

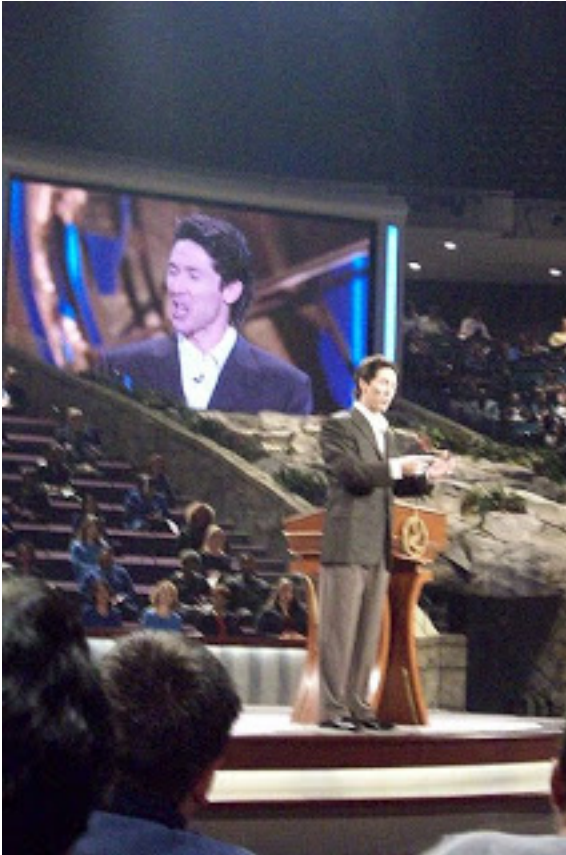
The God Show

(source: "Retro-Church" blog)

One of the things Retro-churches have going for them is that they avoid the God Show. This more than makes up for the fact that they don't have Starbucks in the narthex. The God Show, of course, is liturgitainment: a certain packaging of Christian worship to make it look more like something you'd see on TV and less like, well ... Christian worship.

Now, the God Show is not confined to mega-rock-n-roll churches, though that is perhaps where it really comes into its own. I once saw the God Show in a rural Baptist church with perhaps thirty people in attendance (and though there wasn't rock-n-roll, there was a sort of anemic bluegrass). I once saw the God Show at a Roman Catholic mass, though, for reasons I'll go into in [a later post](#), it's harder to pull off the God Show in a Roman Catholic context.

The God Show starts with the idea that people need information about God, which, of course, is absolutely true. Then it moves on to the idea that most people are not really up to getting the sort of information that, say, St. Paul has to offer, at least not in the terms in which St. Paul offers it. When people come to church, the reasoning seems to go, they want a continuation of the normal way in which they get information: chopped up, blended into mush, repackaged in sound bites and spruced up with music and graphics



What Jerry Springer did for coverage of inter-personal issues, what *The Weekly World News* does for in-depth reporting (remember Bat Boy?) -- this is what the God Show does for Christian worship and instruction. Since many churches don't really distinguish between worship and instruction, the God Show can be used to kill two birds with one stone. The elements of worship and instruction can be blended up together and pushed through a massive sound system and onto a large screen. Don't just sing: follow the band onstage just like concertgoers do. Get into the hype. Dance. Wave banners. Don't just listen to a sermon: follow along with the PowerPoint presentation, and with the presenter as he paces up and down the stage, freed from a podium or pulpit because of his wireless mic.

The stage is, in fact, one of the most telling elements of the God Show. Christian churches used to be dominated by altars of one kind or another (even the Baptist church I grew up in had one, front and center). Many of these altars had the words "This Do In Remembrance of Me", or something similar, inscribed across the front. (It's a topic for another day to discuss the interesting and ironic fact that most churches in which there are altars saying "This Do In Remembrance of Me" seldom "Do" the "This".) The altar was a

sort of signifier that what was about to be undertaken was a devotional action, and that sacrifice was involved.

The stage has obliterated this signpost of devotional action, this reminder of sacrifice, and has replaced it with a presenter or presenters and a band. These people are now the center of attention, and the concentration is upon what they're doing and saying. They may be talking about God -- they probably are -- but God is not the center of attention. God is at one remove from the people on the stage. Corporate devotional activity is a delicate balance of internal disposition and external forms which ensure the orthodoxy and efficacy of the internal act and keep it from becoming idiosyncratic -- which ensure, in short, the continuity with what C.S. Lewis called the "permanent shape of Christianity". It's very difficult to maintain an internal devotional act while there are attention-grabbing antics going on up on the stage: the acts of the actors themselves become the object of attention, and God is abstracted into the liturgitainment. Not only is individual devotion in danger under such circumstances of becoming idiosyncratic, but the entire congregation shares the danger in a corporate form -- the danger of the idiosyncrasy of the local congregation in and of itself. Perhaps this is one reason why there are tens of thousands of different denominations.

The God Show becomes, in the end, a substitute for worship and instruction rather than another form for them. The God Show encourages, not conformity with the Faith once delivered, but with the episode once shown. Change the channel on TV and you get another episode with its own story line. Walk down the street to the next God Show and the result is the same.