrack of a generation had conquered the airwaves. And nothing has changed.

The speed at which all this happened was incredible. Driven by what Joni Mitchell called the "star maker machinery," the rapid production and consumption of pop songs swept everything before it like a tsunami. It was exhilarating and exciting, but also shallow. In other words, much of this rapid transformation in music and pop culture was immature, unthinking, and ungrounded. The way pop music was brought

into churches mirrored the rapid, almost chaotic transformation happening in the broader cultural landscape. Because, quite frankly, much of the integration of pop music into the church was also immature, unthinking, and ungrounded!

Now that several generations have grown up with pop music as a major influence, we can look at how this has impacted worship. Music is a key cultural marker, revealing a lot about the people who create it and those who listen. It can benefit or harm listeners, especially when they are a part of a community whose self-understanding is shaped by the music's meaning. This is especially true for the Church, where music serves as a vehicle for its theology. But the big question is: which theology?

### **Instant Gratification Vs. Settled Tradition: A Worship Dilemma**

I often heard the complaint, "Traditional worship is boring" as if the church had a responsibility to cater to the never-ending adolescent need to escape boredom. Think about it: many of the routines and patterns you grew up with in your family, and those you've established for yourself, provide stability in life. You might think of them as the "little liturgies" of daily life. You don't get up every morning and rearrange the furniture! Similarly, the worship life of the Lutheran church is designed to provide stability in an often unstable and chaotic world.

Do we come to worship expecting relief from a restless need to be entertained, challenged, or reinvented? Or do we come to rest, to hear God's Word of promise, to receive His forgiveness, to partake in the sacraments, and to give thanks and praise?

Back in the 1960s, when I found myself on stage, belting out rock tunes and jamming on my Beatle bass, my primary mission *was* to banish boredom! From my perspective as a pastor, however, I questioned why the worship of the church should become an accomplice in people's restless efforts to escape boredom. As I mentioned earlier, all life involves repetition. Daily life consists of various repetitive patterns, habits, and rituals. At the same time, the current addiction to phones and social media can

create a constant need for stimulation and instant gratification, making it difficult for people to engage with and find satisfaction in the ordinary and often mundane business of living.

But we address boredom not by mindlessly chasing after the new but by finding meaning in repetition. If you can't see the depth of meaning and value in the little repetitions, the "little liturgies" of daily life, don't expect to find meaning by running away from them. Worship is not meant to reflect or encourage the restlessness of the anxious world.

### **Authentic Community in A Disconnected World**

A culture of worship, like all cultures, is embedded through a living community. We are social creatures, after all, and our personalities develop through our interactions. This growth helps the community evolve in specific ways. Traditional Lutheran worship was partly acquired as a rite of passage, a way to bond with the community. On the other hand, the rapid pace of pop culture trends contributes to a culture of instant gratification and short attention spans. Traditional cultural practices that require time, patience, and deeper understanding can be overshadowed by the quick, easily consumable content of pop culture. Think of the difference between preparing and enjoying a home-cooked dinner versus grabbing fast food at a drive-thru.

This shift from communal to individualistic experience has some serious implications. Pop culture tends to isolate people, trapping them in a bubble of self-centeredness and narcissism. Just think about social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat. They allow millions of young people, right under their parents' noses, to be drawn into an alternative culture all by themselves, with little or no connection to their family or community. That's the power of pop culture. It shapes how people see themselves, how they feel, and their overall outlook on life.

Many young people identify more with the influencers and lifestyles they see on these platforms than with their own cultural or community identities. This move towards individualism has led to fragmented cultural cohesion, isolation, and a sense of disconnection, as people latch onto niche interests and subcultures instead of broader cultural narratives.

Since the 1960s, we've seen a major shift in societal roles and expectations, leading to a profound collapse of traditional norms. In this context, pop culture, which often rejects the constraints and disciplines of community life, finds its greatest adversary in traditional communities. The relentless push for novelty and immediate gratification becomes central. Pop culture breaks down barriers, ensuring that anyone can join in and participate without the need for learning, tradition, expertise, doctrine, or discipline. These elements are viewed as hindrances to inclusion. This resistance acts as a shield, protecting pop culture from the adult inheritance. Many hover on the brink of maturity, rarely stepping over the threshold because they don't feel the need to—and, in many cases, are determined not to.

## Chapter 4

### THE SOUNDTRACK OF REBELLION

#### **The Boomer Legacy and The Decline of Traditional Worship**

Throughout my life, pop culture has captivated many lay people and pastors, me included, leading the church into a cycle of diminishing appreciation for the worship tradition of the church. At least, that's how I see it. But it doesn't appear that this situation was solely caused by the collapse of tradition or the rise of pop culture. Instead, it stems from the adolescent skepticism of tradition that characterizes my generation, the baby boomers. In this respect all of this has a broadly societal dimension rather than a purely religious one. The pop culture we created was supposed to usher in a new, 'groovy', liberated world. A utopian era of peace and human potential would be realized in the "mystic, crystal revelation and the mind's new liberation" of the Age of Aquarius, as the famous song goes.

Popular worship culture reflects the post-1960's American identity, which has become widely adopted due to this dissolving of cultural barriers. The result has been a widespread detachment of the boomer generation from traditional social norms, including those of the Church. This skepticism still lingers. Their children and grandchildren share in this skepticism to one degree or another. The treasures of the Lutheran worship inheritance have largely been abandoned by those who were expected to uphold them. In their place is a worship culture that is detached from the past and the future. It commodifies, promotes pseudo-relevance, emphasizes sensuality, materialism, individualism, gratification, and the self-authenticating values of growth—all wrapped in the casual atmosphere the sovereignty of adolescence demands.

## **The Adolescent Soundtrack: Pop Culture's Influence on Church Music**

What we are dealing with here is a principality and power, a globalizing force. Where can you go these days where the adolescent soundtrack, in some form, is not claiming sovereignty over the airspace?

Pop music's dominance is pervasive across virtually all domains of daily life, shaping environments from grocery stores, shopping malls and retail stores, where upbeat tracks encourage spending and attract younger demographics, to restaurants and cafés which use contemporary hits to create trendy, casual atmospheres. Public spaces such as transportation hubs and parks also feature mainstream pop to appeal broadly, while fitness centers and gyms rely on high-energy playlists to motivate clients. In media and entertainment, TV shows, movies, and advertisements leverage pop music to connect with audiences and enhance brand appeal. Educational institutions incorporate popular music into school events and campus life to engage students, and digital platforms like Spotify, TikTok, and Instagram are deeply infused with pop culture, reflecting its powerful influence on consumer behavior and social trends. The point is the adolescent soundtrack is everywhere!

The rise of youth culture, which gained momentum in the 1950s, has flooded every corner of modern life. Youth culture has become a defining culture of our nation and many churches—a reality that's perhaps uncomfortable to acknowledge but impossible to ignore. And youth culture exists, as it always has, to push back against the idea of an adult world with its expectations and responsibilities.

This pushback is particularly evident in the realm of music. Pop culture, with its center firmly rooted in music, has become a noisy, aggressive, juggernaut. While some of this noise may have a certain musical quality (trust me, I've contributed my fair share!), it's still noise. Yet, because of its widespread appeal, it's incredibly difficult to criticize effectively.

It is not a bad thing, of course, that people like music and find ways to enjoy it in many genres. I have a rack full of guitars and basses and a marked preference for the ‘Four B’s’: Bach, Beatles, bluegrass, and the blues! The richness and diversity of the American songbook is a testament to the very spirit that gave it birth: freedom. Unbound by rigid traditions or censorship, American songwriters have explored a kaleidoscope of emotions and experiences. The popularity of the big band era, Broadway musicals, blues, jazz, folk, pop, rock, country, classical genres and more reflects the creativity that thrives in a society where self-expression has the freedom to create.

The same can be said for the vibrant tapestry of Christian hymnody and liturgy. Just as a free people produce a multitude of voices, the living faith of the Church has issued forth in the vast Christian songbook. Its anthems of hope, pleas for forgiveness, and expressions of thanks, praise and joy, have no parallel in any other world religion. Christians have something to sing about!

Both the American songbook and the Christian traditions stand out as powerful examples of how freedom, be it social or spiritual, unlocks the wellspring of human creativity.

