

The Christian Assembly

Concepts, Trends, and Leadership with Purpose

- I. General and Conceptual**
- II. Music**
- III. The Spoken Word**

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Section Three: The Spoken Word

Didactic Worship Leading

Bill, an old friend, upon participating in a worship session I led at Camp Manatawny, observed that I tend to be a “didactic worship leader.” By that I think he meant that I utilized opportunities, while standing in front of a group of 120 teenagers and misc. adults, to infuse teachings on important worship concepts. I didn’t even realize I was doing it as much as I was.

It depends on the setting and the nature of what I’m doing when I lead, but I still do this “teaching while leading worship” thing. On first consideration, it might seem inappropriate, because when worship is supposed to be occurring, a teaching “dynamic” might conflict with the more central goals of attending to the Lord.

Just thinking out loud here, having done this sort of “didactic worship leading” earlier on the very day I’m writing this. It seems to me that it is quite possible to impart valuable concepts . . . to share Kingdom truths . . . to communicate teachings about worship while leading worship. Transitions from more of a teaching statement to a worship call may (should?) be effected seamlessly. And at times, I’m convinced that there is no need for transition at all.

Sunday, I said things like this:

Immediately after John interprets Psalm 111, in which we see ample reason to praise, we’ll encourage one another to praise by speaking to one another. Then in the following song, we’ll move into worship, speaking to God directly.

Worship is about two: 1) God and 2) me (or us). The next song isn’t typically thought of as a worship song, but really, it is, because it expresses awareness of me and my need as I humbly approach the Source of fulfillment.

Although some stick-in-the-muds in my experience (basically, the ones who say things like “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it”—an expression that strikes me as a veil for the fact that it really was “broke” to begin with) don’t like song or worship leaders talking much, I think these types of comments can help to focus the hearts and minds of the gathered saints.

The Use of Scripture in the Assembly

The use of scripture must not be all about the sermon, although the sermon text—and most sermons should be based in a scriptural text, not in the sermonizer’s opinions—should at least be read in as full a context as feasible.

I would ask what you think of the fact that last Sunday, in our assembly, several scripture passages were read. This arrangement could be termed “devotional” reading of scripture. We heard from Psalm 111, John 20, John 9, Ephesians 2, Galatians 2, and Titus 3, at least. All but the Psalm were read during the Lord’s Supper. Could this relatively diverse list indicate a lack of “centering”? (I myself chose three of the above and spontaneously shared them aloud.)

How much violence can be done to God’s intention if passages are read for “devotional” purposes outside of their contexts?

Was it ill-advised to read scripture about grace during the Lord’s Supper, without regard for context? Could contextual framing (i.e., a comment such as this: “in this passage, after speaking to the divided Corinthians about _____ and referring to _____ several times in the previous section, Paul is drawing attention to _____”) actually have detracted from God’s message instead of aiding it?

I’m not entirely comfortable with my answers to these questions.

Would you mind reading the questions above a second time, answering them for yourself? And then maybe read the last question again?

I read the passages I read because I feel fairly confident that I “get” the basic, overall message of grace, in its place beside such equally weighty concepts as faith and response and sin and atonement. Not that I fully understand grace—far from it. But I was fairly confident that in stringing together three Pauline passages that dealt with grace, I would not be doing massive violence to God’s message in scripture.

But I think I would have done better if I’d felt at ease enough to take time for framing the passages contextually. And that would have more likely gotten God’s message across instead of mine.

And my main point, to bring this back ‘round, started out to be that reading scripture is a good thing and should not be confined to scriptures from which the sermon is drawn. Let God speak for Himself, quite apart from the song text or the sermon text. Don’t fall into the trap of thinking that, well, if we’ve got one “slot” for the scripture reading, it’s got to be the text the preacher is going to be preaching from.

Scripture Reading 1: Reverence

Someone with whom I had more than one run-in years ago taught me multiple valuable things, despite our differences. One of those valuable things was the notion that scripture reading deserves at least as much respect as prayer. Why is it, she asked, that most people would not dare to walk in late during a prayer, but many *would* walk in late, creating distraction, during the reading of scripture?

