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LOST CAUSES

“Let it go, Paul.”

“Give up!”

“You can’t win this one, Paul.”

The speakers in my audience were all but shouting. I had been asked to present a favourite topic at an annual conference of local pastors: a review of what I like to think of as the Ecumenical Consensus in Worship that has arisen following the Second Vatican Council. And I was listing, among the items in that consensus, an evolving distaste for “high tech” in worship, including Public Address systems.

I had immediately been challenged from the floor. “Every church building these days needs a PA system!” “No church PA system in the Twenty-First Century? You’re crazy!”

I persisted in defense of my conviction, but I was all but drowned out by cries from my critics. And I was more than temporarily unhinged by the attack, as you might guess. These were mostly all old friends who had heard me pontificating on this topic before. But all my arguments today were falling on deaf ears. And I in my embarrassment had failed to raise the most important and basic issue at stake, namely, the ethical. See 1) below. So I was simply shouted down.

But it set me thinking. This was not the first time I had failed to persuade in a very public setting. In fact, as I reflected further, there’s a whole catalogue of concerns I care about that no one else seems to.

Hence, this Essay. Here they are: My personal *Lifelong List of Lost Causes...* Alternative titles: *Arguments I Simply Cannot Seem to Win... Important Principles No One Else Thinks are Important... Great Ideas I Have Run Up the Flagpole and No One Has Saluted...Part One* (no less). Yes, my head is bloodied but unbowed.

1) Lost Cause Number One: *There is no place for high tech in Christian worship.* Well, almost no place.

By high tech I mean PA systems, recorded music, PowerPoint projections, slide shows, that kind of thing. See [Essay 10](#) for an earlier take on this topic. In addition to the arguments I note there, there's the most basic and even ethical issue of authenticity. Electronic technology in most worship contexts is a moral as well as an acoustic disaster.

Consider electronic Public Address systems. They remove the hearer from engagement with the speaker. An electronically amplified voice is simply not a human voice. You could as well be hearing HAL, that disembodied malevolent robot computer from the movie *2001: A Space Odyssey*. ("Don't do it, Dave. Dave, don't do it...").

Are there circumstances in which I'd be willing to allow a PA system in a church? Begrudgingly, yes. Granted A) the refusal these days of many seminaries to train pastors and worship leaders in the dying arts of projecting the voice in public speech, and granted B) the refusal of most contemporary pastors and worship leaders to train themselves in those arts, relying almost unanimously on a microphone, and granted C) the disastrous architectural arrangements in most of our churches, I'd have to allow — against my principles — a PA system in almost every church in Western Christendom. Every little rural church building that seats fifty worshippers seems to want to have a PA system these days.

But am I the only person who thinks that's a major ethical scandal? A moral disaster? The sound you're hearing is phoney, fraudulent. It's inauthentic. It's second hand. It's twice-removed from the real. It's akin to plastic or silk flowers on the altar. I want the worship I attend to display nothing but raw authenticity, honesty, genuineness. At worship, in all its aspects, I want to engage nothing but Primary Experience.

I could soften my views when it comes to PowerPoint projection of hymn texts and tunes — except for one thing. Respected friends have reported experiencing a sense of community while singing from projected hymn texts that, they say, you don't get when you're pressing your nose into a hymnbook. (The hymnbook itself is of course a primitive "technology." And see Lost Cause Number Four below.) So electronic projections for hymn singing may have a place in worship — *if it were not for one thing*: the architectural monstrosity of those looming projection screens. Where do you put them, without calling attention to them, attention stolen from Font, Table, and Ambo? Zipping them up when they're not needed, and down when you do, creates its own distractions.

And of course like all electronics, the success of PowerPoint projection in a corporate setting hinges on three very uncertain variables: A) Skillful and competent and constant technical oversight by human beings, B) Reliable equipment, and C) A dependable power source. You can't simply assume that all of those variables will be consistently available in today's churches. In my view, the jury is still out on the usefulness of PowerPoint

projection of hymns.