At the same time, within this vast landscape of music, legitimate questions arise about the suitability of certain styles of music for worship. As I pointed out earlier, pop culture is a gravitational force that seeps into every aspect of life, bringing with it the disorderly energy and immaturity of youth along with a whole host of cultural values. While, broadly speaking, adult music might be all about discipline and mastery, youth music, again broadly speaking, is the opposite—it's raw, unrefined, and rebellious. Not all, but much of Pop music is not meant for listening, but stands rather as a mechanical, externalized background to an ongoing melodrama of youthful rebellion. I suspect this is an explicit purpose of the ubiquitous pop culture adolescent soundtrack that we are subjected to everywhere: to drown out or at least mute the sounds,

the influence of adult life. And when it comes to worship, that's where things really get interesting.

Now, don't get me wrong—in every genre of popular music there are some truly great songs. I mean, there's a big difference between the insightful “Eleanor Rigby” by the Beatles and the frat boy foolishness of “Surfer Bird” by the Trashmen! The narrative storytelling of Bob Seger or the soulful melodies and catchy rhythms of Smokey Robinson tap into keenly American sensibilities. As did the sophisticated musical offerings of Ira Gershwin, Sinatra, Nat King Cole, and Ella Fitzgerald. The list could go on and on.

The real challenge for those who plan and lead Lutheran worship is not to pour scorn on all popular music but to take a hard look at its influences and values. We must be willing to critique it—not just for its aesthetically successful and failing aspects but primarily for its theological implications. A good lyric, after all, can save a bad melody, but a good melody cannot save a bad lyric! The music matters, but the words matter ultimately.

Good stewardship of worship demands that we make those judgments. We need to be able to distinguish between what's acceptable and what's not, both culturally and theologically. For that is where the battle for preserving our worship culture is won or lost. That's what this essay is all about—navigating through the complexities of contemporary worship and understanding how our cultural and theological assumptions shape our worship practices, for good or ill.

## **Finding Our Place: The Community of Saints in Lutheran Worship**

Worship, that living encounter with the Word of God, is at the heart of the Christian community. For Christians, it stands at the center of our social order too. Worship is where the big moments in our lives—marriage, childbirth, death, vocation, and even the Creation itself—are wrapped in eternal significance, informed and



defined by the Word of God. In worship, we experience a consecration that helps us receive all of life as a gift. It's where we're equipped to receive "the faith delivered to the saints" and see ourselves as active members of a community, stewards of the "One, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church."

For centuries, the distinctive culture of Lutheran worship has been the main way to prepare people, especially young people, for something our post-modern, pop culture often withholds—a rite of passage from self-centered adolescence into a coherent, mature, adult inheritance. The worship culture of the Christian church has traditionally welcomed people into the faith and advocated for the shared way of life we all depend on as members of the body of Christ. These two purposes—individual growth and our shared life together—are distinct but intertwined. Which means damage to one affects the other. Sadly, we've seen this happen as churches increasingly turn away from the worship culture that created them.

## Chapter Five

### **THE BATTLE FOR HARMONY: CAN TRADITIONAL AND CONTEMPORARY WORSHIP COEXIST?**

#### **Harmony Or Dissonance? The Challenge of Dual Worship Styles in Lutheran Congregations**

The culture of worship plays a dual role in our lives. On one hand, it reaffirms our individual identity as baptized members of the Christian faith. On the other hand, it unites us, emphasizing our belonging to the larger body of Christ within a specific confession of faith. In Lutheran worship, the emphasis tips toward 'we' rather than 'me'. It's about sustaining our identity as baptized individuals within the body of Christ, and this is achieved through a ritual of ongoing passage, where the words, symbols, and music of worship are shaped by the Word of God.

Nowadays, many congregations offer both styles of worship. But let's be clear: this wasn't always the norm. It was a concession. I vividly recall the worship battles of the 1960s and '70s. Eventually, a sort of uneasy truce was reached, and worship became divided into traditional and contemporary camps. This stalemate, this uneasy truce, has essentially led many churches to unquestioningly defer to adolescent "values" as if they were the new orthodoxy.

The push to modernize worship and make it more appealing to younger generations was a common theme among many older members in the churches I served. However, in trying to do so, we may have unintentionally reinforced the values and priorities of popular culture instead of nurturing genuine engagement with the faith community. Rather than guiding young people toward a deeper understanding and commitment to the traditions and practices of the church, our efforts to cater to

popular culture preferences might have accelerated the erosion of traditional Lutheran community values and theology.

Several years ago, Linda and I visited a Lutheran congregation while on vacation. We attended what was billed as the traditional service. There was a large gathering of elderly people marooned in the traditional sanctuary. The traditional Lutheran liturgy, organ, vestments, and traditional hymns were used. As we left the service, families and many younger people were gathering where the action really was, a large hall adjacent to the sanctuary. The stage at one end was complete with sophisticated PA and lighting systems. A rock band blared forth as a hip, young pastor dressed in a T-shirt and blue jeans, kept everything light and breezy.

This now common scenario exemplifies the stark contrast between traditional and contemporary approaches to worship and music. While both settings aimed to inspire and connect, the methods employed couldn't be more different. The traditional service, with its focus on established hymns and liturgy, fosters a sense of shared history and communal worship. Conversely, the modern service, complete with rock band and casual attire, prioritizes individual engagement and emotional connection. This shift in musical presentation reflects a larger trend in how music is used to achieve various goals. Let's delve deeper into these contrasting purposes by examining the underlying musical principles at play in both pop music and traditional hymns.

While some traditional hymns may share structural similarities with popular songs, the underlying musical principles often serve very different purposes. Emotion is present in both forms, of course, but they serve different ends. In pop music, we encounter a form that, by its very nature, emphasizes the primacy of the individual. This phenomenon is not confined solely to the lyrical content but extends to the very fabric of its sonic structure.

Pop music's attraction is grounded in the beat, its immediate accessibility and personal resonance. Its melodies are often catchy and easily memorable, so much so

that you can't get them out of your head! Even after all these years I find myself humming the tune to a song I heard or performed back in the day. But fast forward and think of the repetitive yet irresistible hook in "Can't Stop the Feeling!" by Justin Timberlake, or the singalong chorus of "Bad Guy" by Billie Eilish. Nothing has changed.

Concurrently, the lyrics, oftentimes introspective and focused on personal narratives, offer a simple platform for self-expression and introspection. In this regard, pop music operates as a mirror reflecting the diverse experiences, emotions, and aspirations of the individual listener. The lyrics tend to be personal and relatable.

However, it is within this intricate interplay of sounds and structures where we discern pop music's pronounced individualistic character. The repetitive nature of its chord progressions, the often intensely personal lyrics, often following simple patterns like the one in "Blank Space" by Taylor Swift, and other standardized song forms, contribute to a musical landscape that prioritizes entertainment. Which is to say immediacy and individual gratification are valued over communal engagement. Whereas traditional church music points outwardly to a communal encounter with the Living God, pop music tends to point inwardly toward a solitary communion with oneself. When I attended the Beatles 1967 concert in Los Angeles, the teenage girl in front of me was screaming "Paul, Paul!" during the entire event. As far as she was concerned, she and Paul were the only one's present!

In the tension between traditional church music and contemporary pop tunes, we confront not only a divergence in stylistic preferences but a fundamental theological disjunction. Traditional church music, with its reverence for tradition and collective spirituality, stands in stark contrast to the individualistic ethos of pop music.

You could argue that catchy melodies and personal lyrics have always been a part of music. After all, people have been singing about their own lives and experiences for centuries. And as I pointed out above, Americans are exceptionally good at singing about their lives and experiences! True. But the point I'm trying to make is

that pop music takes these elements to a whole new level. The focus on accessibility, repetition, and simple structures creates a very different kind of musical experience compared to traditional church music.

Think about it this way. Church music and liturgy is designed to bring people together in a shared experience as members of the body of Christ. The hymns and liturgies focus on shared belief, all contributing to that sense of being in community. Pop music, on the other hand, is more about creating a personal connection with the listener. It's a soundtrack for your own thoughts and feelings.

It's not necessarily a bad thing in context, but it is a difference. And this difference can have and has had a broad impact on society and the church. Maybe pop music doesn't explicitly discourage communal engagement, but I would argue that its emphasis on the individual has contributed to a more self-centered culture of worship. This is just one perspective, of course. But I think it's important to consider how the music we listen to shapes our worldview, even in subtle ways.

