

TRENDS OR TRADITIONS?

**A Pastor's Perspective
on
Pop Culture and Lutheran Worship**

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INTRODUCTION

Worship is at the center of the Christian community. Worship, that living encounter with the Word of God, effects our perceptions of the world. Which means for the Christian it stands at the center of the social order. Worship is where those things that matter to us, marriage, childbirth, death, and vocation, the Creation itself are wrapped in eternal significance, informed, and defined by the Word of God. It is in the context of worship that we experience a consecration that enables us to receive all of life as a gift. For that is where we are equipped to receive “the faith delivered to the saints” and see ourselves as living members of a community, stewards of the “One, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.” The distinctive culture of Lutheran worship was for centuries the primary vehicle for preparing people, especially young people, to receive the thing that our current post-modern, pop culture withholds from them – the rite of passage from self-centered adolescence into a mature, adult inheritance.

Some will no doubt take issue with what I write here. I welcome that. My intention is to invite conversation and reflection on the profound impact of pop culture on the traditional practices of Lutheran worship. I am not attempting an in-depth sociological analysis of culture and church. After years of pastoral service these are my ‘second thoughts’, born out of the crucible of life and ministry and offered for your consideration. I write out of my love for the Gospel of God’s free, unmerited grace in Jesus Christ and a deep concern for the welfare of God’s people who travel in that heritage we call Lutheran.

You can consider this work to be an extended prologue to the next book in this Pastor’s Perspective series. That book will provide a step-by-step, nuts and bolts guide to the planning and conduct of Lutheran worship with suggestions regarding how popular music might be successfully integrated into the liturgy. I will also provide specific recommendations, practical insights, and strategies for navigating the tension between popular culture and traditional worship within the Lutheran church for readers grappling with similar challenges.

Pastor Mark Anderson

The Season of Lent

A Journey from Pop Stardom to Liturgical Stewardship

Over nearly six decades, it was my calling to teach and steward the liturgical inheritance of the Lutheran church in congregations both as youth director and then as a pastor. Those decades saw changes in every domain of social life, including the churches. And among the most significant and far-reaching of those changes has been the emergence of pop culture. The effect of pop culture on the Lutheran worship inheritance has been profound, to say the least.

I ministered to people who had grown up in that inheritance and knew the living heart of that tradition. These were people I understood. Like me, the faith delivered to the saints had been transmitted to them through worshipping communities whose emotions and worldviews had been tempered by a longstanding relationship with the words, images, music, and gestures of Lutheran worship. This was an adult world where people were ritually competent and respected the forms and rituals of worship. They married, baptized their children, received the absolution, the Lord's Supper, and buried their dead surrounded and upheld by the instruments, the liturgies of the Word of God.

Others knew little or nothing of the history out of which that worship had grown. I came to understand these people, too. A young couple sat in my study as I carefully explained why the text of a pop song, which all three of us actually liked, did not belong in the wedding service. There was considerable pushback, including an irate phone call following our meeting. In the end, the song was not used. The gate was kept and at a cost.

What that brief anecdote reveals is instructive. The gap between the Christian culture which produced our worship and liturgical heritage and the popular culture being acquired by modern people is so wide that teaching and practicing the great Lutheran liturgical tradition can appear as an offense, a form of transgression against the adolescent, modern pop culture psyche. What mattered to that young couple was what matters to all young people, the present moment and present desire. They were ambitious in pursuit of themselves but unwilling to consider that what they desired might be quite rightly judged by others to be inappropriate. As I saw it, my pastoral obligation at that crucial moment was not to make the worship of the church relevant to their perceived needs. But to make them relevant to the worship of the church.

Along with others of my generation, I endorsed the transgressive solidarity of youth by joining a southern California garage band. The year was 1961. By the time I moved away to college in 1967, my meteoric rise as a bass player in Hollywood had resulted in records, concert tours, TV appearances, a movie credit, and associations with rock star names you would instantly recognize. I had become imbued, intoxicated with the spirit of pop culture, isolated in my adolescence by a profoundly effective support system determined to ignore and defy the adult world.

