

Notes on Effective Worship

Version 3; October 2002

by John P. Nordin

jpn@jpnordin.com

Worship. We suspect that something is amiss with much of our parish worship. However, the worship debate is often stuck in a series of conflicts that repeat themselves without progress.

*I think we can move out of these sterile debates by being clear about the **purpose** of worship and some basic techniques for making worship **effective**.*

I. WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF WORSHIP?

What can we say about why we worship, and what worship is intended to accomplish? What is "good" worship, and how do we know it?

I will assert and then explain a statement of purpose: **Our purpose in gathering is for the worship of God and the experiencing of God's benefits, for the living of a godly life.**

The statement has three components, and I take up the implications of them in reverse order.

Living a godly life. I make no apology for asserting that worship is to change us and shape us toward God and that change is to affect the rest of our lives. Here I would affirm such statements about how worship is where "the church is most the church" or where we are "most like our true selves." Worship should melt our hearts of stone, sanctify us, strengthen us for facing trials and

suffering, clarify our vision of life, enabling us to testify to God in our daily lives.

Worship is meant to be enticing, attractive, something that refreshes you in a way you didn't realize you needed, like a drink of water when you didn't realize you were thirsty, and thus brings the awareness that your way of life is prone to dehydration. Worship is a place of shelter from the cruelty of the world, that teaches you of the world's cruelty and strengthens your resolve and ability not to be borne down by this cruelty. If worship becomes in fact a place where we practice being loving, forgiving and hopeful, than we will return to the world more likely to be loving, forgiving and hopeful. If worship becomes a place where we encounter a vision of the greatness, beauty and mystery of God, we will be convicted of the shabbiness that is in our lives. Thus, the experience of worship is an indictment of a sinful life and guidance and practice in godly living.

Support for defining worship's purpose as living a Godly life is also found the Biblical images of worship as being our primary activity in heaven, when we no longer are here on earth but rather live without sin as God plans. The Biblical image of "praying always" connects worship to daily life. Worship is the godly life -- "the life of praise." Worship is a "foretaste of the feast to come," a foretaste of what human life was intended to be.

Therefore, good worship cannot be a place of sin, other than the inevitability of sin produced by sinful people. But worship cannot be good if it is a place where prejudices are confirmed, where some are excluded, where outsiders are demonized and where sins are rationalized.

Nor can worship be a place for false solutions to sin. The sin of patriarchy cannot be overcome by removing men from leadership, the sin of crime cannot be overcome by excluding criminals -- anymore than the "sin" of a pastor who cannot chant with operatic quality could be overcome by prohibiting their chanting. Here in worship the real sins of the world are transformed by male leadership that isn't demeaning to women, by worshipping with repentant criminals, and, for that matter, by congregations realizing that what they need from a presider is not entertainment. Naturally, leadership is open, must be open and demonstrated in fact to be open, to all with the call. But the quest for a godly life in worship is not the search for a pure group of holy people who are immune from sin; rather we seek to transform sinful people. Worship cannot be the exclusive club of those previously found to be pure.

What of evangelism as a purpose of worship? Much has been written on the dilemma of having to decide if worship is for its own sake or for the task of evangelism. Like almost all choices in worship it is a choice only within the fallen world when we accept that our choice would have to be between the bleak alternatives of sterile, boring, pure worship and a tawdry show. Real worship that shapes us towards a Godly life is intriguing to visitors, surprising them with a vision they did not know they needed. The same worship strengthens the faithful to be able to evangelize in the world, re-energizing them, and renewing their convictions. But, worship is not only for the evangelism of newcomers, but also for the deeper evangelism of the committed Christian. It must also be able to evangelize newcomers by having them observe what worship does for the committed.

This third aspect of the purpose of worship offers us a criterion for assessing our various aesthetic and artistic decisions about worship: does it help us live a godly life? It helps us resist such reasons as "they want to do it," or "we like to see it," as planning guides for worship. Such reasons treat worship as a place of status, where doing something in worship is motivated by feeding the egos of those in attendance rather than transforming them.