As I mentioned earlier, questioning the appropriateness of pop culture style worship has been a tough task. But as a pastor, it's essential to ask some serious questions. How do we convince young people that the rich heritage of our worship tradition is worth preserving and passing on when we segregate older members into "traditional" worship services? What kind of Christian culture are we promoting by offering a smorgasbord of worship styles, each catering to different tastes? Does this approach turn worship into a transactional experience, like picking items off a menu? And does it inadvertently dilute the sense of community by accommodating diverse preferences? Moreover, does the coexistence of contrasting worship styles create serious theological tensions beyond just differences in music or aesthetics? If pastors don't raise these questions, then who will?

## **Leave Well Enough Alone?**

Questioning the influence of pop music and culture on worship might seem like a futile effort. And trust me, I've been there. Holding the line against this tide has felt like trying to hold back an avalanche with a broom! Given my background in both folk and rock music some folks were beyond perplexed as to why I would not go all in for contemporary worship and instead critiqued it and tipped the scales in favor of traditional worship.

But let's be clear: introducing music into the church isn't just about personal taste or musical preferences. Would you expect your pastor to use 'Take Me Out to the Ballgame' for the Hymn of the Day because everyone seems to like it? And if not, why not?

From the early days of Christianity, believers have grappled with the challenge of discerning which traditions and confessions of faith truly uphold the Gospel. The Apostle Paul didn't shy away from calling out the Galatians when he felt they were veering off course. In the early second century, documents like the Didache reflected the Christian communities' concerns about getting worship right. And let's not forget the epic theological battles that led to the creation of the great ecumenical creeds.

This is where pastors are faced with some tough theological questions. The Holy Spirit doesn't operate in a vacuum. Our faith is always expressed in real-life situations. In the trenches of pastoral ministry, this means making tough calls, being willing to say "no," and having solid theological reasons for doing so—even if it's the last thing the adolescent mindset wants to hear.

And then there's this whole idea of Christian freedom. Sure, the Lutheran confessions support a variety of worship expressions. But does freedom mean mindlessly embracing change for the sake of change? Back in the 1950s and '60s, freedom took on a whole new meaning—it was about rejecting tradition and norms in favor of personal liberation and self-expression. That mindset has had a huge impact on how we

approach worship. The adults were caught off guard, and we, the younger generation, took full advantage. The more ground they gave, the more 'freedom' we claimed. But perhaps it's useful to rethink what true freedom in worship really means.

We are clearly in deep water here; and we are not going to avoid the problems by taking the kind of non-judgmental, non-denominational approach that is the prevailing orthodoxy these days. Avoiding judgment in matters of worship and theology is not a solution; it is a judgment in and of itself. Do we really want to suggest that it doesn't matter how worship happens? Are we suggesting that theology does not matter?

It's not just about whether you prefer Taylor Swift to Telemann; it goes much deeper than that. Pop culture worship raises profound questions about our values, the integrity of our worship, and even the kind of community we're building as Christians. My personal journey from rock music to favoring traditional worship highlights an important aspect of pastoral leadership: being willing to theologically navigate and evaluate the tension between change and tradition. Churches and pastors often struggle with this, but perhaps not enough. And pastoral leadership involves guiding congregations through these transitions with empathy and wisdom. And that, again, involves asking hard questions.

Are we sacrificing meaningful tradition in pursuit of what we think is "relevant"? What, in fact, is the difference between popularity and relevance? Because there is a difference. Are we mindlessly shaping our worship to cater to consumer demands? Are we letting Christian traditions who have no appreciation for the Lutheran tradition dictate how we worship? Do we understand the difference between the role of entertainment and the purpose of liturgy? Are we unintentionally alienating those who don't connect with pop culture, creating divisions within our own congregations? These are tough questions, but they're ones we can't afford to ignore when it comes to the integrity of our worship.

## **A Defining Lesson from The Pastoral Frontline**

As a pastor, I had the privilege of ministering to many individuals who grew up, as I did, within the rich traditions of Lutheran worship. These were folks I could relate to. They, like me, had been steeped in the faith handed down through generations (my father and great-grandfather were Lutheran pastors). They were nurtured within Lutheran communities where the very essence of Lutheran worship shaped their emotions, perspectives, and outlook on life. It was an adult world where rituals were familiar, and reverence for the forms and ceremonies of worship ran deep. They celebrated marriages, baptized their children, listened to sermons, received the absolution, partook in the Lord's Supper, and laid their loved ones to rest, upheld through it all by the liturgies of God's Word.

But there were others who were unfamiliar or uncomfortable with the historical roots of our worship traditions. I understood them too. Let me take you back to 1977, the year of my ordination. A young couple sat in my study, eager to incorporate what had become a pop music standard into their wedding ceremony. The song was 'We've Only Just Begun' by the Carpenters. And when it comes to the soft rock genre it didn't get any better than the Carpenters! I carefully explained why it wasn't appropriate, despite our shared appreciation for the tune and its widespread popularity. There was some resistance, even a heated phone call afterward. In the end, the song was omitted. But it wasn't without its challenges and holding the line came at a cost.

That little story speaks volumes. The gap between the Christian culture that shaped our worship traditions and the pop culture embraced by many is vast. The gap, in fact, can be so wide that teaching, defending, and practicing the great Lutheran liturgical tradition can appear as an offense, a form of transgression that clashes with the modern, adolescent psyche shaped by pop culture.

The pop culture of the 1950's and 60's was attractive to no small degree because the adults detested it. Now, several generations later, no adult sensibility can



neutralize pop. It has found its way into the hearts and minds of people for whom the mystery of that older, traditional world of worship has become an artifact.

What distinguishes the traditional worship of the church from the pop culture alternative that increasingly replaces it? To say that traditional worship contains real knowledge as opposed to the ephemeral distractions of pop is to beg the question. We can attempt to explain and defend worship theologically, of course. At the same time, we *feel* it, just as the Lutherans I grew up with felt it. They felt the substance of a worship that was theirs.

That young couple felt something, too. As with so many others, the immediate moment and their personal desires were paramount. They were determined to assert themselves, pushing back against any form of judgment. It simply did not occur to them that the appropriateness of their desire might have to be tested. In that pivotal moment, I realized my pastoral stewardship of worship was not calling me to cater to their perceived needs, but to help them understand how they could fit into the worship of the church. It was a transformative moment in my ministry. I had crossed the Rubicon and there would be no turning back.

## **Chapter Six**

### **NAVIGATING POP CULTURE: THE CHALLENGE TO LUTHERAN WORSHIP**

How do pastors and church musicians navigate the world of pop culture, particularly its music, while staying true to the core principles of our faith? It's all about keeping the central things central.

Drawing from my own experiences in various congregations, I've come up with some key considerations and questions that might be helpful to address. There is no systematic arrangement here. These are simply the things that kept me up at night as I pondered the delicate dance involving tradition and change!

#### **Generational Divide**

The difference in musical tastes between generations often led to a feeling of disconnect within congregations. Younger folks struggled to connect with hymns and liturgical music that seemed worlds apart from what they were used to hearing in their everyday lives. It felt like trying to speak a different language or dance to a beat from another era. On the other hand, many older members felt that incorporating pop music into worship was nothing more than catering to youthful immaturity. To them, worship was an inheritance to be respected and nurtured, a stewardship. The idea of mixing in pop music, letting the kids run the show, felt like diluting the sanctity of worship. So, you can imagine, it created quite the tug-of-war over the church playlist...and some very exciting worship committee meetings!

## The Role of The Pastor

While liturgical worship places emphasis on continuity and the collective narrative of faith, popular, non-denominational churches prioritize personal anecdotes and contemporary relevance. The ‘popular pastor’ effect of non-denominational churches has led many pastors to prioritize a more informal and personality-driven approach to worship. Pastors in such churches may adopt a more prominent and charismatic role, leading worship with an emphasis on personal connection, and relatability.

This emphasis on individual experience can be seen as diverging from the broader tradition and continuity inherent in liturgical worship, potentially leading to a more subjective, personality centered worship experience, contrasting with the structured and symbolic nature of liturgical worship.

In the Lutheran worship tradition, the *office* of the pastor occupies a central role. While some personal illustration can be effective in connecting with the congregation, excessive self-referencing can unwittingly transform the worship experience into a platform for self-promotion.

