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Worship Library

Title: The Colors of the Liturgical Seasons

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Category: Church Year

Color. Color is everywhere. Color is God's way of filling his world with beauty and giving pleasure to those who live in this colorful world. Christians, for centuries, have used color in divine worship to emphasize the redemptive action of God through his Son.

Color, like music, plays an important role in the life of God's worshiping people. Just as music is the "handmaiden to theology," liturgical color complements the message of the seasons and occasions during the church year. Taking a familiar seat in the nave of his/her chapel preceding worship on any given Sunday, the worshiper's emotions and intellect are immediately engaged by color. Liturgical colors aid in establishing a climate in which Law and Gospel may be heard and received.

Color, like light which is its source, is most helpful when it is pleasing as well as stimulating to the senses. However, let's never forget its primary role in divine worship: Color allows us to see the Light of Life, Jesus Christ. It serves to communicate the message of salvation. And communicate it does when it reinforces a specific "colorful" chapter in the life of our Lord and his church, retold annually by the church calendar.

However, color and its bright message can easily be taken for granted or mistaken in its purpose. The paraments, vestments, altar clothes, banners, traditionally employed each Sunday, must be seen as more than an attempt to decorate, or give accent to the chancel. That is, no doubt, the view of some. It's true; interior design and decoration are important. But a greater service is demanded of our liturgical colors than merely making the surroundings "pretty."

Furthermore, when altar paraments are used year after year without much attention given to their message, as well as their care, the pastor, along with his faithful altar guild would do well to throw away the key to the sacristy and refrain from using those altar cloth "decorations." Frequent instruction about the church year and its corresponding colors must go hand in hand with its weekly use.

How do you go about instructing and communicating appreciation for the colors of the church year and the seasons they support? Some liturgical creativity is in order for this task. Think of the rainbow. The rainbow is that vivid reminder of God's promise given to Noah and his descendants. The acronym, "Roy-g-biv," is a helpful device in remembering that beautiful object

of hope, and its red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet colors. Let's adapt that helpful device for use in taking a fresh look at the colors of the church year.

Traditionally, five basic colors of a festive, penitential, and neutral nature have been used in most liturgical congregations. In recent times, with liturgical renewal, three additional colors (blue, scarlet, and gold) have been added to the basic five of white, red, green, violet or purple, and black.

Instead of "Roy-g-biv," may I suggest "Bg-Bgs-Pwr?" (blue, green, black, gold, scarlet, purple, white and red) "Bg-Bgs-Pwr," enunciated Big Bags of Power" might at first seem silly. Indeed it is! Does it have anything to do with the message of those colors? Not really! Then, why suggest such a ridiculous notion? Because, a humorous, yet effective memory technique, such as "Bg-Bgs-Pwr," is what we may need to remember this liturgical tool and the message it conveys throughout the church year.

Each "Bg-Bgs-Pwr" color has evolved through the centuries in the community of faith to communicate a powerful message. Proclaim: A guide for planning liturgy and music by Concordia Publishing House, Manual on the Liturgy: Lutheran Book of Worship, published by Augsburg/Fortress, and the recently released Lutheran Worship: History and Practice published by Concordia Publishing House are three helpful sources of information that elaborate on the subject and the liturgical seasons they serve. A fresh look at the "Bg-Bgs-Pwr" color scheme can reawaken our appreciation for this time-honored custom.

Blue, the first color of the "Bg-Bgs-Pwr" scheme, is the more contemporary color increasingly used by many congregations in their observance of a new church year. Advent, a preparatory time of waiting and watching, communicates the message of hope. BLUE-the color of the sky-helps convey that powerful message. Our Christian faith rests on the hope that Christ, who came in history assuming our flesh, will also return on the last day of time from that same blue sky he ascended long ago.

Green, comes next in the acronym and is by far the most common color seen during the year. Lutheran Worship calls for its use during the seasons of Epiphany and Pentecost. The first Sunday following the first full moon after the vernal equinox (March 21), also known as Easter Sunday, determines the length of these two seasons.

The days of Epiphany may entail a total of, but not more than, eight Sundays. The season of Pentecost, on the other hand, can last from 22 to 28 Sundays. Green is the appointed color for all but a few of the Sundays during these seasons. Consequently, green may be used an average of six to eight months of any given liturgical year!

Epiphany's message of Christ's revelation to the Gentiles along with the season's traditional emphasis on extending Christ's kingdom through missions, calls for the use of green-the color symbolic of growth.

The Sundays following Pentecost, observed as "the time of the church," share a somewhat similar theme as that of Epiphany. Affectionately called the season of the "green meadow," no

doubt due to the fact of green being the established color, these Sundays also emphasize the subject of growth. Green is a neutral color, but there is nothing colorless about our need to grow and mature as disciples of Jesus Christ. That's why the "green meadow" time of the church year is so lengthy. Time must be given to encourage all worshipers to maintain their faith through the constant use of God's means of grace.