Most critically, "living a godly life" provides us a way to resist "I liked it," and "I didn't like it," as criteria for deciding what is proper in worship. I think the "I like it" criterion is one of the most destructive worms eating at the foundations of our worship, for it separates worship from the worshipper, letting the worship become a show that is watched and evaluated for good or ill, rather than something the worshippers themselves have done. "I like it" and its cousin, "good sermon, Pastor," however well meant, place the worshipper in the mode of liturgical critic granting approval rather than participant shaped by the encounter with God. More desirable would be the comments "I heard the gospel", "I became aware of my sin," "I drew closer to the other people," "I forgave that person who was bothering me."

The abject failure of most worship to shape us in any way, other than by giving us practice at alienation, is a severe indictment. The failure of so much contemporary worship to be motivated by or to do anything other than satisfy the "I like it" criteria, is tragic.

To receive God's benefits. The word "benefits" is somewhat infelicitous, but chosen so that we could consider not only God's grace but also God's beneficial judgment on us. There are many benefits. The benefits may start with the proclamation of God's grace and the experience of the sacraments,

but the topic certainly has wider implications. Worship is a place where, to put it bluntly, we get something. It is not a place of work where we do some task. There still is a need for concern with the reformation question of "sacrifice" and the liturgy, and its modern equivalent: the liturgical works righteousness of Lutherans: "if I had fun, it wasn't worship." Rather than the bread from heaven we seek the cod liver oil of God: "if it tastes bad, it must be good."

What, then, are the benefits? Certainly, all of the gracious things given in the previous section apply here. Worship is where we are forgiven, reconciled and restored. Worship is where we are told and experience God's love.

Some arguments about worship now revolve around whether the benefits should start from God's word (hoping that connections with our particular needs will happen automatically) or from our own needs (and then go searching for a benefit from God). Should worship planning be based exclusively on the lectionary or on "meeting people's needs," encountering them "where they are?" Should worship be "what you ought to do" or should it be survey-driven, talking to people about Christian cooking, how to raise kids, etc.

The choice is, as usual, a false choice between two shabby alternatives. God intends, I think, to help us in our problems, but the help offered often involves confession and repentance. What people need is not always what we think they want. For example, we can talk about how to raise kids in worship if that is truly frustrating our parishioners, but what we offer had better not simply be secular techniques and tips for maintaining our parental authority and smoothly managing our kids. We can talk about Christian cooking if it is not more self-absorption, but is oriented towards helping us live more simply, to refrain from polluting our bodily temples and is a

spiritual discipline in moderating our appetites. What we offer, in other words, must be what God offers.

A more subtle issue about what we are to "get" in worship involves the role of teaching in worship. A teaching worship is assumed to be a vehicle for teaching "facts" and in modern Lutheranism, nothing is felt to be more deadly to life than "facts." From the other side of the alleged dilemma, those who see worship's purpose as offering us the bare proclamation of the gospel to the exclusion of all else, worry that the education function will drive out the proclamation function.

Clearly, the source of God's benefits in worship is rooted in the proclamation of the gospel. However, we again have false alternatives that dissolve into a unity when we raise our standards above the mediocre. Education may proceed by such expedients as a consistent theme that allows an aspect of the gospel proclamation to be heard with such clarity that its message can be remembered after church is over. The church year can be taught by its clear use in the shaping of worship. A more than perfunctory treatment of the prayers of the church is educational as are using sermon illustrations from the liturgy. The principle here is to teach by example first, and then gently point out the example.

When we are considering more didactic sort of teaching situations such as telling about a saint's day, a theological concept or explaining a part of the liturgy, we teach best when we have a congruence between what we are teaching and what is being experienced: if we teach that a part of liturgy is where we thank God, then it better feel like thanking God when we do it, or what we have taught is that liturgy is a lie.

The practical question for worship planning then is this: does this proposed worship

practice help or hinder the communication of God's benefits to us?

Worship God. This phrase may seem redundant but here is the nub of much current worship discussion. It is God we must worship, not the government with patriotic songs, the community we are supposed to "support," the worship leaders by enjoying their show, the heritage of a sub-culture, the random "creativity" of various individuals, or our children by turning them into objects to be venerated.

