

## "DOXOLOGY TODAY"

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is the title of an address to clergy the burden of which is that today, elevating praise from creature to Creator requires **heavy-lifting**, as was true of the 16th-c. theocentric (God-centered) Reformation vs. the anthropocentric (man-centered) Renaissance. As by the law of physical gravity human bodies as they age sag toward the earth & become baggier & shorter, so by the law of cultural gravity a tradition's youthful spiritual vigor welling up from praise of the divine declines, as the tradition ages, into God-amnesiac praise of the human. This decline, this saging from liturgy (true worship) into idolatry (false worship), is arrestable, else this address, which I intend as doxology (praise of God), would be only a dirge.

Of the many possible biblical texts about this sag, let's think on this one, Ro.1.20-23 NRSV:

Ever since the creation of the world,...[God's] eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse; for though they knew God, they did not **honor** him as God or **give thanks** to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools; and they exchanged the **glory** of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being....

1 During the restoration of Michelangelo's frescoes in the Sistine Chapel, I made two startling discoveries. First, the uncleaned panels seemed more religious; second, in the ceiling center, Adam was more interesting than God, who is less meticulously drafted & more captive to his environment. As I stood there staring in the dim light, the two impressions converged into one thought. I was seeing the essence of the Renaissance, that neopagan humanistic sag from Creator to creature, from Savior to self-sufficient modern man. Though all the paintings were religious in subject, all were secular in spirit! The building was long before built for the praise of God: its interior decoration praised, honored, glorified man in his-&-her physical beauty & self-confident bearing. To that supreme esthetic master of the Renaissance, Michelangelo, Adam was indeed more interesting than God. And the uncleaned pictures, because their religious subject matter obscured the brushstrokes celebrating humanity rather than deity, did indeed strike me as more religious.

2 Not that the Renaissance was no advance in human development & thus indirectly in true doxology, the praise of God. "Renaissance" is French for "rebirth": in Europe's 14th-17th cs., art, literature, & learning were "born again" as a transition from the medieval to the modern world. The Gutenberg revolution, the printing press, enabled the first printing of the Greek NT, which Erasmus (d.1536) brought out the year before Luther (d. 10 years later) started the Reformation by nailing his debate challenge to a Wittenberg church door, which was eight years before his German translation of Erasmus' Greek NT was printed & published. Meanwhile Michelangelo (1475-1564) was painting & sculpting his humanistic heart out in Rome, whose strident humanism & moral corruption had revulsed the young Luther.

3 I remind you of the thesis of this address, which is that "today, elevating praise from creature to Creator requires **heavy-lifting**, as was true of the Reformation vs. the Renaissance." Bear with me for one more reference to that crucial early 16th c. Two Augustinian monks became symbols of the divide--Erasmus, of the Renaissance; Luther, of the Reformation. Praise accrues to the party who is viewed as free. For E., that was man, as in his 1524 *De libro arbitrio* (ON [HUMAN] FREE WILL). For L., that was God (with man's freedom only derivative & secondary), so he immediately attacked E. with *De servo arbitrio* (ON [HUMAN] WILL [AS] BOUND [by sin & finitude]). The Ren. focus was on humanity & its freedom to flower in knowledge & creativity: the Ref. focus was on deity, whose grace in Jesus Christ the Lord our bound wills need for the regenerate freedom to thank & praise God &, in spite of our finite limits, live lives of unlimited doxology, "man's chief end" as the Westminster Confession was to put it a century later, being "to glorify God and enjoy him forever." In our biblical reference (above), note that the question is who gets the "glory," the praise, "the immortal God" or "images" of creatures?

4 Now we've arrived at the subthesis of this talk, which is this: *The anti-God forces we American Christians face today make especially **heavy-lifting** the centering of our attention & lives in the praise of God, & we must be--for our selves, our children, our children's children, & one another--as aggressive about it as our spiritual enemies, the secular humanists, are against it.* The conservative Christians are that aggressive; the mainline churches have been dying off, one by one, because we are behaving with the same mild self-assurance as we were able to get away with when the surrounding/informing culture was supportive of, or at least neutral toward, the Christian witness & mission. *Mainliners have suffered a loss of nerve as well as of faith, & the Spirit is calling us to recover "the love you had at first" (Rev.2.4, of "the church in Ephesus"). What this will require is the subject of Craigville Theological Colloquy XI, titled "the Church Confident," July 18-22.*

5 You can make your own list of evidences of our culture's **downward drift**, sag, into **militant atheism**. The deliberate godlessness of our public schools is philosophical (based on the secularistic claim that religion is private, optional, & unnecessary to the good life of humanistic "values" replacing theistic "virtues"), not just pragmatic (from the alleged unmanageability of allowing "sectarian" teaching). The media, controlled by graduates of our public schools & secularistic higher education, delight in bad-pressing religion & otherwise avoiding it. Take eg what happened to C.S.Lewis & Joy Davidman under atheist Rich. Attenborough in the 1993 "Shadowlands" (in contrast to the 1985 version, which I saw three days after seeing the 1993 version). R.A. has Lewis lose his religion at film's end (instead of what he did, ~~viz~~ ~~make~~ a deeper advance into Christian faith); & he has Davidman thinking of Lewis in her last words. Actually, her last words were thinking not of man but of God: "I am at peace with God." But the atheist film-direction has these as her last words: "You [Lewis, not God] have made me happy." How does that historical distortion grab you? Are you cynical ("What can you expect?"), or sad ("That's the way it is"), or--as I am--angry that (1) Lewis' & Davidman's witness to God is obliterated & (2) the public is, by distortion, deprived of their witness & (3) God is not glorified, in fulfilment of the Lord's Prayer's first petition?...Another instance in the media, this time book-publishing: A Knopf book I edited ended with "Praise be to God!" But when the book was published, "to God" was dropped, leaving the nonsensical "Praise be!" It was an art book, & the author & I intended that the only reference to God be the book's climax. That truncated climax can serve as a metaphor for our truncated, God-eliminated culture.

6 Christians who go to public **worship** for the right reason do so so Somebody can get something out of it, & that Somebody is not you. Somebody wants you to do the **heavy-lifting** of your spirit off centering in its self-concerns to centering in God, who is the center, all other centers being distracting & damning illusions--& to centering in Jesus Christ, whom we Christians celebrate as the center of history & of human hope. When you're honest & authentic, you go to church so that God will get something out of it, something out of you, namely praise. That basic truth is implied, where not stated, in all liturgies with their praises, prayers, scriptures, & hymns. Why do we even have to state it? Because multitudes absent themselves from public worship because "I don't get anything out of it" or "I'm waiting till they get a new minister; maybe I'll get something out of it then." The guilt is not only in the absentees; it's also in churches that "run" their worships primarily for the people (with consequent emphasis on "performance values") rather than for God (whose praise, doxology, is worship's reason for being).

7 But you're not going to do that heavy-lifting on Sunday if you've not been doing it during the week in practicing the presence of God, doing "whatever you do,...for the glory of God" (1Cor.10.31 NRSV), "constantly giving thanks to God" (1Thes.2.13), "pray[ing] without ceasing" (5.17), "rejoic[ing] always" (vs.16), "abstain[ing] from every form of evil" (vs.22), speaking up for what you most centrally-deeply believe, siding with the needy & risking action for needed change, daily engaging in "holy reading" (mainly the Bible) with meditation, praise, & prayer, practicing grace at all meals at home or away from home. Pray for Tonya & Nancy, don't just lap up the gossip about them! Be a neoPuritan!