My single point: The “virtual” is simply not the Real Thing. See [Essay 47](#) above. Glenn Gould argued long ago that technological advancements in recording would one day render obsolete live concerts in a concert hall. Does anyone today take that argument seriously? Would anyone today actually *prefer* to hear Glenn Gould — or even The Beatles! — on an *I-Pod*? *Actually prefer that* to hearing and seeing and experiencing them live in concert?

I’ve confessed to you before ([Essay 10](#)) that I wear two hearing aids these days. My critics point to this as evidence that my arguments are inconsistent: I’m embracing technology. To that I reply: A PA system in worship is like requiring all worshippers to wear hearing aids. “If you’re going to experience this worship, let alone participate in it, you’re going to have to wear these devices in your ears. Like it or not.” I for one have to wear them. But I don’t have to like wearing them.

Further, and beyond the intrinsic fraudulence of electronic technology, many people today have become increasingly mistrustful of anything transmitted in electronic form. The fact is, any electronic technology can be manipulated. Its potential for fakery is enormous. Glenn Gould could have all his mistakes corrected in the recording studio, so you hear on your *I-Pod* only what he wants you to hear: Perfection. And electronic fakery in movies — and photo-journalism! — has reached unprecedented levels of sophistication. With good reason, North Americans at least have begun to suspect that if it’s electronic, it’s fake.

I want my worship to be a refuge from technology’s ubiquitousness. And its fraudulence.

Further still: Technology in worship reinforces a consumerist view of human life. You have trouble hearing? Buy this technology — throw money at it — and it’ll solve your problems. It’s the pervasive seduction of the age we live in. You have a problem with anything? Popularity? Obesity? Wrinkles from aging? Buy this technology, this drug, this cosmetic procedure and your problems will be solved. I do not want my Church buying into that seduction. Literally buying.

I’ll be called a crack-pot. But I’ll stick with my argument, even if nobody agrees: High tech has no place in Christian worship. It’s fraudulent. And I do have more than a few like-minded culture critics on my side. See [Essay 47](#) again.

In defense of my thesis, here’s Alex Ross in the *New Yorker* magazine, June 6, 2005, page 100. He’s written his *NY* essay to demonstrate how electronics have changed not only how we listen to music, but how artists play music and sing. (More *vibrato* and *tremolo*, for example, than before the microphone seduced us — you can fudge on pitch easier.) Here are his concluding words:

[There is] a paradox common to technological existence: Everything gets a little easier *and little less real*. (Emphasis mine.)

2) Lost Cause Number Two: *Multiple Sunday Services are theologically and liturgically problematic.*

This is my "One flock; One shepherd" principle. Multiple Eucharists on a given Sunday in the same parish reinforce a consumerist view of the Church and of the Church's corporate worship. See [Essay 20](#) above for more on this subject.

Of course, almost no one agrees. "That's bull, Paul!" bellowed our local Seminary's systematician when I advanced this conviction at the same pastors' gathering I note above. (His derogative actually consisted of two syllables.) But I'll stick with my case.

Multiple Services send the signal that the Church is a kind of religious franchise, belonging to clergy, who are there to serve its customers, the laity. And the Liturgy itself becomes the occasion where this consumerist transaction takes place. Clergy possess something that laity don't have, that they'll give them: first the 8:00 a.m. crowd, then 9:00 a.m. crowd, then the 11:00 a.m. crowd.

Anglican Canon John Hill agrees. In *Liturgy Canada*, Easter 2005, he writes:

...when we remember Christ's death while simultaneously condoning the very social condition he died to save us from [a divided Body], we imply that we are collaborating in his mutilation...

3) Lost Cause Number Three: *Our neighbourhoods are doomed to further decay unless Churches re-discover the concept of the geographic parish.* I'm alone on this one as well. But still unrepentant.