The pastor’s use of vestments, for example, carries symbolic weight within the Lutheran tradition. They emphasize the pastor's role as an ordained leader rather than focusing on their individual personality. The vestments invite worshippers to relate to that office first and foremost. By donning vestments, pastors visually signify their authority and calling to lead the congregation in worship. This formal attire also connects the pastor to a historical and theological tradition that transcends personal preference or contemporary cultural norms.

Critics who object to vestments often advocate for a more informal approach to worship, claiming that formal attire is a barrier to creating a casual, approachable atmosphere. They may argue that such attire distances the pastor from the congregation or appears outdated in modern contexts. This may also be nothing more than the willful attempt to conform the pastor to those casual atmospherics the sovereignty of

adolescence demands, I mentioned elsewhere. And this is not the only way in which churches may want to make the pastor over into their own image! Thus, the pastor's conduct not only shapes the worship atmosphere but also upholds the theological integrity and communal focus that define Lutheran worship.

### **Symbols, Gestures, And the Direction of Worship**

Some years ago, Linda and I took a tour which gave us an inside look at the famous Paris opera house. What struck me was the profound care taken in developing the stagecraft. Each element is meant to communicate a rich tapestry of emotions, meanings, and narratives. Every gesture, scene, and symbol on the stage was meticulously designed to convey the essence of the story, immerse the audience in the characters' emotions, and enhance the overall theatrical experience. When we consider public worship, the symbols and gestures matter. After all, it isn't as if no one is paying attention. Someone is making decisions, many decisions, about what goes on in the public worship service. Like art, music, or poetry, liturgy must be learned. How well or how poorly is another matter.

Even small gestures can have big implications. Case in point. The offering plates were brought forward and placed on the altar, right next to the bread and wine. What's the big deal? Placing the offering plates on the altar is harmless, right? Besides, who really notices? Actually, everything is noticed in one way or another. It is the pastor's responsibility to pay attention to the details, to the symbolic actions that can inadvertently alter, in this case, the sacramental initiative of the Word of God.

In that simple gesture God's grace (bread and wine) and human works (offering plates) are placed on the same plane. This symbolic stumble could have been avoided if the offering plates had simply been set down elsewhere, apart from the altar. What appeared to be a harmless gesture points to a deeper misunderstanding or simple ignorance of what Lutheran worship is all about. And what is primary in Lutheran

worship is the *direction*. And to say that the direction is central is to say that the words and actions of Lutheran worship are captive to the ongoing *initiative* of the Word of God.

The point is not to draw attention to the music, symbols, or gestures for their own sake but to allow them to function organically in the worship service. The conduct of public worship involves a deliberate choreography of words, ritual, music, symbols, and gestures. From the placement of objects to the movements of worship leaders and congregants, each element serves as a communicative tool. In worship, the visual and symbolic elements weave together a narrative that speaks without words.

Unlike pop worship, where the focus might be primarily on a loose structure prioritizing entertainment and emotional engagement, traditional worship places significance on the organic integration of these elements. They aren't just there for show or old times sake; they serve a purpose in carrying worshippers along in the face of God's initiative in Word and Sacrament.

As a steward of the Word of God the pastor's role is to ensure that the direction, the divine initiative of God's grace through Word and sacrament for us remains prominently at the forefront of worship. This means that theology, not the clamor for novelty, aesthetics, personal taste, innovation, or liturgical fussiness, serves as the guiding force that shapes the worship practices of the congregation.

## **The Hidden Language of Traditional Worship**

Walk into a traditional worship service and you enter a familiar rhythm. Hymns rise and fall, prayers echo through the space, scriptures come alive, and sermons bring the Word. It might seem like a simple sequence, almost formulaic. But beneath the surface lies a hidden language, that often overlooked choreography of movement, the flow of the service itself. Why is this flow so fundamental to the worship experience?

The flow of traditional worship does more than simply maintain order. It builds anticipation and creates emotional crescendos. The deliberate, hushed moment of reverent silence before a prayer amplifies its significance and provides a moment of transition for the congregation. The entire movement of the liturgical service has an upward dimension. That is to say, the music of the service begins at one tempo and then steadily but almost imperceptibly increases all the way to the end of the service. This careful handling of the hymns and liturgy creates a narrative, musical incline, moving but not driving the service forward. This carefully considered flow keeps the congregation engaged in the unfolding drama of worship.

Imagine a play where the actors kept forgetting their lines or the scenes jumped around haphazardly. The emotional impact would be lost. The worship service is not a vehicle for ad-libbed, self-expression. The established choreography of traditional worship provides a sense of stability and security for pastors and people. Just as a familiar melody can evoke a sense of home, the predictable flow of the service allows worshippers to settle into a rhythm of devotion as they are gathered for worship. This familiarity frees them from wondering what comes next, allowing the central things to remain central. The established flow of traditional worship provides a firm foundation.

### **A Bridge Across Time**

Traditional worship adheres to practices established over centuries. This continuity creates a powerful link to generations past. By participating in the same choreography of worship as their ancestors in Christ, congregants feel a connection to a larger faith community that transcends time. This shared experience fosters a sense of belonging and strengthens the eschatological fabric of the faith. The focus shifts from the fleeting to the eternal, from entertainment to engagement with God's Word. In an anxious world obsessed with novelty and constant stimulation, the traditional

service provides a much-needed sanctuary, a space to slow down, take a back seat, and be renewed in the power of God's promises in Jesus Christ.

The next time you step into a traditional service, pay attention not just to the words spoken, chanted, or sung but to the unseen language that binds them together - the entire choreography of worship. The choreography is subtle, but its impact is undeniable. It is there to guide you on a journey of faith, foster anticipation and connection, and create a space for reverence. And, most importantly, the choreography of worship is ever mindful of the God who is the subject of all the action. In a world that often overlooks the importance of form and structure, the flow of traditional worship stands as a testament to the power of God's intentionality.

## **FINAL THOUGHTS**

When we look at our daily grind, it's mostly filled with those small-scale pursuits of pleasure, power, and security. Worship is of another category. In the presence of Word and Sacrament, the community of faith is brought to see the transient world as an icon of another, eternal order where the hustle and bustle of our world are held in the eternal purposes and promises of God.

In a world consumed by transitory pleasures and superficiality, the historic liturgy is not meant to be a comfortable, seamless interface between the street and altar. It's a call to approach the mystery of worship with reverence and humility, recognizing that we are not there to have ourselves handed back to ourselves in an emotionally comfortable package. We are being encountered in these moments by the eternal, Living Word of God, who comes in His Word to bring us out of death into life. To make an end of us that He may be life for us.

And when we engage with the Word of God in this way, something remarkable happens. We're filled with a sense of awe, wonder, and gratitude. We're transformed in the fullness of the Spirit that radiates from God's Word; that Spirit who truly makes all things new in Jesus Christ. In this way the worship of God is revealed as a central dimension of human fulfillment on God's terms, not ours.

Engaging with pop culture means being both thoughtful and critical. The goal of discernment is to keep worship centered on God's initiative in Word and the Sacrament. It's in these tangible things; the preached word, the water of baptism, and the bread and wine of Communion that God comes to us. If the music of worship distracts, diminishes, or removes the focus from any of these it does not belong in worship, no matter how entertaining or beautiful the music may be.

Yes, pop music can complement worship in the Lutheran church. But we've also got to watch out—it can easily water down, distort and undermine what we believe and how we worship. That's why I advocate a careful, measured, discerning, approach, always ready for ongoing discussions and theological soul-searching as cultural shifts attempt to insert themselves into the life of the Church.

So, dear reader, whether we turn on the pipe organ or tune up the bass, let the music – traditional or contemporary – serve as an invitation, not a distraction. After all, in the end our worship is all about letting God be God. God is not leaving the business of saving us, up to us! He comes for us with His saving Word and Sacraments as we are gathered, we poor sinners, beaten and battered by our own faults and foibles, not to mention the relentless demands of the world. He comes to open our hearts with a promise that we might give thanks with “hearts and hands and voices” for the free and undeserved grace poured out for us in Jesus Christ our Lord.



Our stewardship as worship leaders is to make sure what is central stays central. Because let's face it, whether it's the strumming of a guitar or the soaring notes of a pipe organ, we are all support cast to the real center of the action—the Living God and the Word of Promise He brings!