During my college and seminary years, the spirit of popular culture which I had swallowed during my rock n' roll years had tempted me to believe that the traditional worship and music of the Lutheran church was the stewardship of old 'fuddy duddies' who were stuck in the past and out of step. The stable, churchly world of worship I had grown up in had given way to worship as endless experimentation. And when that other, older world was discussed, it was normally in adversarial terms. Keeping up this tantrum of repudiation was not hard. For more than just about anything else it was the adult surrender of the battlefield, their loss of nerve, which made our gains possible. The "Greatest Generation" who hurled a defiant "No!" into the face of fascism, could not say 'no' to their children.

I share this bit of personal history because I do not write as an objective observer. I have been on both sides of the revolutionary barricade.

This is not to imply that I became a stubborn traditionalist. All throughout the years of my pastoral service I regularly employed my talents as a bassist and guitarist and worked, if with some reluctance, at integrating good popular music into worship. At the same time I am thankful for the influence of fellow-pastors, seminary professors, and lay people who assisted me in removing the curtain that had been drawn across the inheritance of Lutheran worship. They helped me to cross what had seemed to be a fatal barrier into adulthood. They helped me to grow up, pay the price of wisdom, and in this respect 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."

Our civilization has been overrun and trivialized by pop culture and our worship shares in the consequences. The decline of historic worship is not only due to the decisions of congregations or the influence of prominent, influential individuals. The effect can become the cause, intensifying the consequences. Worship becomes

trivial and shallow because the culture all around us promotes triviality and shallowness. Worship today is full of bad theology and bad practices which have been spread by almost mindless imitation.

The overwhelming influence of contemporary, casual, pop culture worship is often defended in the name of Christian freedom. After all, don't the Lutheran confessions give support to the use of a variety of worship expressions? This is true. But is freedom defined as shallow, mindless innovation simply for the sake of change? The very concept of freedom that underwent a major overhaul in the 1950's and 60's has shaped the use of the word ever since. For freedom came to mean rejecting traditional values and societal norms and advocating for personal liberation, self-expression, and social change. That is the air I breathed as a teenager but that is not exactly the 'free air' the confessions had in mind. This argument for freedom that sprang from adolescent rebellion was effectively applied to the culture of worship. Again, the stewards, the adults, were on their heels. And we were watching, learning, and absorbing this retreat from judgment like sponges. And the more ground they gave, the more 'freedom' we took.

Freedom in worship has a purpose. And that purpose is to serve as a flexible framework which keeps the central things central. In the case of Lutheran worship, Word and Sacrament. This freedom is not a license for arbitrary innovation or mindless deviation from established norms but rather a means of allowing for diverse expressions of worship within the framework of these foundational pillars.

Culture Clash

A culture of worship, like all culture, is implanted through a living community. The growth that results causes the community to develop in specific ways. The rapid pace at which pop culture trends come and go contribute to a culture of instant gratification and short attention spans. Traditional cultural practices that require time, patience, and deeper understanding may be overshadowed by the quick and easily consumable content prevalent in pop culture. There is a vast difference between preparing and sitting down to a dinner and a fast-food drive through.

The acquisition of Lutheran worship is acquired as a rite of passage, a coherent bonding into the life of a community. Pop culture, on the other hand, atrophies the person, traps her in the culture of the individual. Cell phones, for example, enable

millions of young people, right under the noses of their parents, to acquire an alternative culture in solitude without any essential reference to a community, including the family. This is the power of pop culture. And as a cultural phenomenon, it shapes the social identity, feelings, and outlook of those who absorb it. Individuals find themselves more aligned with the identities portrayed in popular media than with their cultural or community identities. This shift towards individualistic identification has led to fragmentation of cultural cohesion, isolation, and disconnection as people identify more with niche interests and subcultures rather than broader cultural narratives.

During my lifetime, pop culture has dazzled and mesmerized many lay people and pastors (me included), ushering the church into a period of crisis with respect to worship. At least, that is my judgement. Although the Church is passing through this period of crisis, it does not seem, at least to me, that it was caused by the collapse of tradition as such or the rise of pop culture worship. The crisis was caused by the adolescent suspicion of tradition which resulted in the nearly universal alienation of the boomer generation from the traditional social inheritance, including that of the Church.

A Call for Discernment or Leave Well Enough Alone?