To "worship God" focuses us on how purposeless worship is from a secular point of view. While, "to live a godly life," leads us into certain aspects of practicality, the point of worship remains rather pointless from the world's viewpoint. We are not doing God any good by our worship, and we are not scoring points either, rather worship is something we need to do to stay human -- humans, created in God's image.

Some object that it is demeaning to be forced to praise a jealous God who selfishly insists that we all tell how great God is. Of course, this is an illusion, and a tiny one at that. We were created to praise God; living a life without praise leads us to be tiny, cramped and bitter. Worship of God, can be seen not something we do, but something we both do and something we **are**, because we are the body of Christ when we gather on Sunday morning. The purpose of that body of Christ is to praise God and to dwell more fully in God's grace and care. Praising God is part of our natural function. It doesn't do God any good, rather it is we that are damaged if we don't do it.

Some would use Jesus rather than God as the divine entity at the center of worship, and I will not attack the centrality of Jesus or object

to framing the Eucharist around Jesus as the host at the table. But I wonder if God isn't really the center. The Father is active in the Old Testament, and can be proclaimed. The Holy Spirit, if we ever knew anything about it, should be proclaimed as well. God, in other words, has done more good things than Jesus, even if we put Jesus first.

The practical question this aspect poses for us is: Is it God that is the subject of our worship? This helps us exclude the common false gods listed above, as well as others.

Not all aspects of worship are included in this purpose statement, and there are other useful statements of purpose, but I have found this one helpful for constructively organizing many of the current worship issues. I do think that we have not thought enough about the purpose for our gatherings, or have often adopted a purpose that was too small.

II. ISSUES IN MAKING WORSHIP EFFECTIVE

What follows are a series of discussions about various issues of worship practices.

What can we take from the culture?

One battleground for worship is over what cultural practices may be or must be included in worship. One view is this: much of current worship is linear, verbal, and abstract. The culture's form of communication is increasingly characterized by being multi-dimensional, visual and story driven.

Therefore, toss our printed liturgies and our three-point sermons. Get into multi-media: drama, dance, projection of slides and video. Don't ever talk about theology, tell stories

instead. Further, technical terms like "grace," "narthex," or "invocation" are not comprehended, so translate everything into the increasingly simple vocabulary that people can understand.

Likewise, when it comes to music, Lutheran hymnody is decried for constantly using complex and archaic terms and syntax, as well as musical structures unknown in secular life, so toss it and get into praise choruses and country & western worship.

Those with a contrary view are repelled by what they view as an anti-intellectual direction of culture. They defend the role of worship in shaping and forming the people of God. They argue that while the gospel is simple and for all, the depth of Christian life encompasses more than can be immediately understood.

The same battle is fought over using practices from other cultures in worship: "smudging" of a worship space, Native American spirituality, and so forth. Advocates say this is just the same as putting Christmas trees in the sanctuary, the other side views these practices as pagan.

Behind the debate are two contrary propositions that seem unassailable. The first that we worship in the vernacular, certainly an authentic Lutheran position. The other is that humans and their culture are sinful and are called to repentance and amendment of life on a daily basis, also a Lutheran position.

From these two questions may come a better frame of reference that allows us to move forward. The question is not "do we use the culture in worship?" since everything, including our language itself is part of a culture, but rather, which of the cultural set of tools and techniques may be transformed, or selected to be used in praising God?

The question isn't "is video good or bad?" The question is what sorts of video are good? Can we develop rules, even rules of thumb

that allow us to separate good video from bad and allow us to discern the contexts that video is appropriate for? There is video pornography and also video translations of parables of Jesus (by the American Bible Society).

Smudging might serve for an example. One side says you must allow me to do this because it is part of my culture and rejecting it, after you have accepted other cultural practices, is racist (or ethicist). The other side says you can't do this because it is part of a ritual from a non-Christian religion and has no more place in worship than American flags or Masonic rituals.

The better question to answer is to have an inquiry about what is the meaning and purpose of smudging in its own context, and what it will be taken to mean in worship by people conversant with it and by those who encounter it for the first time. Cultural rituals may change their meaning in worship, or may dominate worship and change its meaning.

