

Reader Response to the Wine/Wineskins of Contemporary Worship

ThTh #261 comes from SHERMAN LEE. Sherm is a long-time Crossings veteran, both as student and workshop facilitator. By day he is an information technology architect for a financial services firm; by night he is husband, father of two, amateur musician, tinkerer, student of pop culture, and has a keen interest in wherever the abstract meets the concrete, that is, where the rubber meets the road.

RESPONSE TO THTH 258: DON'T JUDGE A WINE BY ITS WINESKIN

Ed,

As always, I appreciate your insight and comments. Your analysis reflects what you do best: applying the litmus test for Gospel content.

Keeping in mind the limitations of analyzing a phenomenon from afar – that is, a story presented through the eyes and ears of a reporter, whose words were then filtered by an editor – the phenomenon is still ripe for study.

It is not interesting just to see church organizations trying to cultivate their congregations – this is an age-old problem. It is however fascinating to see attempt at growth on such a scale in an age of declining (mainstream Protestant) attendance/participation. It is mass (pun intended?) marketing

and seems awkward – desperate times call for desperate measures?

Does growth become simply a numbers game to the exclusion of the Gospel?

There is nothing inherently wrong with these “new” measures/methods. Different people resonate with different styles, of worship, of music, of praise and prayer, of communicating. But these ways of attracting and sustaining interest and participation address only the question of HOW.

The more salient question is of WHAT: what is being presented/shared at such services? At best, it’s the Gospel; at worst, hopefully none of it fosters/sustains destructive behaviors.

Theologically, the worst case scenario is if the church advertises Gospel but then falls short and presents something else – like candy-coated Law or just candy-coated feel-good platitudes. The biggest growth success story in the world means nothing if the consumers are being sold a bill of goods (or good news).

But I would submit that many a (traditional) congregation does this on a regular basis but with lower notoriety and much lower growth (and possibly even decline). Sometimes I wonder if the Gospel is propagated not because of the church-as-institution but rather in spite of it.

The afore-mentioned litmus test is actually the journalist’s question of WHY! Why do (should) we even bother gathering, be it at high church or at mega-church? Because of the WHY God-in-Jesus died for us on the cross and WHY he rose for us – for God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever trusts in him should not perish, but have eternal life.

It beats me how anyone, be it a journalist or a marketer, could

omit such a fantastic WHY, but they do. Everyone loves a mystery or a drama, gets hooked by whodunit, but it is always unsatisfying without understanding WHY. And in this case, the WHY is not only curiosity-sating but heartening, uplifting, pull-you-from-the-depths kind of good news!

Maybe, just maybe, the “Gospel-deficient services” play a role as well. I did not grow up “churched” but among my most “religious” lifetime moments came during my annual secular-Christmas tradition of watching “A Charlie Brown Christmas” in which Linus quotes the Lukan Christmas story. Amidst the din of holiday marketing, Linus speaks simply and directly about the angel bringing good tidings of glad joy, of God coming into the world for us. Contrast this with another childhood favorite – Davey and Goliath – which was full of morality but low on Gospel. Even then, as an unchurched teenager, I was able to sniff out not only goodness and morality, but also of Gospel, of promise, of God’s gift.

It would be years before I developed the theological awareness to more fully appreciate its meaning – by going to Luke and other texts and reading with my heart, not just watching a 30 minute holiday special each year. For me, the initial draw was being part of a mass audience and wondering about the messages both Godly and secular and then scratching my head about the motivation to so openly quote Scripture, and why underscore that particular passage in the Charlie Brown special. And along my journey I was baptized as an adult and have spent much time in trying to spread this Good News in a diversity of forms and forums.

I’ve kind of wandered from my original intent which was to state that no one should judge worship services by their trappings, but rather by their content. It’s no secret that I not only enjoy different musical settings and styles (from traditional to

folk to reggae to...) for worship but that I like to participate as a musician as well. But I'm not an "either-or" kind of person – I appreciate diversity in most things but mostly I marvel that the universal message of God's promise and promise fulfilled can come in so many forms – as long as that message is The One being transmitted in the myriad of presented forms.

Shalom!

Sherman Lee

PS – Obviously I was touched by your last column – both the topic and your take on it. It stirred in me many of the touchpoints in my spiritual journey – adult convert, mass media savvy, gospel-content of any form/forum, diversity of musical styles.

RESPONSE TO THTH 259: ANOTHER GOSPEL LITMUS-TEST FOR ANOTHER LUTHERAN MEGA-PHENOMENON

I composed my response to ThTh 258 mostly to ensure that critical analysis did not condemn any worship based solely on its "wineskin." And again Ed, you raised the crucial (pun intended) issue regarding contemporary worship: "Where is THE Gospel in all this?"