"Nobody here understands a word you're saying..." The speaker was keynoter at still another pastors' event, where I had raised this issue and related it to what I called ecclesial taxonomy, the acknowledgment that the reality we call Church exists at many levels and in many forms. See [Essay 59](#) above.

In my understanding of the geographic parish, each congregation takes responsibility for its own turf. You can't restrict *membership* geographically. (More's the pity.) You can't prevent worshippers from driving past six other churches to attend the seventh, the church of their choice. But you can focus *mission and ministry* geographically. Here is the section of turf I'm taking responsibility for. To see that the garbage gets collected here, the snow gets plowed. To fight City Hall, if necessary, as advocate for this particular piece of real estate. And, more importantly, its people.

4) Lost Cause Number Four: *The Tyranny of Texts.* See [Essay 76](#) above. I'd remove all pew Bibles, in the Church of my fantasies. I'd turn off the photocopier in preparation for Sunday Services, with the possible exception of preparing an outline, a guide to worship. Nobody else buys this argument either. But I'm steadfast. And I'm not alone. I have at least C.S.Lewis in my corner.

It's the death of vital worship when we expect worshippers to keep noses pressed into texts in order to participate fully in worship. *Everything* in worship — everything except hymns — ought to be immediately accessible, even to the illiterate and the blind, without having to read *anything*.

Participatory prayers and litanies should be easily and instantly appropriated by everyone — almost incantational, like children's nursery rhymes. And all without reference to anything printed. The people's psalm refrains or antiphons could be taught and learned on the spot, without so much as a printed line of text or music for reference. Don't print out the psalm verses, either. Singing them is the job of a cantor. (Psalms every Sunday, and *sung* every Sunday, of course! The people's first and finest hymnal! Jesus' own hymnal!)

Liturgies themselves should be as familiar and as comfortable to all worshippers as an old pair of shoes, to paraphrase C.S.Lewis. No reading necessary. Post-literate worship, in every parish!

Print materials in worship send two terrible signals: A) "This is going to be difficult, folks." And B) "You've got to be literate to worship here." I've made my case for this in [Essay 76](#). Nobody listens. (Am I beginning to sound paranoid?) But I'll keep trying to convert.

5) Lost Cause Number Five: *The assembly's most important choir will be the people themselves*. Everybody else seems to be convinced this notion too is crack-pot. But I remain obdurate. The insistence on a separate choir of more-or-less trained and experienced voices, preferably robed, remains distinctly problematic, to me. See [Essays 14 & 94](#).

What's wrong with a traditional choir? It's the invention of Protestants. Or Roman Catholics. Surely not Lutherans. (Just joking, folks. I don't often use those first two terms as pejoratives. We've all got something to learn, and from everyone.)

What a traditional choir does, too often, is usurp the people's rightful role in worship. And the people's opportunity to play. No wonder we hear complaints that our worship is dull. The choir is having all the fun! In too many parishes the people have become passive spectators while a choir performs for them. Doing the people's work! Co-opting the people's fun!

I'm thinking hymn alternation — men's voices, women's voices, instruments, organ. I'm thinking some simple unaccompanied four-part SATB singing, the kind of thing Iona's John Bell or Toronto's John Campbell direct so effortlessly, so unobtrusively, and with such heart-lifting results. See [Essays 82](#) and [83](#). I'm thinking rounds and canons. I'm thinking Taize and Iona *ostinatos*, with a cantor's solo voice on a descant. Parishes should be paying church musicians — or pastors! — to incorporate these simple techniques *within the congregation's own song*. Each Sunday! Or else their money's mis-spent.

By all means, if you have the energy, train a chancel choir and rehearse an anthem. But

only *after* you've given the people themselves something exciting to sing. Every Sunday.

Well, I'm out of steam. But my list is long. This is only Part One. And we'll return too next time to Fifty Nifty Things about *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*.