We must assert the right of Christianity to critique all cultural practices even as we assert the need to make Christianity speak to people in ways they understand.

Is Worship Evangelism?

Another battleground that raises some of the same issues as the previous point is the relation of worship and evangelism: is worship shaped for insiders or is it the fundamental tool of evangelism by the congregation?

Those advocating the latter viewpoint advance the following model: visitors first contact the church in worship. What do they encounter? They are put off by the archaic cultural practices indicated above, and to boot, find a dull, dispirited environment with a handful of people rattling around in a huge sanctuary,

singing a liturgy that leaves the visitor always a few pages behind.

To repair this problem, advocates talk about helpers to point out the proper pages, pastors to give instructions on everything, and so on, so that the entire environment is regulated by the needs of the visitors.

People who resist this often try to say that for a community to have any identity it must be different to some extent from what goes on around them. Since faith in God, eating the flesh and blood of Jesus, unconditional love and other aspects of our faith, are absolutely foreign to the lives of people outside church, it isn't reasonable to expect that they will find something totally familiar in church.

There are even defenders of dullness, and they point to genuine realities. The dullness of worship is not perceived as a problem to many, and what some perceive as dullness, others perceive as stability, a quality increasingly rare in our society.

There are at least three positive solutions to this dilemma.

The first strategy points to the common ground of the two opinions. Much of current worship isn't faithful to either position: it is neither friendly to visitors nor an experience of the joy and grace we share in Christ. Thus there are significant areas of liturgical reform that each side of this debate should welcome.

Since classic Lutheran hymnody encompasses a range from obscure to powerful, obviously then we can increase our discernment and use what is powerful and simply let the rest alone. There are contemporary hymn writers who compose hymns with the weight and good theology our heritage wants using contemporary vocabulary and issues, and we can select the best from them. Dullness is not a sign of the true Lutheran church.

When it comes to liturgy, we must remember that while a certain liturgical order is a mark of our heritage, the services of the LBW are compositions from the late 70s, not the first century. It is the flow of worship, not the precise form that marks it as liturgical.

Doing liturgy with power can prove compelling for visitors and regulars alike. Again and again, I have seen those contemptuous or merely weary of boring, ineffective public ritual be converted and grateful when they experience ritual done with skill.

Suppose you went to a football game for the first time ever, would it seem unfriendly, complex, confusing? It might well depend on the quality of the game. If the teams fumbled often, failed to line up on time for the scrimmage and ran the same play over and over again while the fans talked to each other, you might leave complaining of the complexity, remoteness and unfriendliness of the game. If the teams executed well, you could sense the excitement in the stands, and your seat gave you a good view, you might become a fan, who would then seek to understand the intricacies of offenses and defenses. You might find the game intriguing.

A second fundamental strategy concerning worship and evangelism is to separate the audience. Some churches are distinguishing two groups, often labeled "believer" and "seeker." The former is served by worship along traditional lines, the latter receives the utmost in user-friendly, approachable "presentations" of the gospel that may not even be termed worship.

A third strategy, which moves us beyond worship is that popularized by Willow Creek and Rev. Bill Hybels.¹ The aim is to train and motivate members to develop caring

¹I am indebted to Rev. Lowell Hennings for highlighting this aspect of Willow Creek.

friendships with non-churched people. Those contacts lead, in God's time, to opportunities to share the gospel and to invite them to church.

The concept of participation

Several issues organize themselves around this concept.

Traditionally, participation has been seen as a tradeoff of pastor vs. congregation. Do you come to watch the pastor, or to participate? In order to enhance participation we organize lay readers, acolytes, cantors, ushers, greeters and choirs. Most of those jobs are not strictly necessary for the logistics of the liturgy to be done, but they provide a means of participation.

Despite this emphasis, the liturgical churches are attacked as not providing any real participation, and the proposed alternative is contemporary worship. This, in its current form, requires skilled musicians and song leaders, and has its "order of service" a set of songs, a sermon and prayers with a few more songs.