Another Quantity vs. Quality Challenge

I have not experienced any Lutheran Mega-Church first-hand and therefore cannot speak even naively of the ELCA Mega-Church phenomenon, nor its St. Louis "mini-me" cousin as described in your analysis. (Is it just me or does "mega-church" sound so much like "McChurch?") But I can cite additional data that may

offer another perspective of current church movements facing quantity vs. quality issues, and possibly, hope for the Gospel-centeredness of the Church.

As I type this response I am listening to the advance release of the music for the 2003 ELCA Youth Gathering (late July in Atlanta) entitled "Do Life! Ubuntu I am because we are. We are because Christ is." (For more information, please refer to <http://www.elca.org/youth/gathering.html>.) ELCA Youth Gatherings are near and dear to my heart; immediately after my baptism, I began serving as a youth counselor for 13 years, and have attended all such Gatherings (starting in 1988) as a chaperone and volunteer. As a late bloomin' Christian, I have had to play catch up to all aspects of church going, including separating out the cultural aspects from the theological. As an Asian-American in the midwest, I have proudly adopted the German- and Scandinavian-American Lutheran church culture – because that is the dominant local cultural church pattern. It's fun to understand and be part of the "in-jokes" that Garrison Keillor tells about the Lutheran Church. But that is a secondary concern – the Gospel is what matters. And the Gospel speaks to far more than just those of German and Scandinavian descent.

The ELCA Youth Gatherings have been a product of the ELCA merger, and in the two main predecessor ELCA church bodies, there were different youth ministry cultures with differing philosophies on how best to serve youth. I'm no expert on the predecessor youth ministries nor have I been privy to the transition process, but the evolution of the triennial gathering has not been without a few bumps. These Gatherings have been at the ELCA forefront of how to make Christ relevant to today's youth – and a huge part of the Gatherings has been the choice of music – wineskin and wine.

WHAT OF NEW WINESKINS?

This is tough road for the ELCA, or any mainstream Protestant church. For all the talk of the “medium making the message” consider this paradoxical co-evolution: in the artistic side of the current music scene, the main goal is to be new, different and hip; the business side immediately mimics and cashes in on the new sound and the artistic side responds by devising newer, different-er and hipper – and so on and so on. And mainstream churches are even further behind than the business side of the music scene.

And what do young people want to hear? What “gen” are we up to – from baby boomers to baby busters to Gen X to Gen Y to whatever? Do the young people know or even care that they are part of the post-me generation? Do they want to hear organs and strings and brass, or do they want to hear guitars and drums and amplifiers? What should a Gathering expect when they commission original music and contract with songleaders and musicians? These are among the questions that the ELCA-as-merged-entity has had to deal with since 1988.

They are no easy answers to these questions – and ironically the challenge has only increased since 1988 when the initial Gathering attracted about 20,000 participants – and the most recent one hosted in St. Louis (2000) was divided into two five day sessions in order to accommodate a larger total attendance greater than 37,000. (These numbers are far from exact and are from my own recollections.) The audience grows (quantity) but what about the quality (Gospel litmus test)? In addition, teenagers experiment in everything, including and especially musical tastes. Who’s to say which “contemporary” style can attract the entire audience, or even how does one calculate the modern musical lowest common denominator? And in calculating that lowest common denominator, what of the youth most

comfortable with the “non-emotive-sit-in-your-pew-without-moving-let-alone-standing-and-clapping-style?”

The best that any organization can do is to offer and invite, just as God-in-Christ offers true wine and bread, and invites us to share in the Holy Feast, to exchange our badness for Divine Goodness. This year, the advance release of Gathering music offers a panoply of rhythms and styles, from African to Gospel to rap to neo-baroque/traditional to hip-hop. Again, these are only wineskins but they are an important part of God’s invitation – they can and do access emotional portals – and the Gathering is offering a palette of “different strokes for different folks.”

AND WHAT OF THE WINE?

Check out the song list (<http://www.elca.org/youth/tag-songs-list.html>) and lyrics (<http://www.elca.org/youth/tag-songs-lyrics.html>) for yourself.

The usage of “We/Us/Our” far outnumbers the usage of “I/Me/My” but the first person singular does appear several times. But as you look for yourself, even the first person singular in the lyrics reflects Ed’s reminder of Luther/Elert: “It’s really not that complicated. The Good News is not what we are doing for or about God, but what ‘God in Christ’ is doing to, for, with us—in past, present, and future tenses. ‘Christ HAS died. Christ IS risen. Christ WILL come again.’”