Christian evangelicals were quick to capitalize on this suspicion since it had been part of their DNA since the days of the Protestant Reformation. They led the charge away from traditional worship and they have been in the vanguard of the shift to pop culture worship ever since. By adopting entertainment values, individual experience, and market-driven strategies for growth, the pervasive influence of evangelical churches have served, at times unwittingly, to erode core theological foundations and the communal identity of Lutheran congregations who have adopted these values.

This suspicion persists. The assets of the Lutheran worship tradition have been set aside in the name of worship which commodifies, promotes a pseudo-relevancy, advocates sensuality and the raw values of self-authenticating growth. All of this is couched in the casual atmospherics the sovereignty of adolescence demands. This is the insolent culture which pushed back against my suggestion that the pop song was inappropriate for a Christian wedding.

Some may think I write too harshly. Why not just say that God can use all church traditions and leave it at that? It is one thing to say that God can make use of all church traditions, it is quite another to have to make those judgments regarding traditions which most faithfully preserve the Gospel. Acknowledging that God can work through various church traditions suggests a broad inclusivity which fits well with the multicultural zeitgeist of our age. At the same time, the Holy Spirit does not work in a vacuum. The faith delivered to the saints is to be confessed in concrete terms. That means making distinctions, judgements, and being willing to utter that one, most abhorrent word to the ears of adolescents: no.

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

Beginning with the New Testament, Christian people have carried the burden of discerning which traditions, which confessions of faith best preserved the Gospel. Paul was unapologetic in his denunciation of the Galatians for just this reason. The great ecumenical creeds were the result of centuries of theological debate and struggle. A serious grappling with the ministry of the Word of God requires critical evaluation and judgment, involving theological reflection, historical perspective, and consideration of what is central in biblical preaching and teaching.

It is understandable that questioning the influence of pop culture in churches might seem futile given its prevalence. But my experience both in the entertainment industry and as a pastor has led me to the point of looking at the question of pop culture and its influence with real seriousness. Beneath the surface lies a complex interplay of values and ideals that extend far beyond mere musical preferences. Pop culture worship reflects deeper issues regarding the influence of culture, the integrity of worship, and the formation of Christian community.

At its core, the incorporation of pop culture into worship raises questions about authenticity and the theological integrity of worship. Are we sacrificing tradition for the sake of a false definition of relevance? These are valid concerns that speak to the heart of worship itself.

Moreover, the adoption of pop culture in worship can signal broader societal shifts. Are we shaping our worship to cater to consumer demands? Are we prioritizing

a set of values that actually reflect the entertainment culture? What does this imply regarding the crucial direction of worship?

Furthermore, popular culture can also impact the formation of Christian community. Are we perpetuating a worship ethos centered around what are, essentially, adolescent values and priorities? Are we inadvertently excluding those who don't resonate with pop culture, creating a sense of division within the congregation?

Ultimately, questioning the influence of pop culture in churches is not just about style or musical preferences. It is about safeguarding the integrity of worship and being clear about what sort of Christian culture, faith, and life we are nurturing through our worship practices and whether they align with the deepest truths of our confession of faith as Lutherans.

The traditional theology, music, and worship of the Lutheran church, rooted in Word and sacrament, is a deliberate call and summons to a deeper, more enduring, and authentic way of living in the Gospel. It stands in contrast to the pop culture of overheard noise and the accumulating deficit in the shallow experience of community and the qualifying of the gospel message which characterize modern life in too many churches. In this respect pop culture is not a friend of the church. It is a competitor.

There are many congregations 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 have the burden of advocating and defending the worship inheritance which former generations took for granted. And that inheritance is worth preserving primarily because it is an effective vehicle for confessing the Gospel of God in Word and sacrament. That inheritance is no longer transmitted with ease. Not because it has lost its value but because the powers set against it are formidable. And they are on our hands.

Musical Preferences and Cultural Shifts

As successive generations have grown up with pop music as a dominant genre, the musical landscape within society and the church has transformed. Musical tastes have always reflected broader cultural changes. A radical cultural shift began in the 1950's. By the late 50's the big band era of the 30's and 40's was a fading memory. I

remember how the popularity of folk music was overwhelmed in the 1950's by rock n' roll. When the Beatles came on the scene in the early 60's, 50's rock began struggling to find a place. Even the 'King,' Elvis, was losing his grip on the throne! Groups such as the Byrds, and Simon and Garfunkel got folk music off life support and a few artists such as Bob Dylan and Joan Baez kept more traditional folk going. But for all intents and purposes folk music was marginalized. Even Dylan eventually fronted a rock band much to the dismay of his traditional folk music fans.