The day came for me one crisp, Minnesota morning in late Fall. I remember walking to the church that Sunday in the pale light of dawn. The dead and dying leaves crunched under my feet as the skeletal branches loomed overhead. As I entered the empty sanctuary and turned on the lights, the cross that held symbolic sovereignty over that special place was suddenly flooded with light. I stood transfixed. In that moment I became aware of another form of dying. The bright lights weren't shining on me anymore. It wasn't about the Hollywood nights, the rocking out or the energy of the crowd. I wasn't the frontman anymore. I was a servant on a different stage. The focus wasn't on me, or the crowd, but on the magnificent One I now served. Gone were the days of entertainment; from then on, worship was about lifting and proclaiming and glorifying the name who is above every name. It always will be.

**All glory be to Jesus Christ! May His glory be forever!**

## **APPENDICES**

While incorporating pop music brings challenges, it also presents an opportunity to engage contemporary culture with the Gospel. My goal has been to encourage worship leaders to engage in thoughtful reflection before engaging in creative adaptation of musical choices within the framework of Lutheran liturgy. The free spirit of exploration and adaptation has its place in worship. At the same time upholding the theological integrity and communal focus of worship is central. With careful attention to the crucial matter of direction, and a careful eye on the details, Lutheran worship can be authentically relevant and firmly grounded in Lutheran tradition. These appendices offer insights and guidance for worship leaders which I found useful in navigating the integration of pop music and rock instruments into traditional Lutheran worship settings. Recognizing that every congregation has its own requirements and unique context of ministry, these recommendations are meant to be suggestive rather than exhaustive.

### **Appendix A**

#### **INCORPORATING POP MUSIC AND LANGUAGE INTO THE TRADITIONAL LITURGY**

##### **Theological Coherence**

The service of worship is an external event. Which is to say all the action is centered on the Living God who comes ‘extra nos’, that we may be held in faith by what God alone brings in Word and Sacrament. Every element of worship should be examined for its theological soundness on this premise.

## **Christ-Centered Focus**

Given the centrality of Christ in Lutheran theology, texts should focus on themes related to Jesus Christ, His life, death, resurrection, and His ongoing presence in Word and sacrament, together with songs that emphasize thanks and praise and the hope we have Christ.

## **Seasonal Appropriateness, Readings and Themes**

The liturgical season (Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, Pentecost, etc.) provides a framework for selecting songs. Each season has its own theological emphases and moods, and the songs used in worship should reflect these to enhance the worship experience. For example, during Advent, songs reflecting anticipation and hope would be appropriate, whereas during Lent, songs of reflection on the Cross might be more fitting. The chosen songs should also resonate with the themes of the day's scripture readings and sermon. Sometimes, pop songs may need to be adapted or arranged to fit the worship setting better. This might include modifying or re-writing hymn lyrics that do not fully align with sound theology or adjusting musical instrumentation to suit the liturgical environment (examples of this from my ministry are in the last section of these appendices.)

## **Communal Participation**

Worship in the Lutheran tradition emphasizes communal participation in song. Pop songs selected for worship should be accessible to the congregation, encouraging engagement and participation. This means considering songs with singable melodies and refrains. New hymns or songs should be rehearsed and sung by the congregation for several weeks before employing them in the service of worship.

## Appendix B

### THE NUTS AND BOLTS OF WORSHIP PLANNING

Over time, without careful attention, ‘doctrinal drift’ can effect worship practices. Without a careful process, determined folks in leadership positions can introduce new styles of music, liturgy, and even theological emphases that align with personal preferences that may not be suitable for worship. I’ve fought this battle more than once. That’s why it’s so important to set some guidelines for what goes into our worship services. By doing that, we can make sure we stay true to our core beliefs, even as things change over time.

#### Theological Review

Ensure that the core elements of traditional worship, such as confession, absolution, baptism and Lord’s Supper, sermon, and the creeds, remain central and are not overshadowed or cheapened by trendy, contemporary additions.

Have a team, led by the pastor, review the content and lyrics of pop culture elements to ensure they are theologically sound and appropriate for worship. As the chief steward of the Word within the congregation, it is my belief that the pastor needs to carefully keep the gate on this process.

Pastors should make no apology for scrutinizing every word used in public worship, as they bear the profound responsibility of ensuring that each utterance aligns with the truth of God’s Word. By holding every word captive to the Word of God, pastors acknowledge their stewardship of the Word and the power of language to shape faith and understanding within their congregation. After all, the words spoken in worship are not mere expressions; they are vessels of the Spirit conveying divine truth, carrying the power of the Gospel and guiding the spiritual formation of believers. This meticulous attention to language reflects a commitment to faithful

teaching and reverent worship, ensuring that the message proclaimed is clear, doctrinally sound, and deeply rooted in Scripture.

### **Integration Plan**

Carefully plan how and where pop culture elements can be integrated into the service without disrupting the liturgical flow. This includes identifying suitable places within the order of service where contemporary elements can complement rather than detract from traditional elements. Ensure that any contemporary songs or elements chosen, align with the liturgical theme, scripture readings, and overall message and direction of the service. This requires coordination between the worship planning team and the music ministry.

### **Educating the Congregation**

By educating your church about the historical and theological foundations of worship practices, you can foster a more informed and respectful dialogue about worship preferences. Educate the congregation and the relevant church staff about the reasons behind incorporating or not incorporating new elements. This can be done through newsletters or special forums. Provide background on traditional worship practices and how contemporary elements can serve to highlight or deepen these traditions when used thoughtfully.

### **Rehearsal and Preparation**

Ideally, musicians and worship leaders should rehearse extensively to ensure that contemporary elements are executed well and fit seamlessly into the service. This includes attention to musical quality and appropriateness. It may be helpful to invest in training for worship leaders and musicians to effectively incorporate and lead contemporary elements while maintaining reverence and quality.

## **Congregational Feedback**

Regularly solicit feedback from the congregation to understand how the integration of contemporary elements is being received. This can be done through surveys, comment cards, informal conversations, and discussions with church leadership. Use the feedback to make necessary adjustments and improvements. This iterative process ensures that the worship experience remains meaningful and coherent. But be careful not let the tail wag the dog!

## **Intentional Selection**

Instead of using contemporary songs simply because they are popular, select songs that have been curated for their theological depth, musical quality, and relevance to the worship context. Be mindful not to overuse contemporary elements to the point where they dominate the service. I argue for a measured approach which favors the traditional service.

## **How Contemporary Elements Can Enrich Lutheran Worship**

In previous chapters, I've explored, often critically, the real pitfalls that are encountered when incorporating pop culture elements into Lutheran worship. I emphasized the importance of theological grounding, avoiding shallow trends, and safeguarding the integrity of our rich liturgical tradition. But here's the thing: shying away from contemporary elements altogether can be just as detrimental. Let's explore why.

## **Emotional Engagement:**

Contemporary worship often excels at creating a sense of emotional connection. That's one of the reasons it is so appealing. The point is to be conscious of what sort of environment our worship is creating. I am reminded, in this respect, of the Eastern Orthodox liturgy and the décor of their churches. Everything combines to

create a multi-sensory experience that transcends the rational and engages the worshiper on an emotional level. It engages the senses, fostering awe, reverence, peace, and a sense of belonging within the community of faith. Every worship environment has an emotional tone or feel.

### **A Tapestry, not a Replacement:**

Think of contemporary elements as threads woven into a rich tapestry. A soaring hymn can coexist with a well-chosen contemporary praise song. A timeless liturgy can be enhanced by updated language. These things can be done well or badly. The key is to take a measured approach, ensuring that the core elements of Lutheran worship – the Word, the Sacraments, and the centrality of God’s initiative for us in Christ – remain at the forefront. And this is easier said than done!

### **More than Pretty Music**

While beautiful music can evoke strong emotions, worship music (whether contemporary or traditional) should aim for spiritual engagement with God’s Word. It should lead the congregation into a deeper experience of God’s presence for them in Word and Sacrament. Instrumental music, for example, which carries familiar hymn melodies, will bring the text of those hymns to mind. Music that is merely beautiful but lacks theological depth can distract from the core message of the service. The purpose of worship is to glorify God and edify the congregation, not to entertain or showcase musical talent.

J.S. Bach often employed musical symbols to convey theological ideas. For instance, he used motifs and structures to represent the Trinity, the cross, or other theological concepts. The intricate counterpoint in his fugues can symbolize the complexity and unity of God’s creation, while the use of specific intervals and harmonies often carry symbolic meanings related to the themes of the liturgical year.