The point is not to downgrade public praying; rather, the word coming *from God* is to be seen as more important than the word coming *from man* and heading to God.

I still agree with you on that one, Donna.

Scripture Reading 2: Practice and Preparation

The church assembly legacy I claim is one in which “performance” is considered anathema. I believe this attitude comes, in part, from a desire to distance ourselves from the historically performance-oriented—meaning *non-participatory*—choir and organ performances of our other Protestant friends. And I understand. We low-church folks would rather appear informal or even lackadaisical than formal, polished, and interested in perfection of liturgy. However . . .

Musical leaders may need to practice difficult passages in certain songs, and oral scripture readers should practice, too! When possible, expend the effort to practice reading aloud before you read God’s message for a congregation’s benefit. You might be surprised at the meanings and special emphases that can jump off the page into people’s hearts—including yours—when you practice.

If you are reading from Philippians 2, for instance, are you emphasizing the “brotherly harmony” aspect that appears in the first four verses and reappears in the beginning of chapter four? Then read those verses with some emphasis—perhaps by slowing the pace, by increasing or decreasing your volume, or by purposefully stressing certain words.

Or is it the Messiah’s example for selfless behavior that makes the biggest contribution when you read Philippians 2 today? Then you may wish to quicken the pace for the first few verses, slowing down as you arrive at the words “Have this attitude in yourselves, which was also in Christ Jesus.”

It doesn’t take too long, really, to practice most readings. On the other hand, it may take a half-hour to find the best way to declaim Isaiah 53 or something from *Romans*.

Find a version you haven’t read before. Combine a particularly rich expression in the King James with surrounding wordings from the New International or New American. Each time you read a familiar passage, make it fresh. I think John’s blessing¹ on the (oral) readers and hearers of *Revelation* could be extended to those who hear most sections of scripture.

¹ Rev. 1:3 implies reading *aloud* when it pronounces a blessing on those who hear.

When you read scripture aloud, it is good hold the Bible in one hand, high enough to enable you to speak in the direction of the congregation (not with your head down). The other hand may be used to mark your place and/or to turn the page. Remember to speak with all confidence. You are speaking the message of God.

If you are to read aloud to the congregation, prepare for that opportunity. Give each passage at least one pass-through in private. Aloud. You may find that you want to spend more time than you thought, because of the way the words begin to speak to your heart.

Scripture Reading 3: Children and Other Inexperienced Oral Readers

There is probably a time and place for children to read scripture publicly, but not when we really need to hear the message of the reading. I also recommend reserving the lengthier passages for the more experienced, fluent readers.

Public reading skill does not always go hand in hand with silent-reading fluency. I am fairly well skilled in the former but have difficulty with the latter, for instance.

If an individual is typically unable to connect one thought to the next, and if he struggles to pronounce words in succession, he is not a good choice for congregational readings which are, after all, designed to *communicate*. Our purpose is to convey the message of the Lord, not to perform or to have some reason to compliment John or little Tommy on his improvement since last time he stammered through a reading.

It is not for the sake of entertainment, folks. It is not about the adorable little 8-year-old all dressed up with that cute little necktie on.

Part of me is sorry to come down hard on this common practice. I know ... we are Christian families, and we can surely provide some avenues for our little boys to practice leading in these ways. (At home, at least!)

There are certainly more flagrant issues with inept, apathetic adult readers than with child readers. I've probably heard scripture read 3,000 times in Sunday assemblies, whereas it's been done *purposefully* on maybe 100 of those 3,000 occasions. 3% is not good enough, and it is the adults who are wholly to blame.

Scripture Reading 4: Shorter, Please

I'm essentially six feet tall and haven't yet begun to shrink. But this is not about physical height.

I merely wanted to make a brief comment on responsive/congregational readings: They are more effective when they are short. A more expressive, meaningful purpose is attained to when a single reader (or, perhaps, a small group of gifted and/or rehearsed readers) does the longer passages, and the congregation responds with brief punctuates. Here's an example of one reasonable way to fashion a responsive reading from scripture. The bold, italicized words below would be congregational.