The breathtaking speed with which this all occurred was radical. This is to suggest that rock especially had the tendency to mindlessly sweep everything before it in a tsunami-like fashion. Driven by the "star maker machinery," as Joni Mitchell called it, the rapid fire production and consumption of pop songs was exhilarating, exciting, but shallow. Another way of saying this is that much of the rapid transformation of music was immature, unthinking, and ungrounded.

One consequence of pop culture's influence has been the insatiable desire to flee boredom. The objection "traditional worship is boring", is a common complaint. Actually, the issue is not that worship is boring. The issue which ought to be confronted in those who voice this complaint is why has the church become an accomplice in people's restless efforts to relieve themselves of boredom? All life is repetition. Daily life is made up of all kinds of repetitive patterns, habits, and rituals. We address boredom not by mindlessly chasing the new but by investing repetition with meaning. If you cannot see the depth of meaning and value in the little repetitions, the little liturgies of daily life, don't expect meaning to result from your efforts to run from them.

Harmony or Dissonance? The Challenge of Dual Worship Styles in Lutheran Congregations

One way the culture of worship functions is to affirm our individual identity, our vocation as one of the baptized. The other way worship functions is to make us the same, to affirm us as members of the body of Christ within a distinct confession of faith, members of the body of Christ. Lutheran worship sustains our identity as baptized persons in community. The emphasis is on 'we' not 'me.' The culture of Lutheran public worship accomplishes this by integrating all the members into a ritual

of ongoing passage, which is reinforced by the words, images, music, and gestures of worship all under the influence of and informed by the Word of God.

I remember the worship wars of the 1960's and 70's well. I was one of those storming the battlements of tradition! An uneasy truce of sorts was reached, and worship was divided into traditional and contemporary camps. Many congregations now offer two styles of worship under the umbrella of one congregation as if it has always been this way. The result is that in many churches, a reflexive, instinctive deference to adolescent "values" is an orthodoxy.

Several years ago Linda and I visited a Lutheran congregation while on vacation in another state. 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.

Given the entrenched success of pop culture worship it has been difficult to raise serious questions about any of this. But for the pastor serious questions are in order. Under these circumstances, one can see the difficulties in persuading the young that the mature world of our worship heritage is worth preserving and inheriting. When the church isolates the elderly in 'traditional' worship services why should the young draw any other conclusion? What sort of Christian culture does the congregation imagine it is fostering through this a la carte approach? Does catering to diverse preferences inadvertently dilute the sense of being a shared community? Does the coexistence of two contrasting, ghettoized worship styles reflect or perhaps create a theological tension that extends beyond the surface-level differences in music or aesthetics? Who is even asking questions like this?

Lost in Transition: Tradition in a Post-Modern Educational Landscape

Something that I became increasingly aware of during my ministry was the significant shift in educational paradigms and its negative implications for receiving tradition within the Church. In the traditional educational system in which I was raised, expertise, authority, and settled knowledge were prioritized, implying a sense of

reverence for established truths and the wisdom of those who had come before. However, the post-modern educational landscape has increasingly emphasized individualized learning experiences, where the learner's self-perceptions take precedence over established authority or expertise. Adolescent willfulness and post-modern ideology have resulted in a perfect storm of cultural erosion.

The post-modern idea of constructing one's own understanding based on personal experiences aligns closely with the values propagated by pop culture. Pop culture encourages the young to question established norms and authority, (not that they need much encouragement!) prioritizing diverse perspectives and the validation of individual experience and narratives. I ran into this mindset consistently during my ministry. People took for granted that it was perfectly fine for them to prioritize their own interpretations and experiences over established traditions and teaching. What do you say to a ninth grade confirmation student or a fully functioning adult who after reading the Small Catechism or hearing a sermon remarks, "I'm just not feeling it." Or, "That's not my experience."

The topical, the popular, the zeitgeist are here today and gone tomorrow. This is why for generations, the settled cultures of Christian traditions carefully passed on what had been received, taking their cues from the New Testament admonitions in the same vein. The curriculum of the faith was not made relevant to the candidates for baptism or those who felt called to the clerical life. Through the processes of catechization and the education of the clergy, people were made relevant to the curriculum of the faith. That was the hard lesson that young couple in my study were confronted with.