A helpful suggestion for congregations observing summer and fall months with one neutral color, would be to invest time and effort in obtaining several sets of green paraments. Variety and change in shades of this color would go a long way in keeping the season fresh and "green." Changing the paraments every six weeks would complement the Sundays following Pentecost and their emphasis on personal faith that is living and growing.

Black is seen very seldom during the year. The calendar calls for its use only twice; on Good Friday and Ash Wednesday. There's no mistaking the message that this sober color gives. Black is the absence of light. Good Friday, or Black Friday in combination with Ash Wednesday, calls for sober reflection on the cost of our redemption. Without Christ's sacrifice on the day the sky turned dark and hid the light of the sun, there would be no bright Light of Christ to live in, nor new life in Christ to enjoy.

Gold is the optional color for Easter Sunday. It is also the suggested color for the last Sunday in the church year when that day is observed as Christ the King Sunday (LBW). Its use may not be popular yet, but its emphasis is undeniable. Gold represents value and worth. The golden festival of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ is the event that gives our lives meaning and worth. He is worthy of our praise as we adorn his altar with the color of splendor.

Scarlet (a vivid red, or orange) is the fifth letter in the "Bg-Bgs-Pwr" acronym that is called for use during Holy Week; from Palm Sunday to Maundy Thursday. It is a color worth investing in because it stands in contrast to the traditional red that is used on Festival Sundays. Scarlet's use during the somber days of Holy Week help to offer a different message. As the Manual on the Liturgy points out, "scarlet is a color anciently associated with the passion . . . the color of blood" (p. 25).

Purple, like black, is a penitential color, in contrast to a festive one. It is appropriately used during Lent and, still in many parishes, during the season of Advent. The forty days of Lent, including the six Sundays that fall during this season, use this deep, rich color which has come to represent somberness and solemnity, penitence, and prayer.

Violet or purple was a very cherished and expensive color in the world Jesus lived. The dye used to make the color was painstakingly acquired by massaging the neck of a Mediterranean shell fish that secreted a special fluid. It was therefore afforded only by the rich and worn most exclusively by the royalty.

Jesus, the king of the Jews, wore a purple robe only once. As the soldiers mocked and tormented him, the Scriptures record they placed on him a "purple garment" in order to ridicule him and belittle the claim that he was a monarch.

Therefore, purple is used during this penitential season of Lent as a vivid reminder of the contempt and scorn he endured, and the subsequent sacrifice he made for our eternal salvation. Ecclesiastical purple should remind all Christians of their daily need to humbly give attention to leading a life of repentance.

White is the color of purity and completeness. The theme for the "great fifty days" of Easter is supported by the use of white. This color, used primarily during these Sundays, assists in bearing the message that "though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow." Christ's triumph from the grave on Resurrection day is the cause for our rejoicing. His purity before his Father becomes our purity. White reinforces that message of joy.

In addition to its use during Eastertide, white is the appointed color for such festive Sundays as Christmas and its twelve days; Epiphany (Jan. 6) and the first Sunday following it, observed as the Baptism of Our Lord; the Last Sunday after the Epiphany, also known as Transfiguration Sunday; Holy Trinity Sunday; and twenty-one minor festivals and occasions listed on the church year calendar in Lutheran Worship. In all, white serves as the best festive color for the church year.

Finally, red completes the acronym, "Bg-Bgs-Pwr." Red is a power color and is appropriate for use on Pentecost Sunday. On this day we remember the power and fire of "the Lord and Giver of Life," who revealed himself as the promised one. The color red communicates the motif of strength-strength and power the Holy Spirit gives in order for God's people to call on the name of Jesus Christ and share that powerful name with others.

There is no question that red is a compelling festive color. Consequently, it serves well as the traditional color for the heroic martyrs of the church. The Lutheran Worship church year calendar provides propers for sixteen martyr festivals and recommends red as the appropriate color. Their red blood shed in defense of the Gospel offers perpetual encouragement for God's people to be resolute in living the faith.

Additional uses of red are Reformation Sunday; Holy Cross Day (Sept. 14); on such festive occasions as dedications, anniversaries of a congregation and its physical structure; festive days celebrating the office of the public ministry, such as ordination and installation.

It is appropriate, from time to time, to take a thoughtful and fresh look at the colors that are displayed throughout the church year. In the end, we admit, the use of paraments, vestments, altar clothes, banners is an adiaphoron. Even the symbolism behind the traditional colors is somewhat arbitrary and open to additional interpretations as generations pass. The primary source and guarantor of their meanings is tradition.

However, the important thing to remember is why we retain this traditional liturgical standard. The value of the "Bg-Bgs-Pwr" color scheme rests in their purpose: to serve God's worshipping community by assisting in communicating the holy faith from generation to generation. In every age, the beauty and symbolism of color in the church continues to serve us exceptionally well! Soli Deo Gloria pro Ecclesia Colorem!

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Original Source: *Lutheran Worship Notes*, Issue 29, 1994

Published by: LCMS Worship

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