Shout joyfully to the Lord, all the earth.
Serve the Lord with gladness;
Come before Him with joyful singing.
Know that the Lord Himself is God;
It is He who has made us,
Not we ourselves;
We are His people and the sheep of His pasture.
Enter His gates with thanksgiving
Enter His courts with praise.
Give thanks to Him, bless His name.
For the Lord is good;
His lovingkindness is everlasting

And His faithfulness *to all generations*.

Psalm 100 (New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update (LaHabra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995))

The short lines of Psalm 100 could be arranged in several different ways for an effective congregational reading. But the longer the passage the larger group is asked to read, the more it becomes a vain recitation instead of a meaningful, devotional use of scripture. Everyone must wait for the next person, and no one can give any effective emphasis to any word such as “faithfulness” or “joyful” or “His pasture” because the emphasis is washed over in a sea of expressionless, collective voice.

Sundays at our church, we rarely, if ever, do this kind of thing, but there was a time and place that this was more the case. In isolated instances in which congregational reading does occur in my present experience, it usually diminuendos without much effect—blandness on autopilot. In an effort to get more congregational involvement (a generally good thing, in my opinion), leaders may think, subconsciously, “Let me just make all of this section congregational ... and this long section here ... etc.” But it’s not necessarily the length of the passage that draws people in. Shorter passages are better for the congregational responses.

The “Call To Worship”

A worship service is well begun if an impression of God’s overwhelming greatness and mystery along with his graciousness is conveyed, thus causing the worshiper to become lost in wonder, love and praise of God.

— Henry Sloane Coffin, *The Public Worship of God*

The “call to worship” is an interesting entity that has already begun to lose its meaning though it has only been around—in non-liturgical churches, at least—for a decade or two.

For some, the “call” is just that—a phrase spoken with enthusiasm just before worship is to begin. It might be something as simple as “Let’s all join hearts and voices as we sing a song of praise.” For others, the call to worship may have more advance thought put into it. It might be an oral reading, from Psalms or from another scripture passage, that emphasizes something about God or about our relationship to the Creator. Perhaps a devotional reading from a great writer, or a prayer of homage or adoration. Truth is, many things can serve to call the saints to attention (forgive the military imagery, but after all, we are soldiers in service of our King) as worship begins.

It amuses me (OK, sometimes it’s more annoying than amusing) when the “call to worship” occurs after the worshipping has begun. There is really no point when your church has sung “We Shall Assemble” (a sort of “call to worship” in itself) and “Holy, Holy, Holy” and *then* breaks the train of thought by having someone stand up to say “Good morning! What? I didn’t hear you out there. Now, we can do better than that. I said ‘Good morning!’ Ah, that’s better. Now ... let’s all turn in our Bibles to this morning’s “call to worship” scripture: Psalm 8. . . .”

If you choose to use a “call to worship,” let it function as it is supposed to function—to unite the saints in worship-filled thought and feeling. A “call to worship” should be functional in terms of its content, i.e., not everything that fills the place of the “Call” on the printed order of worship may actually be a call. And please do not allow any throw-away songs or prayers that are inserted as ritual actions to get the restless natives calmed down. Each statement, each prayer, each scripture should be voiced with deliberate, conscious intent, and with spiritual meaning!

The Right to Choose

I don’t often like people making decisions for me. Automatic functions I would prefer *not* to be automatic, please, include these:

whether or not to turn my car’s headlights on

whether I get hot or cold water in a public restroom, and how long the water runs when and how I greet people in the assembly of the church

Programmed, forced “greeting” times are typically well-intentioned, in my estimation, but they rarely result in anything more emotionally or spiritually valuable than a 75-second mental break from something else (that the congregation probably wasn’t all that focused on, anyway).

Aren’t there other ways to focus people’s attention on each other—which is, after all, an important facet of the assembly!—than the obligatory “turn around and shake someone’s hand next to ya” thing?