The Church encounters people today who for several generations have come through an educational system where the center of gravity has shifted away from expertise, authority and settled knowledge toward conforming learning to the self-perceptions of the learner. There is no longer established content to be made relevant to, but simply experience and its tools in the service of reconstructive inquiry. Post-modernism challenges the idea of a universal, static truth. Which is just another way of saying reality is what I say it is. The result of this has been an accumulating deficit in the depth of all traditions, including those of the Church, with people standing on the brink of maturity but seldom crossing over because they see no need to and, in fact, in many cases are determined not to.

Stewardship of Lutheran Worship

Popular culture refuses to accept the inherited constraints and disciplines of the community, any community. And its greatest enemy, in this respect, is the traditional community. The demand for ever-more novelties and immediate satisfaction are its revolutionary cries. The popular is confused with relevancy. Pop culture removes all barriers that would in any sense narrow the path to membership or participation on any other terms than those defined by the self. Learning, tradition, expertise, doctrine, discipline are perceived as obstacles to inclusion. The resistance to them is pop culture's barricade thrown up to isolate itself against the summons to the adult world.

The attempt to contemporize worship to appeal to younger generations, which was a constant refrain I heard from older members in my churches, may have inadvertently reinforced the values and priorities of popular culture rather than fostering genuine engagement with the faith community. Instead of drawing young people into a deeper understanding and commitment to the traditions and disciplines of the church, efforts to cater to popular culture preferences actually contributed to a further erosion of traditional community values. The Trojan horse entered the gates.

There is more at stake here for pastoral concern than sifting through the banal lyrics of pop songs. We are dealing with a globalizing force. The pop culture tsunami which actually began in the 1950's has flowed unchecked and uncontained into every crevice and open space of modern life. Which is another way of saying that youth culture has become the defining culture of our country, and of many churches. This is far more true and less obvious that it may be comfortable to admit. And youth culture, itself a modern phenomenon, exists in no small measure to resist and neutralize the resurgent insistence that there is an adult world that expects more and provides more. Adolescent culture sees only in the aged faces and traditions around them their ruined youth and the obligations and limitations of an adult world they are ill equipped to accept or acknowledge.

This applies especially to the music of the church. And, make no mistake, the center of pop culture is the music. All that exists in the music of pop culture is noise. Some of that noise may carry a certain musicality (I know, I made quite a lot of it!) but it is noise, nonetheless. Nor can it be effectively criticized. For it is an explicit purpose of the pop culture noise machine to drown out or at least mute the sounds of adult life. The implications for the worship of the church run all over the place.

It is not a bad thing that people like music and find ways to enjoy it in many genres. At the same time the music of pop culture as a social force has a downward pull that insinuates itself into every aspect of life. It is hard to resist. It does not provide much but it does not demand much either. And the simple truth is that people are sorely tempted beings, unable to protect themselves from this downward pull without the help of a culture that backs up their efforts.

As mentioned earlier, stewardship requires making judgments between what is acceptable and what is not. And having the wisdom, courage, and theological capacity to know the difference. For it is right at this point that the battle is won or lost. This is important because the preservation of culture (in this case that of worship) requires making those judgments, understanding how specific cultural assumptions can have a negative effect upon the worship life of the church, the very idea of Christian community, and undermine the authority of the Word of God.

Whose Will is Coming to Church?

Christian evangelicals were quick to jump on the pop culture bandwagon since repudiating tradition had been part of their DNA since the days of the Protestant Reformation. They led the charge away from traditional worship. These churches continue to be in the vanguard of pop culture worship. By adopting entertainment values, individual experience, and market-driven strategies for growth, evangelical churches have positioned themselves to exploit a core component of their theology: free will.

If you believe people are bringing a free will to church then you will prioritize personal expression, spontaneity, and the cultivation of an intimate, individual relationship with God. Much of the worship will be aimed at motivating the already free will to keep willing! Contemporary evangelical worship forms, characterized by informal settings, life-coach preaching, emotionally charged pop music, and participatory elements like spontaneous prayer and personal testimonies, often resonate with those who embrace the concept of free will. It is all about me. This emphasis on personal choice and autonomy in worship reflects a broader theological framework that prioritizes individual faith experiences, making a free-will decision for Christ, and diminishes the efficacy of the sacraments as means of grace. The commodification of worship experiences reduces them to mere entertainment

products. Worship is designed to attract and retain members. Faith comes before grace.

