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THE OXFORD MOVEMENT

- 1 I'm not a church historian, but what I remember from my Seminary days was something like this.
- 2 In the Mid Nineteenth Century, Lutheran pastor and theologian Samuel Simon Schmucker decided that the Lutheran experience in the New World demanded a truly different church.
- 3 Accordingly, he proposed a radical re-ordering of the Lutheran Sunday Service into a form more congenial to Americans at the time. More Methodist. More like the Presbyterians or even Pentecostals. More Neo-Revivalist. He had little enthusiasm for the Mass, Holy Communion, The Eucharist, The Lord's Supper.
- 4 His son, Beale Melancthon Schmucker, also a Lutheran pastor and theologian, took the opposite view. He respected the historic church traditions, and sought to reclaim them from the dustbin of history.
- 5 A similar movement could be seen among Anglicans in the Mid-Nineteenth Century, especially in the British Isles. Alarmed by theologians and others among the population who embraced the newly popular science and technology, they rebelled against science and even against the gifts of the Enlightenment.
- 6 They came to be called the Oxford Movement, seeking to reject modernism and restore the church to its days of ancient splendour.
- 7 For these worthies in the Oxford Movement, the Middle Ages became for them the Age of Faith, and they were traditionalists. Romantics, even. They offered one splendid gift to the church universal – and two terrible consequences.
- 8 The chief gift – the on-going gift – of the Oxford Movement was their respect for the ancient tradition of the church. They attempted to restore the Holy Communion to its rightful place in the life of believers. For this we can only thank them. Profoundly.
- 9 But they were Romantics as well. So they left us two terrible negative consequences.

10 Because, for the Oxford Movement, the Middle Ages was the Age of Faith, church architecture, in their view, should emulate the High Gothic of those benighted days. Neo-Gothic churches sprang up in every suburban subdivision. Long narrow naves, elevated chancels, divided choir, east wall altar. “Two room” spaces – nave and chancel – with their unmistakable signal, “Laity Keep Out!” Hierarchy in stone!

11 Not till the splendid reforms of the Second Vatican Council (1963) was this tragedy corrected – among Roman Catholics, at least. Most Protestants to this day still flounder under the mistaken notion that a Neo Gothic building is what a church should look like.

12 For what it is worth, both Luther and Calvin rejected the “two room space” model for church architecture. Only Calvin actually did something about it, pulling the altar away from the east wall and allowing the Presider to preside “versus populum”. Luther was apparently too busy with hymns and liturgical reforms to address the problems of church architecture. But he was sympathetic to making changes.

13 And today, we are struggling to deal with the disastrous consequences of the Oxford Movement’s view of worship space.

14 What’s wrong with “two room” spaces? Three things.

15 First, they are highly hierarchical. The Greek means “priests first”, and that is the unmistakable message they send. The chancel belongs to the ordained.

16 Second, two room spaces recall a theatre. The audience sits passively in the nave, the leaders perform in the chancel. Disastrous for worship, where the people presumably join the presider in praise. When you walk in a church door, you should feel invited “on stage.” Your voice, the peoples’ voice, is the most important in Christian worship. Worship leaders are prompters to the people’s praise.

17 Third, two room worship spaces discourage congregational participation. All you see, sitting in the nave, are the backs of people’s heads. No good for building a sense of community.

18 The last disastrous consequence of the Oxford Movement’s fixation on the Middle Ages: Tudor English. We are only now recovering from its cultural distancing.

19 Among Lutherans, it was only with the Lutheran Book of Worship (1979!) that we in North America finally gave up on “thees” and “thous”. Six generations at least until Lutherans in North America finally began to speak in contemporary English.

20 Let’s respectfully thank the Oxford Movement for its chief gift to us, the Holy Communion, Eucharist, Mass, Lord’s Supper. But let us also firmly repudiate their architectural and linguistic prejudices.

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