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## ENLARGING AND ENNOBLING THE HUMANUM

- 1 Does the Christian church – or its public expression in Christian worship – have any responsibility to enlarge and ennoble its cultural setting?
- 2 I'll answer "yes" to that question. I have already answered yes to that question in Essay 189 above, "Growing Up Into Christ: Worship for Grownups." This posting could be thought of as a kind of Part Two to that Essay.
- 3 The question is of no little significance in the days of America's 45th president. He seems to me to be engaged in the opposite enterprise. "Dumbing down", cheapening human discourse. Making our present human culture in North America less noble. Less elevated. More brutish. More debased.
- 4 So I find myself asking, Are there any institutions in public life willing or able to take on this debasement, on our side of the Atlantic? Surely the Christian church and its worship can be a counter-cultural witness. Should be a counter-cultural witness, here at home.
- 5 The Lutheran World Federation sponsored a series of consultations on worship several years ago, and published the results as the Nairobi Statement on Worship (LWF 2014). This statement is so ground breaking and important I will quote a significant paragraph.
- 6 "Christian worship relates dynamically to culture in at least four ways. First, it is transcultural, the same substance for everyone everywhere, beyond culture. Second, it is contextual, varying according to the local situation (both nature and culture). Third, it is counter-cultural, challenging what is contrary to the Gospel in a given culture. Fourth, it is cross-cultural, making possible sharing between different local cultures. In all four dynamics, there are helpful principles which can be identified..."
- 7 It's the third of these qualities or dynamics that concern me in these paragraphs. "Christian worship is counter-cultural, challenging what is contrary to the Gospel in a given culture".
- 8 I will identify six aspects of current North American culture – six cultural pathologies – that, in my view, contradict the Gospel. And that are being perpetuated and encouraged by many of our political leaders. Yes, including and especially American president 45!
- 9 First, RACISM. Racism is the defining pathology of American culture. You will agree: There is no place in our culture, or in our worship, for setting race against race. "In Christ there is no East or West" – "no longer Jew or Greek, no longer slave or free, no longer male or female." We sing this hymn and we profess this Gospel, but our behavior, and our worship, often contradicts our words.

10 And if they didn't – if our actions and our words were totally congruent – what a splendid witness that would make to our surrounding society! Our racist, xenophobic culture would, just possibly, feel judged and chastened by our example. The example, the witness, of Christian people speaking and acting counter-culturally!

11 I'm impressed, for example, that Evangelical Lutheran Worship (ELW), our current Lutheran worship resource, provides no fewer than ten – 10! – musical settings of the Mass, Holy Communion. In ten different musical styles. To en-culturate the widest possible variety of diverse backgrounds in our people. That's great! Still the Mass, but in your musical idiom. Or mine!

12 Second, SEXISM. There is no justification in our Gospel – in Jesus' ministry – to assume that males are somehow more worthy, more entitled, than females. I cite the passage quoted in 9 above: Galatians 3:28. The surrounding Western culture is still struggling under the burden of sexism.

13 Hence I enthusiastically support the inclusivizing of our hymns and even Psalms in ELW. The effort to render the Psalms gender-neutral in ELW is long overdue. I would not use these inclusivized Psalms for Bible study. But in worship, yes. Enthusiastically. We are freezing out one half of the human race by retaining the sexist language of our past.

14 Girls and women belong in every role of leadership in every Christian church. 1 Corinthians 14:34 to the contrary notwithstanding. Lutherans are not literalist with the Bible. We understand the Bible within its own historic and cultural context. Hence we have no problem arguing with the Bible. Disputing the Bible's own cultural biases.

15 Again, what a wonderful witness within our still-too-sexist society!

16 Third, and related to two above: PATRIARCHY. And its bedfellows, hierarchy and paternalism. Lutherans in North America ordained our first women clergy in 1970. Again, long overdue.

17 Yet how many Christian churches are still being built (or re-modeled!) according to an outdated and hierarchical nave-and-chancel configuration? Laity here in the Nave. Clergy up there, in the Chancel with God. Ghastly! I yearn for the day when all Christian worship spaces will follow a one-room model. Most worshipers have no idea how constraining, how corrupting to our theology, a two-room space is. "When your architecture and your theology are in conflict, architecture always wins." See Essays 32 and 33 above.