Selecting music for worship is an intentional process, far removed from the casual act of flipping through a songbook until something catches your interest. This practice requires thoughtful consideration, theological discernment, and a profound understanding of the worship context.

### **Church or a Concert Venue? Why Liturgical Furnishings Matter**

Many churches have replaced the altar, pulpit, and lectern, and turned the chancel into a stage area for musicians. I recall the first time I encountered this years ago and it was readily apparent that this move shifted the focus from worship to performance.

The arrangement and use of liturgical furnishings serve not only functional purposes (which are secondary) but also symbolic roles (which are primary). These symbolic elements reinforce theological convictions and guide and focus the worship experience. Central to this symbolism is the differentiation in roles and functions assigned to the altar, pulpit, lectern, and baptismal font. Each is placed within the sanctuary to uphold Lutheran beliefs about the centrality of Word and Sacrament.

The baptismal font, whether located at the entrance to the sanctuary or somewhere on the chancel, should never be movable. In Lutheran theology, baptism is fundamentally about God's action and promise. A permanent font signifies the unchanging nature of God's promise, independent of human actions or decisions, reinforcing that it is God who initiates and sustains faith. The unmovable nature of the font reflects the steadfastness of God's grace and the solid foundation of faith given in baptism. It serves as a visual and physical anchor for the congregation's spiritual life.

The altar is the focal point for the conducting of the liturgy and the Lord's Supper. Its positioning at the center of the sanctuary symbolizes the presence of Christ among the faithful. This awareness of the central presence of God in Word and Sacrament is fundamental to Lutheran theology, emphasizing the real presence of Christ in the elements of bread and wine.



The pulpit and lectern are designated for the proclamation of God's Word. The pulpit serves as the platform from which the Word of God is proclaimed. The pulpit reflects the central importance of preaching and is set aside for that purpose only. The lectern, on the other hand, is where Scripture readings are read aloud during worship, emphasizing the authority and centrality of the Scriptures in Lutheran liturgy.

In Lutheran worship, pastor and lay assistants conduct the liturgy from the altar rather than from the pulpit or lectern. This intentional differentiation in functions—liturgical action at the altar and proclamation at the pulpit and lectern—serves to maintain Lutheran doctrinal integrity and support, symbolically, theological coherence within worship.

### **Melodies In the Margins: Musicians in Lutheran Worship**

In pop culture worship, particularly in many contemporary non-denominational settings, musicians often occupy a central and highly visible role comparable to that of the pastor. They are frequently “on stage” positioned at the forefront of the worship experience. As mentioned above, they lead congregational singing, perform with professional sound and lighting effects, often becoming charismatic figures, worship ‘rock stars’. This elevation of musicians to a prominent status underscores the cultural emphasis on performance, entertainment, and the personal charisma of individual worship leaders.

In contrast, Lutheran worship maintains a different approach. Musicians in Lutheran services typically fulfill a supportive role rather than being center stage. They contribute through music that enhances and enriches the worship experience, but their presence is intended to facilitate congregational participation rather than draw attention to themselves.

As someone who has experienced both worlds—as a former rock musician and then as a pastor—I understand how the pop culture model can captivate and inspire

congregations, creating a vibrant and emotionally charged atmosphere. And I understand the temptation of musicians (and pastors) to want to be center stage!

## Appendix C

### GEARING UP: THE INSTRUMENTS OF ROCK IN WORSHIP

As a fellow worshiper, musician, and bit of a worship theology nerd, I want to share some personal insights on the use of instruments in traditional worship to assist in creating a fresh soundscape, not a liturgical moonscape! Acoustic and electric guitars, bass guitars, keyboards, and drums can be powerful tools, but how we use them matters. Some of these recommendations are quite specific because the devil is in the details!

### THE HUMBLE ACOUSTIC: A GENTLE VOICE

The acoustic guitar's warm tones blend beautifully with hymns and carols, acting as a gentle hand guiding the congregation's voices. Along with bass guitar, this was my primary instrument for use in worship. Here are some ways to use it:

**Accompaniment:** Provide a supportive foundation for singing, keeping everyone in tune and on tempo.

**Tone and Mood:** The natural sound is perfect for smaller spaces or reflective moments. A tasteful melody can underscore a chant or psalm, while simple chords can add warm harmony without overwhelming the melody.

**Creating Space:** Quiet strumming can create a contemplative atmosphere during reflection.

## THE NOT SO HUMBLE ELECTRIC! POWER AND EMOTION

The electric guitar by its very nature draws attention to itself. That's fine if you're listening to Stevie Ray Vaughn, Slash, or Larry Carlton, but worship is another matter! The electric guitar adds power, drama, and a touch of contemporary flair. But remember, skill and taste are crucial, and they don't just happen. A talented player who understands worship can use it effectively but, as far as I am concerned, the acoustic guitar is preferable. Here's how to use the electric guitar effectively, if it must be used:

### Volume Control

**Moderate Levels:** Watch the volume! Ensure the volume is balanced with other instruments and vocals to avoid overpowering the worship atmosphere.

**Sound Checks:** Regular sound checks can help maintain appropriate volume levels and prevent sudden, disruptive changes.

### Tone Settings

**Warm and Clean Tones:** Use settings that produce a warm, clean tone suitable for worship. Avoid harsh, distorted sounds that can be distracting.

**Effects Sparingly:** Use effects like reverb and delay sparingly to add depth without overwhelming the music.

### Song Selection

**Appropriate Repertoire:** Choose songs where the electric guitar can complement rather than dominate or distract. Avoid songs that require heavy, aggressive playing. Did I say watch the volume?!

**Blend with the Acoustic:** Use the electric guitar to enhance songs primarily led by an acoustic guitar, providing a fuller sound.

## Playing Style

**Subtle and Supportive:** Adopt a playing style that supports the melody and vocals. Avoid excessive solos or complex riffs that draw attention away from worship. Remember, you are not on stage!

**Dynamics and Sensitivity:** Play with dynamics, being sensitive to the flow of the worship service. Adjust playing intensity according to the mood and progression of the song.

## Positioning and Placement

**Placement:** Position the electric guitarist in a way that integrates her into the band without making her the visual or auditory focal point. No rock stars, please!

**Monitor Levels:** Ensure the guitarist has a personal monitor mix to hear their playing clearly without needing excessive volume in the main mix.

## Worship Team Coordination

**Rehearsal Integration:** Include the electric guitarist in regular rehearsals to ensure seamless integration with the worship team. In my experience, electric guitarists don't automatically take a musical back seat!

**Communication:** Maintain open communication with the sound engineer and other musicians to adapt and respond to the needs of the service in real-time. As with all musical ensembles, listening to one another is critical.

## BASS: HOLDING DOWN THE BOTTOM

Bass guitar was the instrument I played during my rock n' roll years and it holds a special place in my heart. The bass guitar doesn't sing the melody or dazzle with solos (at least, not in my style of playing)! Its strength lies in filling the low-end with those deep notes that create a sense of power, stability, and warmth. Think of it as the musical foundation.

**Supporting the Melody and Harmony** The bass doesn't simply play root notes; it can add depth and texture by outlining chords and weaving counter melodies. While often associated with rock and contemporary worship, the bass can be valuable in traditional settings. A simple, walking bass line can add subtle warmth and rhythmic interest. J.S. Bach's seemingly simple yet effective bass lines on the organ offer a treasure trove of techniques for electric bassists. By going beyond root notes, outlining chords, incorporating walking bass lines, and exploring counterpoint, the bass can support the melody and harmony in any musical setting.

**Serving the Song, Not Standing Out** The ideal bass player (or guitarist) focuses on serving the song and supporting the congregation's worship experience. Tasteful playing, thoughtful phrasing, and a clear understanding of the music's emotional arc are what make a truly impactful guitarist or bassist.

## **WHAT ABOUT DRUMS?**

Rock percussion stands in stark contrast to the established soundscape of traditional worship. In contrast to the contemplative atmosphere of traditional worship focused on prayer and reflection, rock percussion's driving rhythms, focus on creating a 'groove'. The physical presence of the beat dominates and conjures up associations with high-energy concerts that contribute to an entertainment 'feel'. That entertainment 'feel' can disrupt the core purpose of worship music by creating a more outward and physical experience akin to a rock concert.