By traditional measures of participation, this contemporary alternative would rate low on the scale. No dialogues with the worship leaders and the songs change from week to week so they are not permanent parts of the listener's minds. The event looks and feels more like attending a play or concert than the "work of the people."

This paradox points us towards broader definitions of participation. We can participate by doing directly, but we can also participate emotionally or vicariously when not doing so actively. Think of a rock concert where no one in the audience plays an instrument or even sings the words, and yet the entire event creates a high degree of emotional participation by attendees who

often go away feeling "blessed" by a reduction of stress, or energized to a renewed hope for life.

The traditional liturgical service has high participation by doing, but often a low emotional participation.

I think, to digress briefly, that this is what is behind much of the fierce debates over the 59-minute time limit for worship. I was once defending longer services to someone who was a highly active and committed church member. "Oh, come on," I said, "a movie lasts an hour and forty minutes, and nobody thinks that is too long." "That's different," she snapped, "at a movie you're involved."

A good movie provides a high degree of emotional participation, even to producing anger or tears in the audience, even though you simply sit and look for 100 minutes.

Pat Keifert, current guru of worship, points us to some of the cultural issues behind this seeming paradox. He talks of a culture controlled by the "Ideology of Intimacy" where what we most desire is to retain our anonymity in public settings, but also wish to indulge "our custom of watching a gifted few express their true selves in public."² We want, in other words, to watch a gifted choir sing, we don't want to sing ourselves. We want to see a pastor tell a personal story in the sermon, we don't want to examine our own lives.

Requiring "participation by doing" violates people's desire to be anonymous and opens them to the possibility of embarrassment (if they can't read the lessons well, or drop the communion tray). Listen to people who advocate participation in worship, usually they advocate the participation of others not themselves: "The youth should be reading the

²Patrick Keifert, *Welcoming the Stranger*, Augsburg Fortress 1992, p. 24 ff.

lessons," "How come you never ask him to read the lessons, he has such a good voice."

Lutherans should be deeply committed to participation, but not committed just to lectors and greeters. Again, a solution is possible by unraveling the seeming paradox to clearly identify what the purpose of participation is.

In terms of participation by doing, we might focus less on "doing" in solo roles (lectors, etc.) and look more to "doing" in the group. This can be less threatening because they are part of a mass group and allows us to sidestep some of the cultural problems explained above.

Therefore we are, once again, led to look at quality and singability of hymnody, the tone and emotion of liturgy that use consistent themes that build powerfully, offering an experience that is unique and positive. (I explore these perspectives more fully below.)

Freed from side battles with cultural trends, we may then engage the culture head on where it counts: by our worship leading people to see that it is worth leaving their lonely and solitary watching of TV to gather together with others to experience how God forms us as the people of God.

Fundamentally, we seek participation because we are after something bigger than just to entertain, or to de-stress. We seek to give each person practice in participating in something bigger than themselves, practice in being part of God's kingdom, practice at being in communion with strangers and neighbors, practice at being Christian.

The Forgotten Virtue of Discernment Some spiritual writings speak of the gift of "discernment," a gift of God like the gift of prophecy or teaching. Discernment is the ability to clearly distinguish good from evil in a particular context. This seems an

uncontroversial virtue, but as I observe our search for better worship resources, I think that we suffer precisely from a failure, almost a total failure, to understand and employ this gift. Our concern isn't so much separating good from evil, but it certainly is one of separating better from not-worth-bothering about.

Instead of discerning what is needed, our ELCA worship debate is often oriented to make broad choices among categories that contain both good and less-good. For example, a score of times or more I have been a witness or participant in a dialogue that goes something like this: "We're looking for resources for worship, but haven't found anything." "Well, I think _____ is great."

This is so common, that we need to unravel what is amiss in this, and in expanded versions of this conversation. People seem to have selected a particular resource (such as the *GIA Hymnal Supplement of 1991*) and become advocates of it. But, at this stage of things, it is more than unlikely that any one resource is going to be the be all and end all for the entire ELCA. I have my suspicions that people advocate the first halfway decent thing they have come across and then stop looking, because the strain of living with an open question is too much to bear. Certainly, my suspicion is heightened when they cannot answer detailed questions about the content or best use of the resource they are advocating or get immediately defensive when it is questioned.