Here are some sample lyrics from a rap song, “Do Life”:

Bishop Tutu says it like this

The man on the cross gave us a big kiss

Yeah Christ flung his arms out open wide

For everyone and everything, makes me teary-eyed

*‘Cause it’s about unity, community, it’s harmony and humanity,
like divinity, like the trinity,*

*Yo, can't you see it's about you and me
'Bout life and living right where you're at
'Bout friends and neighbors and folks like that
'Bout everybody getting their fair shake
'Bout giving more than you take
'Cause God's reaching out, not holding back
He's calling for a spiritual love attack
It's time to join the cosmic embrace
And start spreading God's love all over this place*

There is a strong reason for Gospel-centered theology in the musical liturgy and worship songs: the theme of the Gathering.

I had the great blessing to hear Archbishop Desmond Tutu speak at the St. Louis ELCA Gathering, and he provides the theological foundation for this year's event. Taking the first few paragraphs from the Gathering's webpage on theme (<http://www.elca.org/youth/tag-theme-ubuntu.html>):

DO LIFE! UBUNTU I AM BECAUSE WE ARE. WE ARE BECAUSE CHRIST IS. *The theme for the 2003 Gathering is Do Life! Ubuntu. "Ubuntu" comes from the Bantu group of languages spoken in sub-Saharan Africa. It literally means "humanity." It is a gift from the African culture to our North American Christian culture, for through the lens of ubuntu we can see a way to do life in such a way that God is glorified in and through our very humanness.*

Archbishop Desmond Tutu embraced ubuntu and shaped a theology around it in rebuttal to the Christian faith taught in his South African context of apartheid that said one's skin color was an indicator of one's value as a human being. Tutu pointed to the person of Jesus through whose ministry, death and resurrection God claimed all people as valuable in God's sight. It is in and through this community of the claimed, that we

find our identity and worth as humans.

In Tutu's worldview, in order to understand yourself, you do it through someone else. This is difficult for Western Christians to grasp. We may even resist it. We have been socialized into and through a worldview where personhood centers on the lone individual whose essential characteristic is that of self-determination. Our very faith is often tied to this reverence of individuality.

Youth are especially aware of the pressures to achieve, stand out in the crowd, be unique, succeed, prosper and to make something of themselves. In contrast to this, the African view of a person comes through interdependence with others. For Tutu, the practice of ubuntu grows out of God's relationship with us in Christ Jesus, who sets us free from sin, thereby making it possible to know each other. Our true human identity, he says, comes only through absolute dependence on God and neighbor, even when that neighbor is named enemy or stranger or uncool or old, or... (you fill in the blanks).

In baptism we are brought into a community that shapes who we are. It is in that community that we learn how to think, walk, speak, behave and how to be human together on this earth. The way we understand and view life and community is through the life of Jesus Christ whose sacrifice on the cross reconciled all people to God. We invite you to join the community of faith at the Gathering and learn through the lens of ubuntu how to "do life"... to imagine another way of living abundantly together.

This theology may not cleanly follow the Crossings model, that is, of the problems in our relationship with others, with ourselves and with God (and God's problem with us – change of subject!); then God providing the solution on the Cross to heal

God's relationship with us and therefore overflowing with goodness as to see us through our relationships with ourselves and then also with others. If anything, Ubuntu theology defers our self-relationships to our relationships with others – it absolutely smacks down any possibility for me-ness without the context of we-ness. Regardless, the Gospel-litmus test is positive: we are nothing without the God-in-Jesus on the Cross for us. This is True Wine for us when we accept this holy, healing invitation – and the wineskins, although important in fanning out that invitation – are secondary.

In fact, The Wine is so powerful that it makes and/or adopts its own wineskins. This year will be the first time I will not attend the Gathering in person. But I will be participating vicariously – through our local youth, before and after the event with the Gathering music as incorporated in our local worship – and also in a new wineskin: streaming live video of the Gathering via the Internet in real-time, that is, as it occurs in Atlanta we can see and hear what our youth are experiencing. (See <http://www.elca.org/gathering/med-strm.html>) I look forward to hearing the Gospel as it is offered to tens of thousands of impressionable, hungry-for-substance, searching-for-meaning-in-a-post-9/11-world young (and not so young) people, as it is presented to them in a myriad of ways – wineskins made worthy by The Wine. I hope you (and all who read this response) look forward to this as well, with hope in Christ, for Christ's church and for the world.

Shalom!

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