“Passing the Peace” is a regular feature in some church traditions. For the unfamiliar, this suggestion generally implies 1) looking at someone you know, 2) guiltily giggling because you know you’re supposed to be looking at someone you don’t know, and 3) saying, supposedly sincerely, “Peace of Christ.” As a sincere, believing woman said to me recently, though, “That’s just not me.” She likes to choose for herself, just as I do, and she currently opts for the personally meaningful, although more quirky, “Pieces of Christ.”

Could we simply allow for various, personal expressions instead of trying to standardize them?

Ponderings on Prayer as Worship

Typically, February is a cold, dreary, even desolate month. If you were to look outside during February, chances are that things would look pretty barren. Do you also feel *spiritually* barren when the earth is barren? It may be a good time to withdraw to God in prayer.

Amazingly enough, prayer is a neglected worship activity. (So many of our prayers tend to be of the “gimme” variety.) Why would such a thing as speaking to God in prayer be overlooked as a means of worship?

As a college student, I listened to Albert Lemmons share thoughts on prayer in a seminar. He emphasized adoration in the prayers of the Psalmists, and I have often remembered that emphasis. Expressions of love to God, of praise to Him . . . I still believe these represent the highest and best types of prayers.

If you are not familiar with the **ACTS** acronym as a model for personal and corporate prayers, you might experiment with it. Through **Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication**, we remember four very important aspects of our Godward communication.

* * *

To Whom do we pray? God, of course, is the only real “audience” for our prayers, but what is our concept of Him? The more we are able to describe aspects and attributes—His “otherness,” His majesty and greatness, His love, His holiness, and more—the richer our prayers will become.

The concept of holiness, in particular, is of consequence. Holiness is not really an inherent *quality* of God, but rather, it denotes more the idea that God is *other, separate . . . not like the familiar*. Anything we can take in and digest about God, how He communicates about Himself, and how He relates to and deals with humans, can expand our notion of Who He is.

* * *

Prayer, I would say, is primarily personal. There is some place for public praying (Jesus’ “model prayer” does use plural pronouns, implying a sense of “we”), but it stands to reason that most of our praying will be done “in the closet.”

* * *

The assembly is not the only time for worship-filled prayer. In fact, we see numerous examples of Bible characters as they worshipped God outside the formal assembly.

I've always assumed the Psalms themselves were born in times of personal worship. Certain recorded *visions*, I infer, blossomed out of personal devotion time (Daniel's prayer habit?). And Paul's excursus into praise language during development of a point (end of Eph. 3, for example) also seems to have emanated from a life of personal *proskuneo*. There are also several examples of persons who stopped to worship when they encountered the marvels of Jesus. I do think it's clear that *proskuneo* should be a part of everyday life and not confined to the assembly.

* * *

So . . . let us pray. Let us pray often. Let us pray adoringly. Let us pray in awe, recognizing that God is holy and transcendent. Let us pray humbly, knowing that we are dependent on Him. And let us pray in all the glorious comfort of His presence. *O YHVH God, we worship You. We love you. We confess that You are the only God.*

Prayer 1: Once More, With Feeling

I once thought I had figured something out: that public, spoken prayer is a human invention that has no place in Christian assemblies (or anywhere else, for that matter). It does still seem to me that there is precious little in scripture about leading others in prayer. The "proofs" that surface in support of public prayer-leading are such things as the plural pronouns in the "Lord's Prayer" (which really isn't as much "His" prayer as the John 17 one or probably others, but that's another topic). 1 Timothy 2:8 appears to imply leading prayer by speaking aloud, as well, and there are several instances of public prayers in the Old Covenant writings (Ezra, David, and others).

We might do well to provide more opportunities for private, silent prayer in assemblies, but it is not my intention to suggest that we do away with the leading of prayerful thoughts in public. No, I think public praying can be a wonderful worship avenue, when the words are spoken with purposefulness and forethought. In our church, thankfully, such is the case fairly often, but for many, I fear it is all too rare that well-thought-out prayers are heard.

Of one thing I am certain: no one benefits—not God, not the leader, and certainly not the pew-packers whose minds are supposedly being led—when virtually memorized prayers are merely recited. I once heard a new guy say he wasn't sure which Lord's Supper prayer he was supposed to lead that Sunday, so he'd memorized "all three." Really!