It isn't just resources, we also have little cults of personality around certain composers. Is "it" going to be John Ylvasaker (perhaps he is regarded as passé already)? Perhaps Brian Wren, for those who wish to gain status by advocating someone relatively unknown? Is it Marty Haugen, the new god? Is he the one we are waiting for, or should we wait for another?

This is unreasonable, and unfair to the artists involved. We don't need to decide if Marty Haugen is "good" or not. The question is which of his hymns and liturgies embody gracious words and enable effective worship in which context. No one composer could possibly be "it" for our worship. No composer could possibly have every thing they did be of top quality. We will need to survey many artists and take their best work, not adopt a composer wholesale.

This cult of personality has another invidious problem. If the goal is good worship to God's glory and our upbuilding, the goal isn't going to be met by viewing worship as a vicarious participation in the life of one composer, either. What we encounter in worship must be the gospel, as mediated by a composer or preacher. Yet we advertise liturgies not by what they might say to us, (try to imagine a liturgy being promoted as "helps you overcome possessiveness") but by who wrote it.

We continue our failure of discernment by staking out positions on types of worship. We decide that we are "for" or "against" country & western worship, old folk hymns, polka masses, praise choruses, German chorales, multicultural hymns, singing in harmony, entertainment worship, "the western rite," and so on, as if they could, as an entire category, be "good" or "bad." And yes, I include the western rite in that list. This form of worship, like all others, includes many variations, some good, some not so.

Let us be willing to find one good hymn, one good liturgy (or piece of liturgy) at a time. Let us be willing to pick and choose and to assess carefully.

The Presence of the Presider

I am attending a worship conference, and we have gathered for Morning Prayer. The leader

slumps over the top of the podium. "Hi, how ya'll doing? OK, let's see. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all." And the service continues. Need I explain what I am concerned about? It is not the informality of the first beginning. It is rather, that the presider acted as if she had no clue that the second greeting was a greeting, and that the two greetings she chose to use clashed in tone and gave us conflicting messages. She also told us that the second greeting was unimportant, or even fake, proving her sincerity by her informality. Prof. Michael Aune³ is wont to say that "the question about our worship is not whether God is present, the question is whether we are."

The small example above of un-present presiding is multiplied a thousand times, and kills our worship. We have a liturgy suited for dignity and weight, but we say it casually. Our hymns are grand, but we introduce them flatly. We are, as presiders, far too often simply *not* present when we lead.

I am attending worship. The presider never smiles, indeed is scowling through the entire service. At one point he loses his place and stands at the altar flipping pages back and forth for a full minute. At the end of the service, after the benediction, he takes a moment to considerately (it was genuinely considerate) explain that he - a visiting pastor - cannot stay long after worship, he wants to get to Omaha to see a college world series baseball game, a passion of his. As he speaks his face lights up, he is warm and animated, for that is who he really is. But that person was not present in worship.

It isn't malice, or lack of care, that causes this, at least not entirely. Often we worship leaders

³Professor of Liturgics, Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary.

have spent the final time before worship charging around seeing to a multitude of arrangements and requests. We do not focus ourselves, and we lead a worship about peace without the least bit of that emotion being present in us. Or, we are nervous, aware of the multitude of ways our worship may offend the easily offended in our culture; we can be despairing, fearing that the singing will be bad again this week, or that the organist will turn every piece of music into a dirge and so we lead a worship about hope and victory while being utterly defeated ourselves.

Yes, the efficacy of the sacrament does not depend on the virtue of the leader. But, that truth protects us against feeling despair over our imperfections, it was never intended to rationalize incompetence or inattention.

We need to understand the purpose of our liturgical words, gestures and movements. We need to act the liturgy, act it genuinely. We need to study how to prepare ourselves for worship, and teach others to respect our needs for preparation.