On the other hand if you believe you are bringing a bound will to church you are more likely to find worship forms that emphasize the initiative of God and your need. The voice of the preacher and the sacraments are set apart as the means by which God brings His benefits to us, from outside of us, to do for us what we cannot, and will not do for ourselves. The Word of God comes among us to kill and make alive. This is the traditional Lutheran view. The focus on the divine initiative and human dependence in worship aligns with a theological framework that emphasizes God's as the active initiator in salvation through Word and sacrament and the worshipper as passive recipient. Grace comes before faith.

Over long centuries, the traditions of Christian worship developed around the Gospel of Christ in part to remove the self from the center. I have believed for a long time that this is precisely what many sense is happening to them in the formal structure of traditional worship. They are removed from the center. And they don't like it one bit. This reluctance reflects the individualism and self-centeredness, fueled by influences from pop culture and modern ideologies, which is widespread today. Many individuals, particularly younger generations, may resist the idea of being removed from the center in formal worship structures because it challenges their autonomy and desire for immediate gratification.

The reluctance or refusal to accept this removal from the center of worship can also be seen as symptomatic of a broader cultural shift towards prioritizing personal preferences and desires over communal values and traditions. In this light, the discomfort with traditional worship structures reflects a larger societal trend of resisting or questioning established norms and expectations, including those associated with adulthood and social inheritance.

What I am advocating in this book and the one that is to follow is the belief that Christian 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. Christian worship is an invitation to sit in the back seat, relax, as we are brought in wonder, love, praise, thanksgiving, into the profound mystery of God's

love and forgiveness in Jesus Christ. 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.

Where Lutheran Worship Begins...And Ends

To recognize that God is 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. 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 humanity despite human 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 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, the mover of all the action. This emphasis on God's gracious initiative had a profound effect on how Luther understood worship and was a significant departure from certain practices of the time, such as the

Eucharist as a sacrifice made to God. Luther's biblical perspective led to a distinctive emphasis on the active work of God and the passive role of the worshipper. This emphasis on the Gospel as “the power of God for salvation”, the liberating force of salvation, is foundational, informing not only Lutheran doctrinal beliefs but also shaping liturgical practices and Lutheran community. This Gospel, grace before faith emphasis nurtures a deep sense of joy, gratitude, and assurance in the hearts and minds of worshippers.

God Initiates Creation and Promise

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 unwavering 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. 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 this 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.

God Initiates Incarnation and Redemption

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 securing salvation for humanity.

The book of Acts illustrates God's initiative in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost empowering believers to carry out the mission of God's kingdom.

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.

Whether your heart is stirred by the solemn strains of traditional hymns or the infectious rhythms of a lively pop song, for Lutheran worship the central things must

remain central. In this respect it is crucial to recognize the all-important matter of the direction of worship—from God to us. Pop culture worship has an almost unerring tendency to turn this direction around, emphasizing human preferences and desires over the primacy of God's initiative. Faith comes before grace.

The witness of the Bible underscores this crucial matter of direction. We live, as Jesus said, by “every Word that proceeds from the mouth of God.” With this in mind, the next work in this series will look at the nuts and bolts of Lutheran worship. As we do so we will be guided by the principle that everything that goes into the planning and conducting of worship is held captive to the Word of God and the direction of God’s gracious initiative. Again, grace comes before faith.

Conclusion

For nearly sixty years and across several generations, the Biblical admonition to be “all things to all men” has been stuck in the cul-de-sac of being “all things to all “teenie boppers”. This book examines the negative influences of contemporary popular culture. My aim was not to dwell on criticism but to reaffirm the enduring value and significance of traditional Lutheran worship. As a pastor who was for decades intimately engaged with the challenges and dynamics of modern congregations, I had to confront the obstacles presented by pop and post-modern culture head-on while serving as a steward of our worship tradition. By exploring the influences of pop culture on Lutheran worship, my hope is that this book will encourage a renewed appreciation for traditional Lutheran worship even as the Church seeks to proclaim the Gospel of God in a rapidly changing and challenging cultural landscape.