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GROWING UP INTO CHRIST Worship for Grownups

1 Item: Several years ago, CBC Radio Two caused a nationwide uproar in Canada by changing the format of its venerable daily broadcast from twenty-four-hour-a-day classical music to “...a more youth-oriented play list.” I suppose the decision was motivated by demographic considerations, although CBC 2 has never aired commercials. In any case, now it's pop, rock, grunge, and hip-hop. No more Mozart, Bach, or Beethoven...

2 Item: A recent *New York Times Sunday Magazine* article (April 1, 2014, pages 48 – 49) bemoans what the author, a music critic, calls “popism”. Why should adults, he argued, who “listen to music thoughtfully really agree so regularly with the taste of 13 year olds?”...

3 Item: “They'll never see me in that church again!” The speaker was a long-time member of a local Protestant – not Lutheran -- congregation. “You have to leave your brains at the door when you walk in.” The cause of his anger? The parish had just undergone a change in pastoral leadership, and the new leaders had decided to modify parish worship in the direction of that of the mega-churches, with rock band, “praise choruses”, and looming projector screens...

4 Item: From the Bible, *Ephesians* 4:16-18: “We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine...But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ,...”

5 Faithful reader, I'm asking in these paragraphs: Should the Church give people what they want? What they're expecting? What they are used to? What they find familiar?

6 In a word: Is worship for 13 year olds? Or for grownups? Does the Church have any responsibility to enlarge or ennoble our *humanum*? Hear me out.

7 We today in North America live in a society obsessed with youth. No longer do people aspire to grow up, to mature. In fact, it's the opposite: Grownups aspire to be young again. Advertisements in all media seek audiences that are youthful, not mature. The products our contemporary Mad Men shill for are addressed to the young, to those who hope to look young, to feel young, to be perceived as young. It's "youthism."

8 I suppose that's a relatively harmless self-delusion, until we begin to forget the gifts and graces of maturity. Sure, there's something to be said about being young. You've heard the old saw: "Youth is too precious a thing to be wasted on children."

9 I'll argue here that Christian faith is meant for the mature, to help people mature gracefully, to give people the skills and resources that promote an enlarged and ennobled humanity. There's no virtue in remaining all your life a 13 year old in faith, in spirituality, in understanding, in perception, in piety.

10 My case: Christian worship belongs to the mature – with an important qualifier: See 18 below. I see a whole constellation of implications arising from this conviction.

11 The most basic implication is this: Christian worship carries with it its own traditions, its own culture. It will not be immediately accessible. Entering a church on a Sunday morning may seem like a visit to a foreign land.

12 Therefore we should not expect worship to be like anything else you've encountered during the week. Worship will not be like a theatre. It will not be like a lecture or a concert. The worship space will not look like a theatre, a lecture hall, a concert venue. Seekers and visitors – and our own youth! -- should not expect to understand Christian worship immediately.

13 Arising from this conviction: You must grow up into it. *Ephesians* 4:16-18. You will spend your lifetime growing up into Christian faith. And worship is faith's workshop. Expecting worship to meet the desires or expectations of seekers is therefore fruitless.

14 It is also unfaithful. Martin Marty has observed that to design Christian worship so as to meet the desires or expectations of "seekers" is to allow those who know the least about faith to have the greatest voice in forming faith. Not good.

15 Christian worship forms faith. It is meant to build up into Christ. We should not be surprised -- or offended! -- to learn that Christian worship carries with it its own constraints, its own traditions, its own culture. It will be different from the surrounding culture and its values. It will sometimes be downright opposed to the surrounding culture and its values.

16 Therefore: The leaders of Christian communities, the leaders of Christian worship must constantly be about the business of mystagogy: interpreting faith and the rituals of faith. To the young in their midst, to the seekers at the door – even to every-Sunday old timers in the pew. Christians will spend a lifetime learning how to be Christians. Their leaders should help them.

17 Which brings me to that important qualifier. Sure, Christian faith -- and faith's form for Sunday worship, Word and Sacrament -- is for growing grownups, for developing maturity. But of course it's also for kids. It's also for the young. It's also for seekers. After all, we're all of us seekers, all our lives, aren't we?

18 Hence: Now more than ever Christian communities must teach worshippers how to worship. Christian communities must plan for a deliberate and ongoing program of instruction in worship. Mystagogy. (Essay 162)

19 In Christian education opportunities, in a parish newsletter, in verbal and printed announcement every Sunday, in children's messages, in teaching and – Does it need to be said? -- in preaching. We must never assume that anyone walking in the door on Sunday morning will know what we're up to. You must be led. Taught. Instructed. Encouraged. Formed in faith. By whatever means it takes.

20 Now, how? First, as a worship leader, I'd want to telegraph in my style of leadership that this adventure called Christian worship may not be self-evident or immediately accessible to all. But it will be exciting and exhilarating and enlarging and ennobling -- and, yes, fun. I'd strive to make worship every Sunday as accessible as possible for all ages and all levels of experience. But I wouldn't shy from pointing out It may also mean requiring you to stretch your perceptions and expectations a little. Growing up into Christ should not be a drag. It shouldn't mean unrelieved, sober-sided grimness. (Essay 182)

21 "Children's sermons?" As you've learned through these postings, faithful reader, I'm not a big fan of children's sermons. They're too often pious moralizings or obscure metaphors that kids can't handle until they're much older. But children's messages do offer a fine opportunity for mystagogy: Helping worshippers – even grownups! – to worship. Teaching some of the fine points of why we do what we do in worship. Kids -- and their parents -- will appreciate being let in on "the mysteries" of faith and worship.

22 "Youth Services" or "Seeker Services"? I'm not a big fan of these, either, as you've come to notice. First, there's a convincing Biblical argument against dividing one congregation needlessly into two. "One flock; one shepherd" is a prudent Biblical standard. (Essay 20, "The God Business...")

23 Second, both "Youth Services" and "Seeker Services", in my experience, have been notorious for infantilizing those who worship. They're too often "dumbing down": presenting "baby faith" in theology and in liturgy. They're designed for 13 year olds. "You have to leave your brains at the door when you walk in." I don't often see any stretching, any striving, in either -- any attempt "to grow up into Christ." Sure, those "happy clappy" songs of youth ministry, those "praise choruses" of Seeker Services, are fun to sing, on occasion. But I certainly wouldn't want a steady diet of them on Sunday morning.

24 Further: I'm willing to sing your "praise chorus" in a Seeker Service, your "happy clappy" song at a Youth Service. But too often I don't sense any willingness to reciprocate: for youth or seekers willingly to sing my songs – those sturdy, splendid German chorales, for example. "Pop takes no prisoners." (Essay 130)

25 Is the answer then an occasional Youth Service or Seeker Service, as part of a menu of worship opportunities throughout the year? I'm not enthusiastic about that possibility, either. To schedule a Youth Service or a Seeker Service once a month, say, or once every two months, is to send the signal that those other Sundays are not for youth, not for seekers. On those other Sundays, kids, you can stay at home in bed.

26 My entire point, in these paragraphs, has been to maintain that we are all seekers, we are all "on the way." We are all, always, "growing up into Christ."

27 The best way to nurture that growth each week is to present worship for grownups. It's called Mass, Eucharist, the Holy Communion.

28 And also to provide weekly, winsome, enthusiastic interpretation – mystagogy! -- about what we're doing and why we're doing it.

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