What is the point of having someone take 30 seconds to stride from the back of the room to the microphone to say,

Dear God, thank You for the beautiful day You've given to us. [Not a bad thing to say, but if everyone says it, every time, it feels more like a ritual than an expression of thanks.]

Lord, be with the speaker of the hour [heaven forbid that we call him by his name] that he might have a ready recollection of the things he has prepared, and may we apply these things to our lives.

Thank you for sending your Son to die on the cross for our sins. [It is high treason to recite these words ritualistically, without passion, and with no realization of their gravity.]

Lord, be with Mavis in her upcoming surgery as the doctors attend to her. [Often, these types of prayers seem to be offered in order to show awareness to the siblings more than to request aid from the Father.]

In Jesus' name, amen. [What does this expression mean, really? If we don't know, why do we say the words?]

We must do better than ritual wordings when leading the saints before the throne of God. Whenever possible, we should lead with premeditation as well as with reverence. Let us pray at least as meaningfully when attempting to lead others' minds and hearts as when we pray privately. Let us pray more than just the request list. Let us pray with awareness of His sovereignty and our subjection. Let us pray with humble perception that we can only do so because of His having opened the way. Let us pray with thankful hearts. Let us pray to adore the Lord. Let us pray to recognize His righteousness and purity. Let us pray to confess our lack of trust, our tempers, our sinful thoughts.

Let us pray. . . .

Prayer 2: Confessions of a Non-Prayer-List-Maker

I suggest that prayer lists may be hurting some of us rather than helping. I appreciate those who move in spiritually devoted minds through prayer lists and actually use them effectively, but I would still challenge this tradition.

Why do we feel we have to "announce through" the entire prayer list before taking the matters to the throne? Couldn't we just pray the things, allowing the announcing aspect to arise naturally out of the public prayings?

But wait. Then it sounds as if we're announcing things to God that He already knows. "God, please be with Jean, who goes for her gall bladder surgery Tuesday morning at 9:30 at County Hospital on Memorial Drive." That's a little silly, isn't it?

Here's an idea: maybe the announcements and prayers could be seen as one and the same, not requiring formal prayer-words, and not doubling up on the time spent with these listed items? "Jean wanted us all to know that her gall bladder surgery is Tuesday morning at 9:30 at County Hospital on Memorial Drive. We trust that God will be in the scene that morning, guiding the hands of her medical caregivers, and that He will comfort her soul." No prayer-words, per se, but the church is recognizing the Lord's sovereignty as the announcement is being made.

It could be that the prayer list items are better prayed over in private, anyway—by the prayer warriors of your church, later in the day and week.

And/or it could be that many saints were already praying in their hearts for Jean, appealing to the power of God in spirit, even while the announcement was being read. Now that would be cool.

Prayer 3: Prayer vs. Announcements, and Vice Versa

Have you heard prayers uttered as though they were really intended for the saints' minds rather than for the Father's "ears"? Prayers that are really just announcements masquerading as requests?

Lord, we ask You to be with Jim, who'll be having knee surgery to remove a bone fragment at 10:00 Tuesday morning at City General.

Is anyone really fooled by such a prayer? Sometimes I wish the person had simply said, *before* he began praying, "I want to let you know about Jim's surgery Tuesday before I include him in my prayer this morning." (Then the details are provided.)

On the other hand, have you heard announcements that could have been just as well stated as prayers, without need for doubling up? In other words, why tell the people what is going to be prayed about before you actually pray? The result is duplication . . . wasted time. Going through a prayer list, and then praying through the same prayer list, can become a mere exercise in either 1) creative re-wording or 2) vain repetition. (Let's hope it's the former.)

I am of two minds on this matter, though. Some details seem unnecessary unless they are for informational purposes. (Informative details are only needed by people, not by Deity.) Yet God

hears the heart, and if the praying heart is genuinely caught up in the medical or spiritual situation to the point that details like the time of Jim's surgery just overflow, who is to complain?

