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NEO-REVIVALIST WORSHIP

I've had the experience in recent months of attending worship in parishes of two radically different denominations.

The first was in the Summer worship of what you would call a main-line Christian denomination. I won't identify either the parish or the denomination; I'll simply call it Worship A. But this was by any standard a solidly main-line Protestant congregation, like the Methodists or United Church — although it was not a parish of either of those specific churches. Its worship was not, that is, informed or shaped by the word-and-sacrament traditions of the Big Three of Western liturgical worship: Roman Catholic, Anglican, or Lutheran.

The second — I won't identify this one either; For my purposes here it'll be simply B — was in the Summer worship of what can perhaps be called a radically post-Protestant free-thinking group, to the left of Quakers and Mennonites on the apophatic-kataphatic scale I note in [Essay 24](#). It's a group that might often refuse to call itself a church, with many of its adherents uncomfortable in identifying themselves as Christian.

But what struck me was the similarity of the worship *ordo*, in both cases.

There were significant differences, of course. The Gospel was clearly evident in Worship A; not so clearly evident in Worship B, as you might expect. That's the main difference.

And I suppose, for some pieties, that's all you need to know. Worship A is clearly "evangelical". Worship B is not so clearly evangelical.

Aside: In the days after World War 2, when the National Council of Churches was being formed in the USA, it was Franklin Clark Fry, a Lutheran voice in the deliberations, who argued that groups like B above be excluded from membership. If this were to be a Council of *Churches*, Fry argued, their evangelical commitment, their Christian credentials, should be clear to all...

Aside Number 2: Further, I have major problems these days in identifying the so-called Christian Right as “evangelical”, as I note in [Essay 108](#). Evangelical means having to do with the Gospel, the Good News of God in Christ. And these days I hear from the Christian Right only rarely very much “good news”. It’s mostly law. You hear too often not God’s yes, but almost exclusively an all-too-human no...

But I’d hesitate to argue that B was totally un-evangelical, completely lacking in God’s Good News. I did indeed glimpse the Gospel there, if only in the hospitality of the congregants and in the cheerful, heart-felt welcome of the pastor, to me, a stranger.

But it’s the *ordo* I’m holding up here, the order or pattern for worship. The worship in both assemblies was remarkably similar. Worship in both congregations followed what a friend calls the “hymn-sandwich” pattern: Hymn, reading, hymn, prayer, hymn, offering, hymn, sermon. With the sermon as the expected climax and conclusion.

Contrast and compare that *ordo* with ours in the word-and-sacrament churches. That pattern, that order is laid out neatly, memorably, in our new worship book, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. Gathering, Word, Meal, Sending. They’re participatory actions, they’re corporate activities. Sure, hymns and psalms and canticles are an important part of each action. But these are embodied, collective commitments. You can’t do them alone. You’re invited into a drama. To become, not an observer, but a participant, an actor on stage.

Certainly even in A and B I felt some of that sense of participation. If only in the singing of hymns — their texts dreadfully bowdlerized in B — I felt included, a participant. But there was not much of a sense of the corporate in either worship, A’s nor B’s. I was participating, in both A and B, in a relatively private exercise.

This sense I had of an individualist approach to worship, rather than a corporate one, was intensified by the architecture of both assembly’s worship spaces. East-facing rows of pews allowed you to see only the backs of others’ heads. You felt you were interacting with the preacher alone; it was only the preacher’s face you could see.

Of course the same critique — worship that is an individual, private experience rather than a corporate, communal one — could be leveled as well against any of the word-and-sacrament churches where the seating dis-allows mutual interaction.

And altogether lacking, in both A and B, was a sense of sacrament, of incarnation, of the stuff of creation lovingly embraced as vehicle for a heavenly invasion of my life.

So I found myself asking: Where does it come from, this hymn-sandwich form of worship?

Not from word-and-sacrament roots. There the *ordo* is action, it’s incarnational. It

demands molecules, the stuff of the created world: bread, wine, water. And it's both participatory and communal.

Not from sources in the Daily Office — Morning Prayer, Evening Prayer. There too an incarnational, a participatory, a corporate form or structure is at least implicit, if not explicit.

Here's where that pattern or form for worship comes from: Nineteenth Century American frontier revivalism. .

So I'll give it a name: Neo-Revivalism. And I'll make a sweeping claim: Most contemporary Protestant worship is neo-revivalist in structure or shape or form. A series of hymn-sandwiches, climaxing in the sermon. You come to listen to a lecture. All that's lacking from the days of the tent revival is an altar call.

Now, if there's Gospel there — as in A above — isn't that enough? The answer, from the tradition of the word-and-sacrament churches, has been no, it's not enough. You need action too. You need those tangible tokens of incarnation, of sacrament, those molecules of bread and wine and water. You need that sense of corporate engagement. You need that public perception of everyone present invited to participate as irreplaceable players in this praise. Neo-revivalist worship is lacking in that kind of catholic wholeness. See [Essay 29](#). above.

As a friend and mentor maintains, the fullest truth about God is not one word but two: Word and sacrament.

Now the neo-revivalists are lovely people. In both A and B. You'd want to, you know, take them to lunch. "I myself Was a Teenage Neo-Revivalist." But my hope — my prayer — is that one of these days, they'll come to appreciate a more comprehensive, a more catholic fulness in worship.

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