

Author: Paul F. Bosch [ [paulbosch31@gmail.com](mailto:paulbosch31@gmail.com) ]

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## **"Couch Potato" Prayers, Part Two**

A Faithful reader: I have been browsing in my archives recently, and came across the following Essay from many years ago. Essay 7 from September 1996. This very early Essay has not been available in recent years, since the re-design of this website.

B I reproduce Essay 7 below, virtually unchanged except for a new 15, with my recent paragraph numbering added. I like those paragraph numbers. They're a big help in the editing process!

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- 1 Where does it come from, this custom of remaining seated for worship?
- 2 Seated -- slouching like a couch potato -- during the singing of hymns. Seated during the prayers. Seated during the exchange of liturgical responses between worship leaders and people. Seated even for the final Blessing.
- 3 I've had experience recently, at two of the Church's flagship seminaries, and at one of the Church's flagship retreat centres, where, at many of the daily services of worship, the entire congregation remained seated for the entire duration of the rite. Dreadful!
- 4 From one perspective, the habit is traceable, I'm guessing, to the ritual pathology I've identified here in previous essays as "word reductionism."
- 5 To refresh your memory: Word reductionism is that sectarianism, endemic among North American Lutherans, that reduces all of the meanings in Christian worship to those of the words used there. It is the words, the verbalizings, alone that matter, in Christian worship, according to this pathology; all else is adiaphora. The arrangement of the space or worship environment. The posture, position, and gesture of worship leaders. The music. The books and candles and vessels and vestments.
- 6 And since words alone are what matter in worship, according to this sectarianism, any concern with any of these other non-verbal elements in the experience must be dismissed, out-of-hand, as "anglo-catholic pedantry". In spite of their being persuasive Media of Meaning.

7 To concern ourselves with the non-verbal elements in worship, that is, in this view, is to betray an un-wholesome (and even un-Evangelical!) "catholic" bias.

8 In my experience, there is almost no possibility of a persuasive answer to these sectarians. Word reductionists, as I have known them, are notoriously difficult to convert to a more catholic wholeness, in theology or practice.

9 To remain seated for worship, according to the word reductionists, is simply a self-evident witness to the primacy of the Word. It is to signal one's disdain for any other human language than the language of speech, of words, of verbalizing.

10 Of course, it is also to signal a contempt for -- or at the least, a misunderstanding of -- the First Article of the Creed. Word reductionists, that is, lack a coherent doctrine of Creation. They are, in effect, unitarians of the Second Person.

11 Lest I be misunderstood, let me recall that there are, indeed, three occasions in Christian worship when sitting is appropriate: 1) when listening to the reading of scripture; 2) when listening to the preaching of a sermon; and 3) when meditating, as during the singing of a psalm between the Lessons in Holy Communion, or during the singing of a hymn during reception of the Communion.

12 When to stand and when to sit? Read the rubrics! Evangelical Lutheran Worship (ELW), our current Lutheran worship resource, and its predecessor, Lutheran Book of Worship (LBW) are both the envy of many another denomination in their splendid graphic design, with rubrics not only printed in red, but, in LBW, numbered as well! And if you're using an experimental rite, such as the Marty Haugen Matins or Vespers or Eucharist, use the ELW or LBW rubrics as model.

13 Carelessness with rubrics is an unfortunate corollary of word-reductionist piety.

14 In refutation of "couch-potato prayers," let me cite FIVE good reasons for standing, not sitting, for worship. I will not convert, I am convinced, any "word reductionist" listening in. But it's worth a try.

15 Aside: There are always THREE GOOD REASONS for doing anything in worship. A) The practical or functional reason. Example: Candles can light the page for worship leaders in a power outage. B) The phenomenological or pedagogical or symbolic reason. Example: Candles have been since earliest days a symbol for Christ the Light of the World. Standing at worship has three such reasons. And finally C) the historic reason. Example: Candles have been used in worship since pre-Christian times.

16 The FIRST good reason for standing -- standing to sing, standing to pray, standing to take your part in ritual responses -- is simply functional, practical. You sing better and speak better in a standing posture. You are more totally engaged in your role in worship as the primary voice of praise in what is, after all, "the peoples' work". Any lecturer, any dancer, any singer, would despair of the kind of "couch-potato praise" I am criticizing here.

17 The SECOND reason for standing arises out of one of three phenomenological or pedagogical observations. For a body of people to remain seated while a single figure stands is to model, in worship, the unfortunate "audience-performer" distinctions that Kierkegaard warned of long ago.

18 It is to deny, in our posture, the Reformation conviction about the priesthood of all believers, where the people join the leader in prayer, in POSTURE as well as words. For the people to sit while a leader stands is to model instead the theatre, or concert hall, or lecture hall: "audience" here, "performers" there. That model is disastrous in Christian worship. In worship we are all "on stage," the people as surely as worship leaders.

19 The THIRD reason for standing is also phenomenological and pedagogical. With our cousins the Jews, we stand to pray and praise in an attempt to model the conviction that we have been made in the image of God.

20 To be sure, there will be some in our assemblies who cannot stand, for obvious reasons: the handicapped, the aged and infirm, the arthritic, the parent with wiggly children.

21 But the rest of us -- and we are, each of us, only temporarily able-bodied, as a friend points out; gravity gets us all, sooner or later! -- the rest of us stand, to model the imago dei.

22 And -- still a FOURTH argument for standing and yet a third phenomenological / pedagogical observation -- we stand also to model the Resurrection. It is no accident that the Greek word for resurrection is anastasia: the "standing up again" of Christ. So also the German word auferstehung. When we stand for prayer and praise, we are modeling the resurrection posture of the Risen Christ, and our own resurrection posture.

23 The FIFTH and final reason: the historic reason to stand for prayer: Your grandma did. So did grandpa. So did Martin Luther. So did Francis of Assisi. So did Augustine of Hippo. That's good enough historic precedent for me!

24 Can we rid our worshiping assemblies of "couch-potato praise" and "couch-potato prayer"? I'm not betting on it happening soon, granting its tenacity in our seminaries. But it's worth mobilizing all our energies in the effort.

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