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WW '72: CHAPTER 3 (CONTINUED) THE TRADITION: WHO NEEDS IT?

G. K. Chesterton has argued that having a Tradition provides you with a kind of trans-generational **DEMOCRACY**. When you honour a Tradition, that is, you give grandma and grandpa a vote in the decisions you must make today. Not the only vote, not the deciding vote, but a voice and vote nevertheless in the deliberations you're facing today. You're not alone. You've got some helpful precedence.

So let's turn to the Tradition itself for whatever guidance we can find there for contemporary questions about our worship life. As I note in the paragraphs above ([Essay 96](#)), there's a kind of **HIERARCHY** in our Tradition, with each set of judgements standing in priority above the ones below. These judgements are six in number. In priority order of importance they are: III) Biblical, IV) Catholic, V) Confessional, VI) National / Synodical, VII) Parochial, and VIII) Personal.

III. OUR TRADITION: IT IS BIBLICAL

Our tradition is, first and foremost, a **BIBLICAL** tradition; It shares the history and the hopes of Israel. (Of course, it is also broadly human; It shares the *humanum* with all the races and creeds of humankind. And indeed it partakes with the whole created order in the Original Blessing pronounced at the creation.) But more specifically, it holds in common with the Jews the Covenant made with Abraham and Sarah, and with other Christians the New Covenant in Christ. There are several implications of this for contemporary worship.



First, the fact that our tradition is a Biblical one suggests an important invariable: The content, the referent, in our worship will always be the saving activity of God in establishing a community-of-love among all people through the **PROMISES** to Israel, made manifest in Jesus Christ. If our worship is to be Biblical, it will include encounter with the God made know in scripture; It will include recollection and participation, by word or action, in the event of Israel and of Jesus of Nazareth.

To maintain that our worship should be Biblical is to raise the issue of the **JEWISHNESS** of Christian faith, among other things. We have a good deal of homework to do in this area, it seems to me, including a re-examination of old forms as well as a critical evaluation of the new. The historic collects and prayers, for example are often more Greek than Hebrew in spirit.



Another implication of our Biblical Tradition will be recovery of the relationship between worship and **ETHICS**, worship and life. With its emphasis on individual sense-experience and subjective inwardness, contemporary spirituality runs a real risk of withdrawing into mysticism and even magic or superstition that has little relation to the demands and decisions of human life. We must always remember that the religion of Israel includes bells, cymbals, dance, incense and song, yes; But it also includes justice for the oppressed, food for the hungry, restoration for the dispossessed and good news for the poor.

There are other implications of this aspect of our Tradition: (1) a recovery of worship as **VICARIOUSNESS**, wherein I dare to stand and to serve on behalf on others who cannot or will not stand and serve; (2) the recovery of worship as work — as one's joyful duty, the beginning of one's service in the world of which one's vocation Monday-through-Friday is an extension; (3) and so on. I leave them to you to discover and elaborate.

IV. OUR TRADITION: IT IS CATHOLIC

To admit that our tradition is **CATHOLIC** is to say, in other words, that it is whole, integral, ecumenical, universal, non-sectarian, Trinitarian. I take all these terms as loosely synonymous, mutually defining one another. Our Tradition is catholic — small “c” — in that it speaks through the witness of the pre-Reformation Teachers of the Church, male and female, as well as through the historic and contemporary ecumenical consensus. There is a *catholic* witness in the

Tradition, which stands in judgement over against all the churches (including the *Roman Catholic*)!

One implication of this canon of catholicity is the question mark it places alongside the Protestant tradition (of the past two hundred years) which **SUBSTITUTES** a kind of Morning Prayer or Service of the Word — or, worse yet, a high-tech revival meeting! — for the Holy Communion as the chief weekly worship of the Church. Are Protestants “sectarian” — non-catholic, non-ecumenical — in not offering the Holy Communion each Sunday as Standard Operating Procedure? My answer would be yes: That Protestant tradition is indefensibly sectarian — albeit historically understandable. And the current ecumenical consensus expressed, for instance, in the volume *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* of the World Council of Churches seems to concur in that judgement.