Think of the context

Congregations vary. This not-so-profound observation is also overlooked. In the Northeastern Iowa synod 40% of the congregations have less than 100 people at worship every week. Only 10% of those congregations regularly use both setting 1 and 2 of the LBW and have a choir that sings more-or-less regularly. For the congregations with over 200 at worship, the same figure is 82%. Advice that assumes a cadre of skilled musicians, and musicians skilled at the range of modern, Christian music, as well as a choice of worship services, space, and instrumentation to do them, is bound to generate only anxiety, not good worship. The size of congregations is a key attribute in

determining what worship would be effective there.

Rural vs. urban. A high church tradition vs. informality. Non-white cultures vs. general American vs. Northern European. Campus environments vs. everything else. Despite this variation, we always assume we can talk about what is "good" as if it was a universal. I suspect that what happens is that people know what they like, and then advocate that without awareness that "congregations vary." See the comments about discernment above.

Thematic Coherence and Emotional Consistency

These are my mantras these days, the single biggest clue, I think, to generating ritual that has power. They are worthy of an entire article in their own right, but let me just touch a few points. They are so critical to how I plan worship that I find it hard to discuss, perhaps because they are essentially artistic terms.

Theme: this is not, of course, just something like, "Boy Scout Sunday" or "Mothers Day." Theme is what piece, aspect, or dimension of the gospel we are contemplating in worship. Thematic coherence means adjusting the entire liturgy, not just the entrance hymn and hymn of the day, to support that theme. For example, we could aid this process within even the most strict confines of the LBW by 1) having prayers of the day fit the texts more precisely, (one for each year of the lectionary cycle would help), 2) a choice of post-communion canticles and a larger choice of post-communion prayers, 3) musical settings tied to seasons of the church year (some do exist), 4) orienting our preaching to draw on the main images of the theme, 5) organizing worship enough in advance so the choir can choose something to support the theme also.

Themes must be chosen carefully, distinguishing between images and concepts. Our 1993 ELCA theme, "Rooted in the gospel" was an image, and a good one. "Stir us, free us," the 94 theme, was a concept. You cannot have a theme for worship on the subject of being stirred, because talking about stirring, kills it. You can *have* stirring worship, but you cannot *talk* in worship about how you are having stirring worship. The 94 theme could be used by worship planners, but rarely in the worship itself. Talking about a theme rather than using a theme is a common error.

Further, focus on theme is necessary because it is not the typical approach for a group planning worship. The typical beginning is that each person comes in saying "we could do this," offering a series of detached bits of liturgy. In the aggregate this leads to worship being, (again quoting the sainted Prof. Aune) "one durn thing after another."

Emotional consistency is something trickier. Here we are concerned with the tone of words and music, rather than their content. *What a Friend we have in Jesus* is about friendship or prayer, but its tone is something else: mystical, tugging the heart, lovely, perhaps. If our prayers were going to be about, say, spiritual warfare, this would not be the right hymn for a call to prayer. *Battle Hymn of the Republic* might be more congruent emotionally, even though it isn't "about" prayer.

Constantly, I see the disasters that failing to attend to the emotions of worship bring. A gospel-style service is chanting the psalm. The body of the psalm is a standard psalm tone. The antiphon is done to a near-rock flavored beat. Both were wonderful, together they destroyed each other. Often we preface worship with announcements. The tone of these matters also. If it is All Saints' Sunday, the announcements would best be done with some dignity and gravity

Our various collections of hymn topical indexes betray us on this point because they focus on what hymns are about in their lyrics rather than what mood or tempo is created by the music, or the feeling produced by their combination. Actually, most hymn indexes do not even index images ("refuge", "rock", "light") but focus on concepts ("Reformation Sunday"). Totally missing is an index of moods ("upbeat", "grand", "mysterious").

Emotional consistency is a subtle topic. When you ask about specific applications of this concept with people, they often insist that it isn't important or that they did not detect some crushing conflict of emotional tone in the service, or didn't think it affected them. But, my experience is that when you get emotional tone consistent and right, people are surprised by the power of the liturgy. They are so used to ineffective worship, and so good at insulating themselves from the endless blather of our commercials in our culture, that they have forgotten the possibilities for group ritual. I think our LBW funeral liturgy is a good example of a service consistent in tone and one that naturally supports a powerful ritual.

