

Dear members and friends of St. John,

One of the greatest controversies in Lutheran Church history has been the introduction of **alternate worship forms**. These have come to the LC-MS in the last fifty years, including contemporary worship, praise worship, and various forms that blend traditional worship with modern music and dance. How are we to look at alternate worship in the Church?

First, we must look at the culture we live in. In many ways, the 1960's led to a total upheaval in a person's freedom to express oneself. This postmodern worldview states that each person has a right to *challenge* the norms of society – what is right and wrong, what is practiced and what is rejected. This notion of **total individual freedom** has greatly impacted the Christian church. Couple this to the hedonism of this age which boldly claims that there are **no absolute truths**. From a Christian perspective, the culture is racing to embrace sin, while rejecting God's holy word.

Another societal change is growing isolationism. Our society has become increasingly isolated from **group culture identity**, meaning computers and the Internet have allowed people to avoid direct involvement in a group setting, in favor of privacy and isolation. For example, fifty years ago clubs and organizations thrived throughout our culture. Today they're becoming increasingly rare. People can be coerced into spending a limited amount in time public service or in public protests for a cause that concerns them, but getting them to commit to help organize and run the operations of a group is very challenging. Social media posts may get them to flock to a rally, but that's the extent of their involvement.

An important teaching of Jesus Christ is His command that we be "in, but not of" this world (John 17:11-18). But today's young adults choose very limited avenues in which they will be "in" this world, allowing themselves to be close to a limited number of friends or family. Therefore, organized religion is antithetical to today's culture because it requires that we "join in" with complete strangers in a group setting, and commit to this on a weekly basis.

Today's postmodern, isolationistic culture therefore runs headlong into Jesus' desire for His Church. The Church necessarily is countercultural. By this I mean that Christ's central teachings are in nearly complete opposition to our American culture. First, there *is* real "truth" in the world. Jesus says, "I am the way, **the truth**, and the life" (John 14:6). Indeed, God's Word points to the only absolute truth that exists in the world – God's demand for justice, and His unfailing love.

Next, there's the requirement that **we work with others**, combining our gifts and talents with theirs, to accomplish a **greater good**. God has given us unique talents and, we must combine ours to have the greatest impact on the world around us. This notion of **shedding our individual rights, and privacy, to be part of something greater than ourselves**, is central to Christianity. St. Paul refers to this as being a member of the "**body of Christ.**" Each individual, isolated from others, is weak and ineffectual. Together, the sum is vastly greater than the parts.

So, how do these cultural and societal changes affect the way people chose to worship? The answer is in dramatic ways. Today's individualistic, isolated American wants

worship to meet their demands for freedom: choosing what they believe and rejecting what they dislike, while remaining disconnected from messy entanglements of sharing with others. Worship must satisfy the individual's basic emotional and "spiritual" needs and wants, or else.

And how has the American church (including churches in the LC-MS) answered their demands? Alternate worship forms. Interestingly, the greatest demands for change in worship does not come from our youth, or even millennials; it comes from **baby boomers** (those born between 1946 and 1962).

Baby boomers have been the change agents in the American church, beginning with the placement of limits on what is communicated from the pulpit. When I first arrived at St. John, a few leaders approached me and told me what topics were "off limits" for my sermons. **Abortion** and **cohabitation** were **not** to be discussed. Too many people will be offended. My reply was not well received. I would not allow limits to be placed on what I communicate from the pulpit. This demand to limit God's word is not uncommon in the LCMS. It stems from the idea that worship must **not be offensive** to the worshippers. But God's demands, in the form of His laws and decrees, are always going to be offensive to those who demand Christianity on *their* terms.

The next change demanded of the church is **music that is satisfactory to the "audience."** Contemporary praise songs largely focus on "me." "My" feelings, "my" walk with God, "my" needs being met. They border on entertainment. They may include mantras, statements repeated over and over again to change our mood or thinking through repetition of thought. However, the power of God's word is not found through pop psychology, but the Spirit working through the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

In response to these pressures from the world, the **Church's worship must take up the task of opposing the culture. This makes worship countercultural.** In reply to the demands that the word be limited to that which is not offensive, we must be resolute in our worship to proclaim the **whole counsel of God**, both God's terrifying judgment of sinners and His comforting forgiveness for the sake of Christ. Though the world will forever persuade the Church to soften its prophetic message, we remain determined to proclaim the truth, fully aware that the Gospel - indeed, Christ Himself - is a stumbling block (Matt. 21:42; 1 Cor. 1:18-25).

Our worship will also strive to resist other trends that have come to characterize our society. For example, the perception that **everything we do in worship must be relevant** should **not** be an excuse for allowing our wants and needs to dictate the agenda of the service. **The genius of the Church's historic liturgy - and why it has found continued use in diverse cultures over centuries — is its ability to focus on the heart of the matter, namely, our condition as sinners in need of a gracious God.**

Removing or changing the liturgy must be done with the utmost care, for all of worship is designed to **kill the old Adam in us, replacing it with the new person in Christ Jesus.** This process began in our Baptism, and is called Sanctification. Our selfish desires must give way to the desire to serve our neighbor out of love. Our love of entertainment and self-satisfaction must give way to the discipline of God's holy word, found in the liturgy, readings, sermon, and hymns. **Hymns focus our hearts and minds on God's word**, instead of feelings and emotions that **do not** build up the soul. **Ultimately, each parishioner should expect**

worship to be an attack on what our culture says is "good," with a strong proclamation of the Truth that kills the old sinful self, and grows and sustains our new life in Christ. Yes, worship is going to be "other worldly." And that's a good thing! May God help us seek that which builds-up, yes, that which is contrary to what the world holds as precious – as we worship our Living Lord.

Pastor Travis