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Series: Worship Workbench
Issue: Essay 240 + December 2019
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WORSHIP RULES: PART THREE SIX WORSHIP RULES FOR WORSHIP SPACES

1 Faithful reader. When I first envisioned a short series on Worship Rules, I thought of only two possibilities. Worship Rules for Worshipers, since posted as Part One, Essay 237, for November, 2019. And Worship Rules for Worship Leaders, since posted as Part Two, Essay 238, also November, 2019.

2 But in my delirium last night, I thought of yet a third possibility: Worship Rules for Worship Spaces. Hence this posting: Part Three. You will recognize favourite themes of mine in what I write below.

3 **RULE ONE:** No PA system. Most parish churches have no need of a Public Address system, with microphones and wall mounted speaker boxes. If the space is so big it needs a PA system, it's too big. Only cathedrals need a PA system. Any parish church building as big as a cathedral is simply A) a monument to the ego of the pastor who built it. And B) a white elephant to succeeding generations of worshipers.

4 Of course the flip side of Rule One is this: You must train your worship leaders – Presiding Ministers (PM), preachers, lectors – to speak in public. That means A) speaking more slowly than in conversation, B) enunciating more clearly, and C) projecting your voice. None of these are difficult skills to learn. But they do not come naturally. You must train for it. Any worship leaders unwilling or unable to learn these skills should seek alternative ministries.

5 In my old age I have come to believe that a microphone and PA system are the enemies of public speech. Put a mic in front of anyone and they are tempted to mumble or to whisper, believing the mic will rescue them. Not true. The mic will only amplify their carelessness.

6 Further still, I have also come to believe that with a PA system, nothing less than an actual moral issue is at stake. The voice you hear coming from that speaker box mounted on the wall: It's a virtual voice. Not a real voice. An electronically amplified voice is the oral equivalent of plastic flowers in the chancel. Neither have any place in authentic Christian worship. No matter how common in contemporary show business.

7 I want my worship to be faithfully and steadfastly real and authentic. (See Essay 198 above.) I do not want the phoney or the virtual in my worship. I fear that with the ubiquity of PA systems in our common life, we are training ourselves to prefer the virtual to the real. Big mistake.

8 RULE TWO: No wall to wall carpeting. Wall to wall carpeting is a disaster for acoustics, in most church buildings. It completely deadens sound. Ask any musician. If your worship space already has it, tear it up!

9 Any space for worship, even a simple four walled room, becomes a public space, like a library or classroom. It is not your living room at home. We should honour its public character and keep wall to wall carpeting out.

10 Even a carpet runner down a centre aisle can affect the sound quality of the space. Be certain to check such matters with a qualified musician or acoustic engineer before installing any floor covering.

11 That said, a splendid Persian rug may rightly honour one of the Four Chief Architectural Symbols of our worship: Font, Table, Ambo, Sedilia (Seats for leaders).

12 RULE THREE: A one room space. Not two rooms (nave and chancel). I am disheartened to the point of despair when I note the worship spaces still being built (or re-modeled) according to a long ago discredited two room model.

13 Nave and chancel worship spaces send three disastrous signals. They are A) hierarchical, with us peasants gathered here in the nave, and all the holy people and holy stuff up there in the chancel with God. Like it or not, and whether you perceive it or not, that is the signal being sent, Sunday after Sunday, in two room spaces.

14 Further B), two room spaces speak of the theatre, a second disastrous signal. Here we are in the nave, an audience, passively expecting to be entertained – or maybe even inspired! – by those folks up there in the chancel, on stage, with the funny clothes. Again, not the message you want to send about the nature of Christian worship, as Danish Lutheran theologian and philosopher Soren Kierkegaard argued more than 150 years ago!

15 Finally C), a two room worship space encourages a private, not public, perception of what Christian worship is about. All you see are the backs of peoples' heads. No faces. You might as well be at home saying your rosary.

16 All three of these disastrous messages have been pointed out many times since the 1960's by scholars and liturgists more eloquent than I. So my point here is nothing new.

