

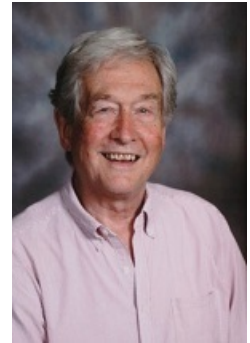
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## PRIMARY EXPERIENCE

### Still Another Counter-Cultural Witness

1 I've told you before in these postings that in the early 'Seventies, I was part of a national team of pastors, theologians, and church musicians charged by my church – then called the Lutheran Church in America – with introducing the treasures of the soon-to-be-published *Lutheran Book of Worship* – the “green book” – to LCA congregations.

2 *LBW* was to represent at that time a radical departure in worship for many North American Lutherans. I've spelled out also in previous postings what some of those radical changes included. See [Essays 107](#) ,[108](#),[109](#), and [111](#) for a review of those changes as they have been endorsed and enlarged in our current worship book, *LBW*'s successor, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* – the “cranberry red book.”

3 Anyhow, if memory does not fail me, I served in no fewer than 26 week-long workshops over a three year period, designed to introduce these treasures to North American Lutherans. And as leaders we were trained by our national church at a series of conferences that included top-flight liturgical scholars, not simply Lutherans, but Anglican, Presbyterian, Methodist, and even – Can I be remembering correctly? – Roman Catholic. (These were the days of thrilling ecumenical consensus and convergence, remember. See [Essay 166](#).)

4 It was at such a training event for us leaders that I remember hearing one liturgical theologian – I think he was Methodist – praising our new book, *LBW*. And he included in his praise – a truly heart-felt paean of appreciation! – something like these words: “These marvellous rites cry out for primary experience!”

5 I understood instantly what he was saying. He was expressing what I have attempted to articulate in many of these postings: That contemporary human beings are starved for contact with the truly authentic in human experience. Our contemporary love affair with technology – as I have been arguing in these postings for almost two decades now – has left us hungering for what is real, and not fake, for what is palpable and authentic, and not “virtual.” For bread, not a stone.

6 That's our basic hunger today, and it's often sub-conscious: For the promise of primary experience. High technology certainly has its place in our modern world. It serves us well in communicating, in enriching our lives, in making our lives simpler and less burdensome. But "high tech" has its dark side too, often unobserved and unremarked.

7 "Every new technology carries with it its own agenda," maintains a respected mentor of mine, "and we don't always see that agenda until it's too late." A recent article in *The Atlantic* (June 2013) makes the case, for example, that, almost without recognizing it, we've become accustomed to living lives of "continuous partial attention." We're tuned in to our cell phones, to our iPods and iPads, and tuned out from the rest of the world. We're no longer fully engaged in life; We're strangers to our own experience.

8 Christian worship ought to be a refuge from that, a sanctuary where for an hour's time we can leave those otherwise-useful gadgets turned off. And pay full attention.

9 Now that expectation – of full attention to primary experience – is foreign to many people. It's not what people today are used to. It will take some learning into it. It will take patience and practice. It will take a sensitive leadership to help contemporary North Americans negotiate the truly radical re-orienting that Christian worship necessarily demands.

10 But it's what people hunger for, whether or not they can recognize that in themselves. *Philippians 4:8*. The flickering candlelight of a Christmas eve service; the hushed breathing of your neighbour in the silence after the Sermon; the warmth of a human handshake or embrace at the Peace; the gentle touch of a human hand in anointing with fragrant oil – a healing touch, not abusive, not invasive – humans today in the West are starved for such experiences. I recall the words of a wheelchair-bound elder at the exchange of the Peace: "That's the first time anyone has touched me with any kind of affection in ten years..."

11 Therefore, Christian worship, with its steadfast insistence on primary experience - low tech, not high tech – represents a counter-cultural judgement. It challenges contemporary expectations. More than that: Worship will sound a distinct and defiant "No!" against our current culture of "continuous partial attention," of an acquiescence to the kind of spectator-life than can only be described as de-humanized and de-humanizing.

12 Yes yes yes: I know our worship also must try, at the same time, to be en-culturated. Yes, we must strive to speak in the languages of today, and to embrace – insofar as our Gospel allows it – the assumptions, even the enthusiasms, of those we hope to reach. But we must never shy away from our counter-cultural responsibilities either. We must be prepared to utter that "No!" whenever we encounter the demonic, the de-humanizing. In a word, and with the Spirit's guiding, we must teach ourselves to "discern the spirits." *1 John 4:1* and *Romans 12:2*.

13 To design worship, to present worship, week after week, that is faithful to our Gospel and at the same time winsome and attractive to the unchurched will not be easy. It will mean constant mystagogy. See [Essay 162](#) above. But remember: In our responsibilities to be authentically counter-cultural, we will be aided by our parallel responsibilities to be trans-cultural and cross-cultural.

14 The bottom line: Christian worship has its own distinctive culture. Un-apologetically. We must make it clear to all who enter the door of our worship spaces: What you will find here will NOT be an entertainment. You will not find a TV talk show or a rock concert.

15 What you WILL find, *deo volente*, is a Working Model of the Gospel.