My main concern here is that we *realize what we are doing*. If the people in the pews need the information, then acknowledge the need, and give it to them in print, on the screen, or orally. (Usually, one of these methods at a time is enough; two is more than sufficient; and three borders on the ridiculous.) But don't thoughtlessly begin a prayer to God and then fill the people in on the details during the course of your supposed prayer to Deity.

The more intimate the circle, the less formal prayers can be. I mean, if Jim is there in our midst and we are all aware of the impact of his knee problems in his work day, and we know and love Jim, is it possible that God hears our expressions of concern to the brother as prayer? I am just not sure the "prayer requests" all need to be stated for the benefit of the group first, rehashed so everyone gets all the details for their "prayer lists," and then stated yet again in a more formal prayer. After the "mere" announcement, I figure God has already heard our hearts for Jim, and I would like to move on to another activity.

Maybe we need to be more comfortable with simply sharing the information in a "prayerful" mood, rather than feeling the need to 1) share with the humans and then 2) pray formally to God. Or maybe it is just my personal fixation with time constraints that makes me feel this way.

Prayer 4: Public Prayersphere (Does That Rhyme with "Shakespeare"?)

I didn't even know I had this little paperback edition of Shakespeare sonnets. Must've picked it up at a yard sale. In straightening & reorganizing around the house this summer, I came upon it and it picked it up. Anyway, according to the editor, C.S. Lewis once likened a good sonnet to a good public prayer: "the test is whether the congregation can join and make it their own."

I'm of the opinion that public prayer is greatly overemphasized in Christendom. The plural pronouns in the so-called "Lord's Prayer" (which really isn't) do seem to indicate a validity in collective prayer-thought, i.e., unison prayer-verbiage from a group of people. And 1 Corinthians 14 implies a spoken-out-loud-ness mode of prayer. But one is hard-pressed to find nearly as much example or instruction concerning public praying as about private praying. I do find that there's an art to public praying, and it's in the ear of the auditor. Personally, I'm a better oral reader than a public pray-er, so I tend to work a little harder at the latter.

Would you care for musings from my own public prayersphere? On two successive Sundays, I had opportunities to lead our group of gathered saints. First, I led what I consider the "main" prayer in our assembly. (In print, it's known as the "Adoration and Confession" prayer, and it tends to gravitate toward one or the other, depending on the intentions or inclinations of the given leader.) On that occasion I spent a couple of hours collecting and arranging thoughts in advance. My intent was to blend the notions and practices of 1) adoring God worshipfully and 2) confessing our humanness to Him. I think I failed rather decidedly. The preparation was—as usual for me—more fruitful in terms of Kingdom work than the actual spoken prayer was in the assembly. The prayer was, in one sense, pretty well constructed, but I really don't think it was very effective in bringing along other hearts before the Throne. I'm just guessing here, having heard from no one.

Then on the second Sunday, I led the "closing prayer." You know the one, if you're in my branch of Christendom—it's the prayer they usually ask the least "ept" guys to lead, because it's the least embarrassing if you mess it up. Not because of this stereotype, but more because of my own frame of mind, I opted out of advance preparation this time, figuring I could probably tie things together in a relatively brief, effective public prayer without much thought.

On the first Sunday, the Adoration and Confession prayer was theologically deeper, more polished, and more prepared. The next Sunday, the closing prayer appealed to faith examples of Hebrews 11 (from the sermon), other examples of living folks nearby, the Apostle John's particular testimony (being one who had seen and touched the risen Lord Jesus), and the experience of Jesus and Thomas, post-resurrection. All this was in less than a minute, and the closing words went something like this: "Now help us all to move from simple belief in the reality of the risen Jesus to a living, intimate trust relationship with Him as we live this week."

Prayer 5: Distant Relationships

I hate to say this, but some matters are just not appropriate in the public prayers of the gathered saints.

I know, I know—when little Alicia, the ever-so-cute daughter of the new couple in church, asks everyone to pray about her friend from school’s cousin’s friend’s turtle that died, we all smile and say “aww ...” inside. And there are times to make the Alicias of the world feel special.

