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PRE LITERATE WORSHIP PRE DIGITAL WORSHIP

- 1 I've made this case before. But it bears repeating. Christian worship is not only pre-literate. It is also pre-electronic, pre-digital.
- 2 I learned this 65 years ago in Seminary. My professor of worship in those days was George Rise Seltzer, an enormously cultured person, with a treasure trove of opinions about worship which he willingly shared with all who would listen.
- 3 I gladly listened, taking almost every course he offered. Sadly, he never wrote a book.
- 4 He was largely ignored, or worse, indulged, made fun of, by the rest of the student body, and even by other faculty. I and a few other students became his acolytes.
- 5 But I will never forget his wisdom. Yes, I'd call it that. He had many words to say about worship that resonate today. That should be heard and heeded today.
- 6 Among his opinions was this one: Christian worship should be pre-literate. NOBODY, except worship leaders, should be expected to read. ANYTHING.
- 7 This opinion is widely ignored, today, as in 1955. Worshipers are often greeted, when they enter a church, with paragraphs of unfamiliar prose or poetry that they are expected to read aloud in order to participate fully. A worshiping congregation is assumed to be literate.
- 8 That may be true enough, in many cases. But more and more these days, we cannot assume that.
- 9 The aged with poor eyesight. Little kids who haven't yet learned to read. The recent emigrant, who may be fully literate, but in a language other than English. And the functionally illiterate – as many as ten percent of some urban congregations. They can read the traffic signs and the cereal box, but that's the extent of their English literacy. ALL THESE we freeze out, by insisting that people read, in our assemblies, when they come to worship.
- 10 To maintain that Christian worship should be pre-literate is a distinctly minority opinion, these days – as in 1955.

11 But I'll stick with it. Only worship leaders need be literate in English. We pay them for it. We can expect it. But worship should be designed and led in such a way that literacy in English is not necessary, in the assembly. In the very best of circumstances, even hymns are lined out, from a leader in front.

12 Christian worship in many African communities is enormously vigorous and engaging, And they have no hymn books or worship guides.

13 Now I will maintain that the identical principle applies with electronic and digital media. High technology, with its projectors and screens and speaker boxes and microphones, has no place in Christian worship. See Essay 193 above.

14 In that Essay, I offered four good reasons why. Recapitulating from Essay 193:

15 FIRST: High Tech reinforces the perception that worship is entertainment. We have trained ourselves to expect the leaders, the people up front – pastor, assistant pastor, lectors, choir – to entertain us. Or instruct us. Or even inspire us.

16 There's little sense of what Kierkegaard warned us of, long ago. That everyone coming in the door on Sunday morning is invited on stage. We ALL participate in worship. It's not audience here in the nave, and leaders there in the chancel. Even our church architecture betrays us.

17 Of course, leaders of worship and lectors must take the time to learn how to speak in public. How to project the voice.

18 SECOND: High Tech presents us with the Virtual, not the Real. Even an amplified human voice is not real. It's virtual. It's fraudulent. A phoney. I want the real in my worship. "Any parish church that needs a PA system is too big..."

19 Why do you suppose people get all teary-eyed at a Christmas Eve Candlelight Carol Service? Because perhaps for the first time in church, they are brought face to face with Primary Experience. We must not cheat people from living through that experience.

20 THIRD: There are three inescapable problems with High Tech:

21 Undependable power source. What happens when the electric power fails? City wide? Locally?

22 Undependable equipment: What happens when the equipment fails? "Never trust anything you have to plug in..."

23 Undependable human operators. What happens when the operator of the equipment makes a mistake? Falls asleep? Has a heart attack? Is simply poorly prepared?

24 I have NEVER attended a High Tech worship service where at least one of these three items has not failed.

25 FOURTH and finally: Screens, speaker boxes, microphones – all of these distract from the Four Irreplaceable Signs in Christian worship: Font, Ambo, Table and Sedelia. Moving images on a screen are especially seductive.

26 All of these opinions are still today pretty much minority judgements. But I am sure they will become more and more widely appreciated as the years go by.

27 Don't get me wrong. High Tech has its rightful place. I'm wearing at the moment a pair of hideously expensive hearing aids, that direct my ringing phone directly to my ears. They're very handy.

28 Right now, we're living in the Digital Age. I guess I had better get used to it.

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