For this reason, I suggest exploring the use of alternative percussion instruments. Lutheran worship can maintain its focus on reverence and theological depth while incorporating rhythmic elements that enhance congregational engagement and participation. Hand-held percussion instruments, of which there many, have their own unique timbre and character, offering opportunities to diversify musical expressions

within the framework of Lutheran liturgy. This approach ensures that percussion serves the worship experience harmoniously, rather than overshadowing it with secular associations.

## **PIANO: ELECTRIC OR ACOUSTIC?**

While electronic keyboards have found their way into modern worship, the acoustic piano remains a preferred choice for its authenticity, richness of sound, symbolic presence, and ability to engage both the musician and the congregation. Like the organ, its enduring appeal lies in its ability to connect us to the deeper, more traditional aspects of worship, supporting the atmosphere of reverence and spiritual depth. From a purely functional standpoint, the acoustic piano complements the natural acoustics of a worship space. Unlike electronic keyboards, which rely on amplification, the sound of an acoustic piano blends organically with the architecture and acoustics of the church.

## **THE RELIABLE TRIO**

Over the years I found that the ‘Reliable Trio’ of bass, acoustic guitar, and acoustic piano provided a versatile, balanced, and respectful accompaniment for worship. Its ability to enhance both traditional hymns and contemporary worship songs without overwhelming the liturgy makes it an excellent choice for churches looking to bridge the gap between different worship styles. This ensemble supports the congregation’s singing, respects the solemnity of the service, and adds a fresh, contemporary feel that can engage a wide range of worshippers. Here some of the reasons why this ensemble works so well.

## **Adaptability to Various Styles**

The bass, acoustic guitar, and acoustic piano can seamlessly transition between traditional hymns and contemporary worship songs. This flexibility allows for a diverse musical repertoire that caters to different tastes and worship traditions.

## **Dynamic Range**

These instruments cover a wide range of dynamics, from soft, contemplative pieces to more vibrant, celebratory songs. This range is essential for the varied emotional and spiritual tones found in both traditional and contemporary worship services.

## **Balance and Blend**

The acoustic nature of these instruments means they blend well without overpowering the congregation's singing or the spoken parts of the liturgy. The bass provides a solid foundation, the guitar adds rhythmic texture, and the piano offers melodic and harmonic support.

## **Supportive Role**

This ensemble supports the congregational singing rather than dominating it. The acoustic guitar and piano can follow and enhance the melody, while the bass underpins the harmony, ensuring the focus remains on worship rather than performance.

## **Respecting Liturgical Elements**

The acoustic qualities of the trio respect the traditional elements of the liturgy. They can be played softly and reverently during more solemn parts of the service, maintaining the integrity and reverence of the worship experience.

## **Smooth Integration**

Traditional liturgical music often has a rich harmonic structure that the piano can articulate beautifully. The bass and guitar add depth and warmth without detracting from the solemnity of traditional hymns.

## **Adding Contemporary Feel**

The acoustic guitar and bass introduce a contemporary feel that can appeal to younger congregants or those who appreciate modern worship music. This helps in creating a more inclusive worship environment that resonates with a broader demographic.

## **Rhythmic and Harmonic Freshness**

The rhythmic patterns and harmonic progressions possible with an acoustic guitar bring a fresh and engaging element to contemporary worship songs, while the bass adds a groove that can make contemporary pieces livelier and inviting – within reason!

## **Practical Considerations**

These instruments are relatively simple to set up and require minimal amplification, making them practical for churches with varying resources, but who almost always have a piano. They are also widely accessible, as many musicians are proficient in these instruments.

## **Ease of Coordination:**

A trio is easier to coordinate than larger ensembles. The fewer players involved, the more cohesive and synchronized the accompaniment can be, reducing the chances of distractions during the worship service.



## APPENDIX C

### GOOD HYMN, BAD HYMN

In many contemporary Christian songs God's love is portrayed as what a friend of mine calls 'sloppy agape'. The language runs in the direction of how loving and inclusive we should be. The Church is supposed to be a place where all divisions end, and all are welcome. God is nice so we should be nice, too. The seriousness of sin is minimized or ignored. Christ and His cross revealing the only righteousness is downplayed. These types of hymn texts are legalism disguised in flowery language, often at the level of 4<sup>th</sup> grade poetry!

Evaluating hymns requires a comprehensive assessment of their theological soundness, poetic quality, singability, and capacity to foster meaningful worship. Good hymns focus on theological fidelity, ensuring alignment with Lutheran doctrinal teachings on grace, Christ's centrality, Sacraments, and the Word of God. Good hymns also reflect biblical teachings accurately, incorporating contextual and coherent biblical narratives. Good hymns value poetic excellence, including rhyme scheme, meter, and imagery. They enhance engagement by evoking emotions and expressing reverence. Accessibility is crucial, avoiding complexity or jargon that could hinder comprehension while maintaining theological depth.

The following are some examples of good hymns. A careful reading of their texts reveals theological soundness and good poetic quality. Again, using our basic theological theme, it's all about the direction.

1. **"A Mighty Fortress Is Our God"** by Martin Luther

"A Mighty Fortress Is Our God", a cornerstone of Lutheran hymnody, emphasizes God's strength and protection amid spiritual warfare. It reflects Luther's theology of salvation by grace through faith.

2. **"Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Your Word"** by Martin Luther

"Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Your Word" focuses on the importance of God's Word as a source of strength and guidance for believers. It underscores the Lutheran emphasis on the utter reliability of the Word of God.

3. **"In Christ Alone"** by Keith Getty and Stuart Townend

I would not recommend all their hymns, but this hymn is widely appreciated for its robust Christological focus, affirming salvation through Christ alone and the centrality of His life, death, and resurrection.

4. **"Abide with Me"** by Henry F. Lyte

While not originally Lutheran, "Abide with Me" is often used in Lutheran worship for its profound expression of dependence on God's presence and grace, particularly in times of trial and transition.

5. **"How Great Thou Art"** by Stuart K. Hine

"How Great Thou Art" magnifies God's majesty and creation, offering praise and worship in response to His greatness and the wonders of His works, especially the wonder of God's taking away our sin through Jesus.

6. **"Beautiful Savior"** ("Fairest Lord Jesus")

"Beautiful Savior" exalts the beauty and majesty of Jesus Christ, reflecting on His divine attributes and how He is the light and life of the Christian.

7. **"O Sacred Head, Now Wounded"** (Passion Chorale) by Paul Gerhardt

"O Sacred Head, Now Wounded" poignantly meditates on Christ's suffering and sacrifice on the cross, conveying deep emotion and theological reflection on the atonement.

## **THE ROLE OF HYMN TEXTS IN WORSHIP**

Hymn texts hold a vital place in the fabric of congregational worship, serving to express sound theology, provide vehicles for thanks and praise, and connect the congregation with the seasons of the church year, biblical themes, and festival days. The following are examples of hymn texts I wrote for congregational use, set to either traditional or contemporary melodies. These texts were carefully written to align with and illuminate the theological and liturgical rhythms of the church calendar.

I am providing a detailed analysis of this first hymn to illustrate how hymns texts may be assessed theologically.

### **LORD, BE THE SONG**

Text: Pastor Mark Anderson,  
sung to the tune of "The Bells of Christmas"

Lord, hear the song of those who wait, Whose hearts grow faint, whose need is great;  
Who wander through the world alone, Who long for warmth, for love, for home.

Lord, hear the song of those who wait, Whose tears cry out, 'Is this our fate?'  
Who know the groaning of the earth. Lord, bring the new creation's birth.

Come, join the song of those who wait, Who God's great Day anticipate.  
Who know the fear of darkening days, Yet dare to hope, to trust, to praise.

Come, sing the song as we await Lord Jesus, who we celebrate.  
Whose praise we sing, Whose love we tell, Our hope, our joy, Emmanuel.

### **Christocentric Focus**

**Verse 4: "Lord Jesus, who we celebrate; Whose praise we sing, Whose love we tell, Our hope, our joy, Emmanuel."**

This verse clearly centers the hymn on Christ, celebrating His incarnation as Emmanuel, "God with us," which is a core aspect of Lutheran Christology. It emphasizes Christ as the foundation of our hope and joy, which is essential in Lutheran worship.