As for the Holy Communion itself, the catholic or ecumenical consensus also provides us with some fundamentals in **RITE** and ceremony. The almost-universal experience of the Church in the past two thousand years suggests, for instance, that the Communion involves a meeting in both Word and Action. The Word has always included a recollection of God’s saving activity in the history of Israel and of Jesus Christ, especially his death and resurrection. The Action has always included participation in a common meal of bread and wine — at least bread and wine — during which these elements were distributed in a four-fold action: offered up to be Taken into the embrace of God; Blessed, that is, set aside with a prayer of thanks; Broken and poured out; and Given, that is distributed as food for the faithful. This four-fold action is itself a proclamation-in-enactment of the Lord’s death, “until he comes”, and it was understood as both participation in and anticipation of the fulness of God’s victories at the End of the Age, when “many shall come from the east and the west” to sit at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Sarah, Miriam, Mary and Jesus in the Dominion of God. More of this “shape of the liturgy” in Chapter Six.

There are other implications of this standard of catholicity as it applies to worship. For example, in what sense are Lutherans **SECTARIAN** in their particular theological bias? Or Calvinists? I leave it for you to elaborate on these implications.

V. OUR TRADITION: IT IS CONFESSIONAL

Perhaps in the hierarchy of values that the Tradition offers to us, the Biblical and

catholic levels are most important. Nevertheless, there is no need to apologize for **CONFSSIONAL** gifts and insights. Diversity of Confessional opinion can become a scandal in disunity. But it doesn't need to be that way.

For instance (I have mentioned it before), I believe there is a discernable **DIFFERENCE** between "catholic" and "Protestant" views of the secular, expressed in the formula that the Finite can "contain" the Infinite. (See [Essay 92](#), page 3, above.) When Lutherans (or anybody else!) affirm this classic "catholic" formula, they express at least two convictions about the so-called secular world; If they reject this affirmation, they raise questions against these two convictions.

The first conviction is a generally **POSITIVE** attitude toward the culture, the "finite". That is, this conviction recognizes and, yes, celebrates "sacramental" possibilities, so to speak, in the family, in government, in education, in the arts, in all the structures of culture. To apply this classic and Confessional conviction to worship, for example, is to respect (and to take delight in!) the various arts as vehicles for the Word — music, architecture, vestments, gestures, symbols — all of which the Conservative (Lutheran) Reformation retained. Now that is A Good Thing in my "Confessional" view. This respect (and delight!) is lacking in many "Protestant" traditions.



Many "Protestant" churches, that is — to use two twenty-dollar words — have a strongly **APOPHATIC** suspicion of signs, symbols, and ceremonies in worship. The Lutheran Confessions, in contrast, hold a more "catholic" and kataphatic view — a significantly more sympathetic appreciation of the role of the arts in worship as bearers of the Word.

The second conviction characteristic of this Confessional (and "catholic") affirmation is a respect for the relative **AUTONOMY** of the secular. According to this view, the Church and its ministries need not serve as sponsor, guardian, or legitimator of the secular. The culture can, in a sense, go its own way and, for that matter, teach the Church a thing or two. See *Joel 2:28-29*. It is at this point where the Principle of *Mana* — Respecting the Gifts of the Gifted — takes on a Confessional coloration.

VI. OUR TRADITION: IT IS NATIONAL / SYNODICAL

I mention this as one of our loyalties because there is a significant movement in society today, not least in the Church itself, which despises all **INSTITUTIONAL**

forms and structures as unnecessary, or as actually apostate. I can sympathize with the criticism; I believe we have much homework to do with regard to the Church's institutional structures. But let me speak a word in defense of the Church as institution. It's part of my argument here that the eternal Word assumes the flesh of "religion", and that flesh includes organizational forms as well as liturgical, theological and ethical forms. Incarnation, therefore, implies institution, if we are to be faithful to the Biblical witness.

VII. OUR TRADITION: IT IS PAROCHIAL

Our tradition is parochial. Your congregation has its own **PARISH** history, different and distinctive from other parish histories. And insensitivity to parish history is a common failing among young ministers who, for example, will often rush into a new situation and attempt to make sweeping changes in worship practice within the first two months. That's not only bad manners; it's also poor parish management.