18 Fourth cultural pathology: AGE-ISM. And its related pathology, a prejudice against the handicapped. Steps leading up to the church's front door. Steps from Nave to Chancel. No accommodation to youth or children in weekly worship design. Our Christian churches and our church's worship are too often (perhaps unintentionally) discriminatory in favour of the solidly middle aged and middle class. No wonder many Christian churches are dying.

19 Seekers at both ends of the age continuum – the very old and the very young – are frozen out. Our churches, and our church's worship, are for the middle aged.

20 But if it were not so? If we actually acted out our belief that all are welcome, no matter age or experience? The Christian witness would rightly shame its culture!

- 21 Fifth: LITERATE-ISM. I've just coined this word. Is there another one? I'll gladly entertain a better term. The cultural pathology here is the common cultural assumption that everyone who walks in our doors – our church doors – can read. Can read English.
- 22 Again, in this casual supposition we are being un-welcoming to an enormous percentage of our human population. The blind. The aged with poor eyesight. Little kids who have not yet learned to read. The adult illiterate. The adult functional illiterate. (Up to 10 percent of an average congregation, I have heard. These are adults who have major problems reading – reading English at least. They can read the label on the cereal box in the supermarket, and the street sign that says “Stop”. But that’s the extent of their ability to read.)
- 23 Yes, we should not hesitate to teach our people to read and to know and to love our rite of Holy Communion, eventually by heart. And we can reasonably expect our worshipers to handle the reading required in the singing of hymns. But no other reading. No long paragraphs of unfamiliar prose or poetry every Sunday. We pay – and educate! – our worship leaders to be the literate ones among us.
- 24 Perhaps even the hymns themselves could on occasion be call-and-response, requiring no reading. The Day’s Psalm always responsorial; the people learning a simple refrain on the spot, each Sunday, without any reading required. The choir or a cantor does the heavy lifting, in singing all the verses. The people sing a simple, invariable, recurring response.
- 25 Remember: Singing together in a group, as in Christian worship, is distinctly counter-cultural today. Nowhere else in our society do people sing together any more. Pity.
- 26 Sixth current cultural pathology: INDIVIDUALISM. My guess is that North American devotion to a capitalist economic system is the root cause of our current infatuation with individualism. The self-made man. The hard-driving corporate tycoon. The striving entrepreneur. The individualist pursuit of the so-called American Dream. The suspicion of anything that smells of socialism. Is it any wonder then that Christian worship is still too often perceived as primarily private?
- 26 But that perception is the death of worship. Christian Worship is steadfastly, un-ambiguously corporate. The gathered assembly is the Body of Christ. The members, the limbs and organs of that Body are diminished or enfeebled when any single member is missing.
- 27 That sense of our corporate identity in Christ is sorely lacking in many Christian communities. And in our wider society. You serve, not simply self, but others. Christian worship enlarges and ennobles the individual, of course. But the individual in community. Neighbours serving neighbours.
- 28 You could even put it this way: Another name for socialism is Christianity. See Acts 2:44-47. That description of the early Jesus Movement sounds like Marx or Lenin to me: “From each according to ability. To each according to need.”
- 29 My point: You’re not private, alone, in Christian worship. You prosper and grow only as your neighbour prospers and grows. I am incomplete without you. You are incomplete without me. That’s a lesson our culture has yet to learn. Maybe the Christian church can teach it.
- 30 A final word about the LWF standard number four. See 6 above. Christian worship is cross cultural. We sing each others’ songs. Let’s make the most of that stirring challenge, in each Christian parish.

31 Homo sapiens – our humanum – is enriched and ennobled, not by dumbing down or debasing human life, not by embracing or capitulating to the pathologies of our troubled times, but precisely by resisting them. Challenging them. Providing something better, fuller, more humane.

32 That agenda will not be easy to accomplish, given the resistance of our surrounding society. And given the current cultural marginalization of the Christian church. But it will constitute a Godly endeavour.

33 As theologian Harvey Cox has said, the great thing about being in the margins is this: You can jump into any paragraph! Hah!

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