### **Law and Gospel**

**Verses 1 and 2: "Lord, hear the song of those who wait, Whose hearts grow faint, whose need is great; Who wander through the world alone, Who long for warmth, for love, for home." and "Whose tears cry out, 'Is this our fate?' Who know the groaning of the earth. Lord, bring the new creation's birth."**

These verses highlight the human condition of suffering and longing, reflecting the Law by acknowledging the brokenness of the world and the human heart. The plea for God to "bring the new creation's birth" points to the Gospel, the promise of redemption and renewal through Christ.

### **Eschatological Hope**

**Verse 3: "Come, join the song of those who wait, Who God's great Day anticipate, Who know the fear of darkening days, Yet dare to hope, to trust, to praise."**

This verse captures the eschatological hope central to Lutheran theology, the anticipation of God's final victory and the restoration of creation. It encourages the

congregation to live in hopeful expectation despite present fears and challenges, resonating with the Lutheran emphasis on hope in Christ's return.

### **Advent Theme**

The text fits well within the Advent season, which is a time of waiting and anticipation for the coming of Christ. The repeated theme of waiting and the eschatological hope align with the themes of Advent, making it suitable for this liturgical context.

### **Pastoral Sensitivity**

The hymn addresses those who are suffering and waiting, offering comfort and hope. It acknowledges the reality of pain and loneliness while pointing to the ultimate hope found in Christ. This pastoral sensitivity is crucial in choosing hymns for worship, as it speaks to the varied experiences of the congregation.

### **Communal Aspect**

**Verse 3: "Come, join the song of those who wait, Who God's great Day anticipate, Who know the fear of darkening days, Yet dare to hope, to trust, to praise."**

This verse invites the community to join in waiting and hoping, fostering a sense of unity and shared faith. It reflects the communal nature of Lutheran worship, where the gathered assembly supports one another in faith.

### **Accessibility and Singability**

The text is written in a simple, straightforward style that is accessible for congregational singing. The tune "The Bells of Christmas" is likely familiar to many, which can aid in the congregation's participation and engagement. I often used this hymn on the first Sunday of Advent, as the hymn tune anticipated the arrival of Christmas. Then I used "The Bells of Christmas, as the closing hymn on the last Sunday of Advent.

## Emotional Resonance

The hymn effectively captures a range of emotions—sorrow, longing, hope, and joy—mirroring the emotional journey of Advent and the Christian life. The emotional resonance helps worshippers connect more deeply with the message.

A simple test to apply to any hymn comes in the form of two questions: Did Jesus have to die on the Cross for this hymn to be sung? And would I want to sing this hymn on my deathbed? If the answer to either is no, then the hymn fails to capture the profound gravity and transformative power of our faith.

### **O GOD, FROM WORD AND TABLE**

Text: Rev. Mark Anderson    Tune: ‘The Church’s One Foundation’

O God, from Word and table You send us on our way.  
Our words could never thank You for all You've done this day.  
In bread and wine and promise our lives have been restored,  
Your gracious love has claimed us, through Christ our mighty Lord.

You broke the bread of promise and poured the cup divine,  
And through these simple gifts, Lord, Your mercy now is mine.  
O Lamb of God, most holy, Your grace alone imparts,  
The faith that trusts You only and satisfies our hearts.

What struggles lie before us, O Lord, we cannot know.  
Our lives, as Yours, O Jesus, into this world must go.  
Forsaking earth's brief glories, You chose to bear the cross,  
So we, by faith, will follow and count the world the as loss.

## **BRING YOUR SAVING WORD**

Text: Rev. Mark Anderson

Tune: Donna Adkins, Worship and Praise Songbook, Augsburg Fortress, #42

Trinity blessed, O God of all the ages. Bring Your saving Word to all the earth.  
Bring Your saving Word, free those who have heard. Bring Your saving Word to all the earth.

O God, our Father, whose judgments never falter, Teach us not to fear the evil day.  
When the battles rage, we will sing Your praise. Teach us not to fear the evil day.

Christ our Redeemer, The Alpha and Omega. Conqueror of death and Lord of Life.  
Trust will see us through, Relying, Lord on You, Conqueror of death and Lord of Life.

O Holy Spirit, our Advocate, Defender, Come into our hearts and grant us peace.  
Make our Savior known, make our hearts His throne. Come into our hearts and grant us peace.

Trinity blessed, O God of all the ages. Bring Your saving Word to all the earth.  
Bring Your saving Word, free those who have heard. Bring Your saving Word to all the earth.

## **WE LOOK TO YOU, O GOD OF MIGHT**

Text: Rev. Mark Anderson

Tune: Philipp Nicolai, #76, Lutheran Book of Worship

We look to You O God of might, Great lord of all beyond our sight!  
You bring Your Word from heaven.  
Your faithful Word Your church protects, From death and hell, dread sin's effects,  
Until the Day of judgement.

REFRAIN Holy, holy, God of power, in this hour, guide and shield us. By Your Word renew and heal us.

Your will is that Your Church embrace All people, ev'ry land and race, that all may know Your favor. To tell the story is our call, to speak of Christ to one and all, to make the good confession. REFRAIN

When earth's brief glories pass away, we'll look to Your triumphant Day, Your kingdom's final vic'try. As we await You in this place, renew us in baptismal grace, for life and love restore us. REFRAIN

### **CHRIST, YOU CALL US**

Text: Rev. Mark Anderson

Tune: Franz Joseph Haydn, #358 Lutheran Book of Worship

Christ, you call us in the water, dying, rising, born anew.  
Opening Your promised future, sin no longer can accuse.  
Bring Your Word, O Lord, refresh us, Bring the faith the world derides.  
You alone, our rock and anchor, Stand forever by our side.

Christ You call us, young and aging, Men and women, bound and free.  
By the water and the Spirit, Joined in faith's deep unity.  
Christ our Master, be our vision, Save us from ourselves, we pray,  
May we live in faith's bold freedom, Looking forward to that Day.

Christ, You call us out of bondage, Welcoming your sinful guests, Turning us from self-reliance, toward Your grace and promised rest.  
In Your glorious, precious Gospel, You proclaim us ever-free!  
Speak, O Christ, and may we listen. In Your Word is liberty.



## QUESTIONS

### **Multigenerational Worship: Engaging Younger Members without Compromising Theology**

1. How can the church ensure that worship remains theologically sound while incorporating music that appeals to younger members?
2. What safeguards can be put in place to prevent the preferences of younger, less mature members from unduly influencing the worship experience?
3. What criteria should be used to evaluate the appropriateness of contemporary music in worship, considering the maturity levels of different age groups?
4. What role does education play in helping younger members develop an appreciation for traditional worship elements?
5. How can the wisdom and experience of older members be used to mentor younger members in understanding the value of traditional worship practices?
6. How can the church create a worship experience that is inclusive yet not overly influenced by the potentially immature tastes of younger congregants?

### **From “me” to “we”: Staying on Message**

1. In what ways might self-referencing of the pastor disrupt the intended focus on communal worship and the broader tradition?
2. What steps can be taken to prevent worship from becoming a platform for self-promotion by pastors?
3. How can congregational feedback be used to help pastors understand the impact of their self-referencing on the worship experience?
4. How can pastors use personal illustrations effectively without detracting from the theological and liturgical core of the service?

5. What role should church leadership play in guiding pastors to maintain the focus on communal worship rather than individual experience?

### **Instrumental Cohesion in Worship**

1. What steps should be taken to ensure guitars enhance congregational singing without overpowering the vocals?
2. What strategies should be employed to ensure the electric guitar complements rather than overshadows the liturgy?
3. In what ways can the bass guitar contribute to a sense of power and stability in traditional Lutheran worship without becoming overly prominent?
4. How might we explore alternative percussion instruments to diversify our musical expression while preserving the reverent atmosphere of Lutheran worship?
5. How can musicians be encouraged to approach their instruments in ways that prioritize serving the song and supporting congregational worship over showcasing individual skill?

### **Worship in the Digital Age: Integrating Tech with Tradition**

1. How can the church critically assess the impact of technology on the worship experience to ensure it enhances rather than detracts from the worship experience?
2. What guidelines should be established to balance the use of technology with maintaining a sense of reverence and communal connection in worship?

3. In what ways might multimedia presentations disrupt the traditional flow of worship, and how can these disruptions be minimized?
4. What role should congregational feedback play in determining the appropriate use of technology in worship services?
5. What strategies can be implemented to educate the congregation about the appropriate and respectful use of technology during worship services?