17 Sadly, these arguments have yet to enliven most worshipers' views – hey, most pastors' views! – of what a church should look like. So firmly has nineteenth century Oxford Movement piety gripped Christian imagination in Western societies, with its enshrinement of Gothic and Neo-Gothic two room architecture, that many people can hardly imagine a church without a nave and chancel. "This is what a church should look like, right?." The Medieval idea of a Christian worship space seems glued into human imagination. At least in the West.

18 But ask Martin Luther – or even John Calvin! – about Medieval piety!

19 What might a one room worship space look like? In configuration of seats – pews or chairs – not unlike two room spaces. There are basically four of them – Rudolph Schwartz, in his magisterial book, “The Church Incarnate” identifies seven. I’d identify four: Radial, Axial, Processional, and Antiphonal. See long ago Essays 32 and 33.

20 Each of my four, in 19 above, can be imagined simply with reference to their designation. Radial for example places the Four Irreplaceable Architectural Signs (Font, Ambo, Table, and Seats) in the centre of its space. Axial and Processional place those signs at the East end of the space. And Antiphonal? My favourite!

21 Antiphonal arrangements place two banks of seating on opposite sides of a wide centre aisle, facing each other. Like a Canadian parliament. The Chief Signs – Font, Table, Ambo, Sedilia – are all disposed on an East-West axis through the centre of that generous middle aisle. Antiphonal arrangements are terrific for a sense of community. And for variety in singing, say, at the Hymn of the Day.

22 Church buildings that have already been built according to a nave and chancel model can often easily be re-configured into a one room space, with no cost except human energy. Simply ignore the East wall Altar, and place a handsome library table as new Altar / Table at people’s level at the head of the nave. Ignore the old Pulpit, and move the Lectern / Ambo to the centre of the top step in the old chancel. Flank the Ambo with processional torches. Many European cruciform Gothic churches, damaged in World War II, have been re-purposed this way, without spending a penny. Just the afternoon’s labour of a few husky volunteers.

23 I worry what we are saying when we position our Table / Altar on a precise East-West axis – and place the Ambo / Lectern of our reading and preaching off to the side at North or South! Is Word less important than Meal? Is one set of worshipers, at North or South, privileged over against another?

24 **RULE FOUR:** One place of the Word, please. Not two (lectern and pulpit). When there’s one Place of the Word, for both reading from the Bible and preaching, we are signaling the unity of these actions. Separate opposing Pulpit and Lectern date from the dark days of the Byzantine Imperial Law Court – not an appropriate model for a church, in any case. In that model, you needed a place for prosecuting attorney and a separate place for defense attorney, as I understand it. Bad optics, as they say on TV.

25 When you’ve got just one Place of the Word, call it an Ambo. “Ambo” in Greek means “edge” or “a raised place”, as at the brink of a cliff. So it is quite appropriate that the Ambo be raised a step or two. Simply a matter of sight lines: Can everybody see the Lector / Reader or Preacher?

26 **RULE FIVE:** No more than seven seats in a row, please. No more than seven. Whether in pews or in chairs. This is a long time principle of a church architect friend. Longer rows of seats are OK in a theatre or concert hall, where you pay for that seat. But no one pays to go to Christian worship. And worshipers hate to crawl over other’s knees.

27 An elaboration of Rule Four: No seats at walls. Not at the end of rows, nor along any walls. Many municipal fire codes demand this; It's simply a safety measure. All walls in the worship space should be free of any furniture. You should be able to walk around the inside walls of the entire space without any encumbrance.

28 RULE SIX: It almost goes without saying. A free standing Table / Altar, with the PM behind it, facing the people across it. This recalls the arrangement in the earliest Christian House Churches (Essay 32 again), where Bishop or PM stood and led the prayers across the Table in a domestic dining room. And sometimes preached from that position!

29 It's worth noting also that the earliest Christian preaching was probably delivered from a seated posture, following Jewish practice. See Matthew 5:1. In most homes, you sat or reclined on pillows on the floor, perhaps to dine at a triclinium, a low three sided table. No chairs.

30 Hence the Sedilia, or Seats of the worship leaders, are not un-important pieces of church furniture!. I'd try to place the Sedilia on the same East-West axis as the other Three Irreplaceable Architectural Signs. See 11 above.

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