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## “POP TAKES NO PRISONERS” SUNDAY SCHOOL AND SACRAMENT ~ PART 2

My friend and I were talking hymns. We were both clucking our tongues at the hymn selections you so often encounter these days in Christian worship. He’s a pastor-musician and was despairing that the hymn tunes so often selected for worship seemed light and insubstantial. For my part, I was regretting the neglect of those marvelous German chorales that are such an important part of our Lutheran heritage. I was even bemoaning the disregard you often find these days for those magnificent English texts by Isaac Watts or Charles Wesley.

“Well”, he sighed, “Pop culture takes no prisoners.”

The expression was not original with him, he confessed, but he couldn’t remember the source. Nevertheless his observation struck a chord with me, and I found myself agreeing.

My friend went on. “Pop culture is like Microsoft. It liquidates its competitors, and leaves no room for any other players. It’s almost like the economists’ dictum that bad money drives out good money.”

I shook my head sadly. How often, in my experience, had I been willing — eager! — to learn something new from the “pop” culture — an unfamiliar Marty Haugen hymn, or even a “happy-clappy” song, and truly enjoyed it? Almost every Sunday!

But equally, how often have I been dismayed to discover that enthusiasm — alas! — is not always a two-way street. The devotees of “pop” in worship seem too often unwilling to learn from what I would call the Tradition.

Sure, I’ll learn your songs. And sing them with gusto!

Now: Are you willing to learn mine?

My friend's observation seemed to suggest that's an empty hope. "Pop takes no prisoners." Allows for no other forms of expression. Kills, obliterates, once it's taken hold, every other possibility.

Maybe that's too harsh a judgement. Maybe my friend and I were simply two grumpy old men, peevish that the world was passing us by, and unwilling to embrace the brave new world our children are creating. We're certainly, both of us, "of a certain age", that's true.

But honestly, I can't believe that's the whole truth. Perhaps there *is* an element there of what they used to call "generation gap." But I found myself as we spoke returning to a theme I've sounded before in these postings, under the title "Sunday School and Sacrament", as early as twelve years ago, in [Essay 4](#). My friend's dandy dictum seemed to fit right in with what I argued there.

To review my argument in [Essay 4](#), and updating it: My fear, with almost any extra-liturgical or popular musical idiom in worship, is that it will train worshippers in bad habits. Is this or that form sufficiently "catholic"? Or is it training worshippers in not-sufficiently-catholic — that is, sectarian — expectations? It was the Revivalist worship forms of Central Pennsylvania's Lutheran Sunday Schools of my early ministry experience that prompted my misgivings back then, and in 1996. But I included, in my misgivings in Essay 4, the neo-Revivalist aspects of 1996 youth ministries as well. And I'm including today, in this posting, the "pop culture" aspects of much that's called worship today.

Aside: Are *all* pop cultural media, today and always, subject to the same critique? Art? Architecture? Vestments and paraments? The postures, positions, and gestures of worship? Or is this danger limited to music? To be valid, shouldn't the same standards be applied across the board? *All art forms* in the service of worship ought to be judged by the same criteria. In the service of worship: That's their shared vocation. Hence: To be appraised by an identical measure. Still, music especially cries out for this assessment...

So I'm unwilling to let the matter rest with the apparent truth of my title this month. "Resist pop hegemony in worship!" says the bumper sticker on my car. (Just kidding. I don't own bumper stickers.)

Hence yet again, some Important Principles:

1) I've argued before in these postings (*Ad nauseum*, I hear you muttering!) that it's a mistake to schedule a menu of services on a given weekend. To offer, as they say, separate worship opportunities, as they say, in a variety of styles and musical expressions — one service exclusively pop, for example, another folk, or country, or so-

called traditional, or *whatever* — is to divide the Body unnecessarily (*One Flock! One Shepherd!*), and to betray a consumerist model of church and of ministry and indeed of worship. See [Essay 20](#) for more on this.

2) Whether or not your numbers will require multiple services on a weekend (*One Flock! One Shepherd!*), *every service* in a Christian parish should be “blended”, as they rather inelegantly call it these days. Certainly if your demographics demand it, one service — of two for example — could be less formal than the other. One service could ordinarily be cast in more popular idioms, musical and otherwise. One service can feature an organ; another guitars and drumset. But *every service* in a Christian parish should utilize a *variety* of forms and expressions for faith: some pop, some “praise choruses” (as they say), some global music, some folk and spirituals, some Taize-style *ostenatos*, some chorales, some Victorian weepers, even some plainsong. Even some happy-clappy. You are offering your worshippers something less than catholic fulness, if you do less.

3) Not all of this fulness I suggest above would be possible to showcase *every time* you gather for worship. But over the course of weeks and months, every faithful member — every visitor to worship in your parish — ought to become familiar with the incredible richness, the *pleroma*, of the Christian worship tradition. We are living in a Golden Age of Christian hymnody, as I have also argued before. Make the most of it! Introduce your people to the glorious fulness of Christian hymnody. Even the happy-clappy stuff — even the praise choruses! — are at least fun to sing, for the most part.

I'd even be willing to argue that, in worship among Lutherans at least, *every service* should feature at least one chorale — the defining hymnic gift from Lutherans to the ecumenical treasury. Sung in alternation, I'd hope.

4) *Whatever* you do in less formal, more pop oriented worship, make certain it *prepares* worshippers for transition to more traditional forms of worship, if and when that happens. Nothing you do in pop oriented worship should have to be unlearned later, in a more “liturgical” setting.

5) And sure: What's pop today will be Tradition tomorrow. Some of it, that is. Not every praise chorus will survive the test of years. Many times the most immediately accessible stuff has the shortest life. But hey: Don't knock immediate accessibility! That's a wonderful asset, in an age when most people are cultural and biblical and theological and liturgical illiterates.

6) That brings me to this. Who remembers “They'll know we are Christians by our love...”? You hardly hear it today. But that was sung around every campfire in Christendom, a generation ago. And it served its purpose. So a little charity and good will are in order. Ahem. Even from Grumpy Old Men.

My bottom line: No pop hegemony. Let's sing more hymns, more songs, of more

types, in more styles. Not fewer.

A closing parable: In the late 'Sixties, in my own Campus Ministry incarnation, we taught our daughters to sing *Lord of the Dance*, with its lilting melody from a Shaker hymn: "I am the Lord of the Dance, said he..." One evening — We were entertaining ourselves on an auto trip — we heard our four year old Sarah singing, "I am the Lord, and you can't scare me..."

Nice theology, Sarah