Be warned, however, that because people are not used to thinking about the dimension of emotional tone in worship, they will often attribute the power of an effective liturgy to something totally peripheral, so you cannot just take an opinion poll at face value after a good worship experience either.

Emotions are not emotionalism. There are proper emotions for worship and improper ones. Worship should encourage our feelings of beauty and transcendence (see below) without being sentimental. Worship can create joy which is not the same as slapstick or humor. Worship can create awe, a sense of mystery, leading to fear of God, and that is not the same as intimidating people with a mind-boggling show. Worship can be

invigorating and motivating, helping us overcome all that whispers in our ear that our lives are stuck, and that is not the same as motivating us by hatred or contempt. Worship can be centering and bring a dispassion that help us control our violent reactions, our anger and easily offended attitudes, and this is not the same as draggy music and a dead environment. Worship can lead us to declare war on evil, even to be angry at evil, but that is not the same thing as stirring us up by pandering to our basest fears.

The need for beauty and transcendence

These are an aspect of emotions, but so important, I want to give them a separate focus. Consider the difference between a 19th century railroad station and a 20th century airport. The former has as part of its purpose to be grand, to be a center for the city (which is why restoring them, a la St. Louis, or Washington is so effective). The latter is about processing people as fast as possible. People seldom go to the airport to hang out. Airports are, by and large, visual disasters.

Our worship spaces are often visual disasters as well. Perhaps it is just Iowa, but church after church here seems almost designed to avoid any beauty. Altar pieces and chancel areas are often marvelous, especially in old country churches, but physical layout, colors and traffic flow are often horrible. Doors to parish halls are located beside the altar. The fan blocks the cross. The narthex holds four people, tops. The speakers for the sound system are larger than the cross. The side isles require you to walk sideways.

In a world where beauty is expensive and purchased, and in a world opposed to transcendence, the church should reassert the true use of these. Calm and centering music reveals the shallowness of Muzac blared at us in shopping malls. Harmonious layout of

space (and bulletins) convicts the clutter of our other spaces and places.

Is it bad to be good?

We must clear away another Lutheran hang-up. Talk about making something good, or worse, talk about how we will make something good, especially worship, is sure to generate the time-tested Lutheran conversation-stopper, "WE don't do it, GOD does it." Yes, indeed God does it. We wouldn't even be worshipping if God hadn't done it. We wouldn't worship Jesus if God hadn't sent him, we wouldn't make music if God hadn't given us the gift, we wouldn't read the scriptures if God hadn't provided them, we wouldn't claim grace if it hadn't been first given to us.

Nevertheless, part of what God did was to create us in the image of God and give us gifts and directed that we use them. And, I assert, against all the out-of-context quotes from the Augsburg confession you can find, that some rituals are better than others, some rituals are more faithful to the gospel than others, and it is our job to choose the good. I know our confessions are replete with statements about human rituals, and how we are free to alter them, but those statements were never intended to allow devil-worship, years of boring worship, or to prevent us from making choices. Those statements were intended to assert precisely our freedom to say, "this is better than that" against the view that virtue had for all time coalesced into the Roman Catholic mass circa. 1517.

Worship does shape us, and shape our communities. Therefore we must attend to how we are being shaped and be clear that we need worship that shapes us toward God and not toward the world. We need worship that embodies God's love, so we can practice loving our neighbors. The transcendent unity

created at the Lord's Table needs to be felt during worship by the physical body of Christ.

None of this leads to worship simply being a more complex show, nor is it a calculated way to induce emotional states in the worshippers. We must realize that the alternative to paying attention to what I discuss here is not some pure unsullied worship, innocent of conscious manipulation. Not at all. Failing to attend to what makes worship effective leads to ineffective worship. It leads to certain specific emotions: a boredom that teaches that God is a waste of time, an emptiness that teaches that God is nonexistent, a series of emotional contradictions, or contradiction between words and actions, that teach that religion is a lie.

Just as we discuss the theology of words, sermons, creeds and decide that a correct word is better than an incorrect one, an effective word, better than an ineffective one, likewise our entire experience in worship should also be studied.

Yes, we need to be effective in our worship.