One implication of this fact is the need for mechanisms of **FEEDBACK** between parish leaders and people. We must have the courage to allow people to disagree with one another. And to provide opportunities for them to express those differences, frankly, openly, and without rancor.

VIII. OUR TRADITION: IT IS PERSONAL

Here is the lowest level of our loyalties: the personal. Our Tradition also includes the witness of **YOUR LIFE** and history. That should be self-evident; It is not always. It is a wise and gifted leader who can bring out the individual contribution for the good of the group, the personal *charismata* which represent the irreplaceable person. The Apostle enjoins you to "present your body as living sacrifice." That personal gift, however mean or meager, must never be despised. In the words of Willy Loman's wife, "Attention must be paid."



Before we leave the Tradition, and its six splendid standards, I want to lift up four other **INSIGHTS** from a more recent study of worship undertaken by the Lutheran World

Federation. The study, an international survey of Lutheran worship pieties and practices, concludes with four striking affirmations. Christian worship at its best will always exhibit these four qualities: 1) It will be en-culturated, 2) It will be counter-cultural, 3) It will be trans-cultural, and 4) It will be cross-cultural.

1) Christian worship will always be **EN-CULTURATED**; It will be firmly anchored in its unique surrounding social setting. There are compelling reasons, to be sure, for an alternative argument — for, say, a Mass invariably in the Latin language, always and in every place predictably and unalterably the same. You could argue that its universality gives the Latin Mass an advantage over any vernacular version of the same. But in a vernacular Mass, the virtues of comprehension, understanding, and accessibility can be said to “trump” whatever virtues the old Latin Mass presumably possessed. And more than language is at stake when we argue, as I would, for en-culturated worship forms. Also at issue are the singular gestures, symbols, and cultural assumptions of each specific social setting where faith finds itself.

2) At the same time, Christian worship will not simply “baptize” its surrounding social setting. Instead, it will also be actively **COUNTER-CULTURAL**. Worship, to be true to itself and to its Tradition, will offer a critique, a critical appraisal — a judgement even — against its own cultural context. Not everything in any specific society can be said to be God-pleasing. . Surely we want a liturgy that will, when necessary, turn its own world upside-down. So there will be an element of cultural subversion visible every time a Christian congregation gathers. A wise church musician friend maintains, for example, that for an assembly of North Americans simply to sing hymns together in worship represents a counter-cultural witness. (*Nobody* in our world sings anymore in a corporate setting! In the privacy of your own home, perhaps, in the shower. But in an assembly with others? Never!)



3) Faithful worship further will be **TRANS-CULTURAL**. It will span cultures in space and even aeons in time. The ancient Hebrew terms “Alleluia” (“Praise to the Lord!”) and “Amen” (“So be it!”) are trans-cultural examples out of our worship texts. So is the use of wine in Holy Communion. It is wine — not grape juice or coffee or *Gatorade* — that provides our trans-cultural link with the Jewish ritual meal Jesus observed with his followers. See [Essay 26](#) above. And the historic communion vestments — alb, stole, and chasuble — provide a trans-cultural visual link with our Apostolic past. (Says a pastor-friend: “When I put on these vestments, I am two thousand years old!”) Such trans-cultural references in our worship are too precious to lose. Or to ignore.

4) Finally, Christian worship will exhibit **CROSS-CULTURAL** aspects. Even within our own era, we’ll want to know and to appropriate to ourselves the experience of Christians in other cultures, in other social settings. You’re living, faithful reader, in a Golden Age of Hymnody. Current hymn collections feature songs and hymns from an incredible variety of sources: African, Hispanic, Asian tunes and texts find their place alongside

German and Scandinavian chorales and English folk tunes and pre-Medieval plainsong. And magnificent new hymns — texts and tunes — are being written today at a Spirit-inspired speed. Never before in the Church's long history have Christian people had access to such a wealth of glorious hymnody. Christian congregations today are being cheated if they're exposed to only a paltry handful of *PowerPoint*-projected "praise choruses".

Well. Next time: What's New? What makes a worship form "contemporary"?

