

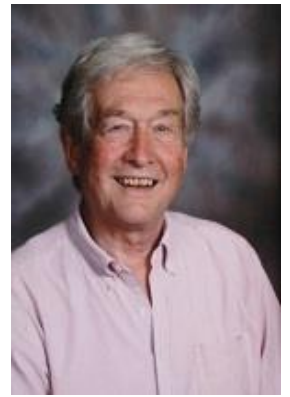
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KOINE WORSHIP: PART ONE

1 You may be aware, faithful reader, that the text of the New Testament is mostly written in what is called *koine* Greek. That word is pronounced “Koy-NAY” and it refers to the language spoken in the markets and streets of ancient Greece – and more widely among Greek speakers scattered abroad.

2 It’s not the refined, elegant Greek of the classics, that is: Homer, Euripides, Aristotle. *Koine* is every-day. It’s common. It’s the language of the people. Not of the elite.

3 Let me propose with this posting that our weekly worship should also be *koine*. Every-day. Common. Non-elite. I have so much to say on this topic I’m going to make two postings of it. Part One and Part Two.

4 ARCHITECTURAL SETTING: Best if we can do away with pews. They’re terribly restricting for lively, common worship. Moveable chairs are best. But with chairs or pews, the space wants to be kept neat, inviting, and somewhat mysterious. Worship is not a rock concert. And please: No rows of seats longer than seven. People do not want to crawl over others’ knees at worship.

5 Further: Tear up that wall-to-wall CARPET. A space for Christian worship is a public space, like a supermarket or a bank. It’s not your living room at home.

6 Further still: Any musician will tell you: A wall-to-wall carpet is terrible for acoustics. It deadens, dampens sound. You want a bright, lively acoustic in your worship space, where song can swell and amplify and reverberate. The bodies and clothing of worshipers will be sufficient, in most cases, to tone down the lively acoustics, if the sound is too bright.

7 Carpeting in a church is almost always a big mistake. Even a carpet runner down a centre aisle is likely to do more harm than good. A handsome Oriental rug in the chancel is quite another thing.

8 And if I had my way, I'd tear out the PUBLIC ADDRESS SYSTEMS in most churches. Says a Jesuit friend and mentor: "If the worship space needs a PA system, that worship space is too big."

9 Cathedrals are quite another thing. But no parish church building should be as big as a cathedral. Any parish church building the size of a cathedral can only be A) a monument to the ego of the pastor who built it, and B) a white elephant to succeeding generations of worshipers.

10 That voice you hear in most churches coming from that box on the wall: It's a virtual voice. It's not real. It's phoney. I want only The Real in Christian worship.

11 The flip side of my argument, of course: We must teach a new generation of worship leaders – pastors, preachers, lectors – the lost art of speaking in public. It's not difficult. But it takes practice. See Essay 191 above.

12 VESTMENTS: In *koine* worship, vestments would be simple, and would evoke the peasant rather than the prince. Princely, imperial vestments belong in a museum, not in *koine* worship. Simple but eloquent fabrics in colours and textures that "speak" of the Day or Season. No orpheries, galloons, or even appliqued symbols.

13 Remember: Vestments are themselves symbols. If the fabric – texture as well as colour – speak of the Day or Season, there’s no need for any further embellishments, like appliqued symbols. And yes, vestments “speak”. So does everything human beings do or make or wear or give order to.

14 LANGUAGE: I’m glad that *Evangelical Lutheran Worship (ELW)*, our current Lutheran worship resource, has abandoned the so-called “King James” language of “thees” and “thous” throughout its pages, and casts all its worship texts, and all its prayers, and all its psalms, and almost all its hymns, in an every-day, inclusive, contemporary 21st Century *koine*.

15 The “King James” language is beautiful, without doubt. But language, like everything else in life, changes through the years, and “King James” language – more properly, Tudor English – has become increasingly incomprehensible to modern people. And in some cases patently misleading. The Sixth Petition of the Lord’s Prayer is a case in point.

16 MUSIC: (I’ve made this argument before in this space.) The chief choir in Lutheran worship – in catholic worship, small c – is the people themselves. A separate body of trained and rehearsed voices singing an anthem every Sunday is decidedly unnecessary, for vibrant weekly worship.

17 And maybe even counter-productive for vibrant weekly *congregational* worship. It will constitute a learning curve for many professional parish musicians to wrap their heads around that concept. To mix metaphors.

18 Why should a separate choir have all the fun in singing? Can’t the people in the pew share some of that pleasure?

19 Yes, I will agree, almost certainly: If you begin to think of *the people themselves* as the chief choir, their song will be plenty *koine*! It will be plenty common, even to the point of rough-edged. The people’s song will not be polished and professional. Their Sunday song will be nowhere near as professional and polished as we like to think a trained choir would provide.

20 But that's the point! Worship is the people's work, after all. The very word Liturgy means "the public work of the people". Nobody, no choir, can take that work away from the people themselves.

21 Of course what we think of as a congregation's choir will mostly be made up of congregational members themselves. And sure: That trained and rehearsed choir will be exercising their own important ministry in worship. I wouldn't want to dispute that.

22 But it's a Protestant heterodoxy – Protestant! My favourite pejorative! – to assume that a choir can usurp the peoples' own ministry. Or that a weekly anthem represents the totality of a choir's responsibility.

23 A choir's most important role in worship is like any musician's role in worship – organist, pianist, guitarist, instrumentalist. To support the people's song. The people's admittedly very *koine* song. The people's very common, rough-edged song.

24 The people's song, every Sunday, includes a Psalm. So helping and enabling the people's singing of that Psalm will be part of the chief responsibility of any choir of trained and rehearsed voices. Not an anthem. Any anthem is frosting on the cake. Nice, but not necessary.

25 The people's singing of the Day's Psalm, unlike a weekly anthem, is a non-negotiable.

26 And a group of specially trained and rehearsed voices – what we think of as a choir – can enable that. Enrich that. Make it splendid. Make it a musical highlight of the Day!

27 Further: To give the people – not only the choir – a portion of the pleasure in singing in worship, you'll need a song leader. Someone with a sufficiently extroverted temperament that he or she is comfortable bossing people around publically for a few minutes. "Now you heavy voices sing this..." "Now you treble voices sing this..."

28 Such a song leader or leaders – you might need several of them – might arise from the choir itself. A song leader might arise from the congregation’s paid musician or musicians. It might be a congregational member with a hidden talent for this kind of thing. In any case, you will probably need such talent.

29 And be aware: *Koine* worship can make of the Sunday Service something messier than many temperaments can tolerate. Hey, it’s *koine*. It’s meant to be messy! It’s human. It’s common. It’s not elite, or fuss-buggity. The vaunted “flow of the liturgy” will necessarily be interrupted, if you pause mid-service to rehearse the embellishment of a hymn.

30 My next posting will include a partial list of the kind of every-Sunday hymn embellishments I’m thinking of.

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