But if we took time for everyone’s work associates’ relatives, there would be no time for the building up of the saints, no time for instruction, and no time for *worship* in prayer or song.

Leaders, perhaps we can seek to create opportunities for personal needs to be taken before the Lord’s throne, while still being judicious with “distant relationship” needs in corporate prayer. “These matters present real challenges for real leaders with hearts for both people and worship,” commented a deep-thinking friend.

Prayer 6: Do We Really “Need Prayer”?

Is it really *prayer* that we need?

Why are we encouraged to keep Judy “in our prayers”? It is as though prayer itself has a sort of magical power all its own. Keeping someone “in our prayers” is not the crux of the matter. No, the decisive “factor” is the *One to Whom we present the needs* sincerely and persistently. The keeping of someone “in our prayers” is sometimes offered as though “our prayers” is a holy vat of enchanted prayer elixir that somehow immerses the need, and/or the person who has the need, in mystical hope and healing. But no, it is *God*—the source of all good—Who hears our hearts’ devotion a) to others and b) to His capacity to provide.

It is not *prayer* that is the source of power. It is not *prayer* that we need when we are in spiritual trouble or when we are having heart surgery. Why speak of “prayer cover,” as though it is a murky, yet somehow divine, sort of haze . . . when we could more aptly speak of God’s might and providence?

Maybe we should call them “God lists” instead of “prayer lists”? And “matters for God” instead of “prayer requests.”

Since this topic proved to be troublesome and just a tad confusing for a saint of considerable spiritual insight and experience who read over this material in advance, please allow me to clarify. Again, I am proposing that it is not *prayer*, but **God** that we need.

I was asked, “Are you saying we shouldn’t pray *for* them, as opposed to merely presenting their needs to God while acknowledging His capacity to provide? Is that not prayer? Are you thinking we shouldn’t really ask for what we humanly want, such as healing or extended life?” No, that’s not what I meant. I think I am being a bit more simplistic than that. I am merely saying that it makes a difference whether we think the source of the power is a) prayer or b) the One who hears prayer.

It was suggested that the phrase “keeping someone in prayer” means “having prayerful thoughts about them—perhaps repeatedly.” I’ll buy that. But the expression still bothers me a little. I’m into saying things in ways that provoke minds and hearts to awareness, and I think the expression “keep John in your prayers” tends to put us to sleep instead of enlivening our spiritual senses. My interlocutor, incidentally, did agree about the “tedious, repetitive, annoying, time-consuming references to ‘remember in prayer,’ ‘keep in our prayers,’ ‘remember to pray for,’ etc.” “I think you’re right,” she admitted, “that ‘prayer requests’ is a very tired expression.”

On the other hand, a rather unconventional expression has caught my interest: “dart prayers.” In this type of praying, a simple, perhaps single thought is sent like a dart to the Father. Now I *like* that. The notion of having spiritual concerns throughout the day and sending them to God often, without preamble or pretense, is a good one. I’m all for “keeping John in my prayers” if doing so means sending a “dart prayer” to God for what I believe John needs.

In order to summarize (and at the risk of bogging down in this topic), could I suggest that you try out less common expressions such as “John needs God’s intervention” rather than “John

needs your prayers,” and “Care of the Almighty lists” instead of “prayer lists.” But John *does* need my prayers, you say; if we don’t believe that, we don’t believe prayer can change things! I say *no*: John needs God, but he doesn’t need me to ask God. He just needs God. It is a semantic difference, but an important one.

Prayer 7: Habits

I’m about to confess something that may irritate even my dearest friends. Even those who tend to look the other way and bear with the annoying or unbecoming aspects of me will likely but put off by this. And yet....

In a single, four-minute public prayer, I recently counted 43 times that the same word was repeated. **43!** Now I know Jesus prayed, “Not my will, but Yours be done” three times; I do understand that some things bear repeating. But 43 repetitions in four minutes is *careless* repetition, not thoughtful repetition.

(For those who might wish to keep watch over this ostensibly judgmental soul, please know this: since I’m a multi-tasker by nature, I affirm that I was able to pray in my heart, at least some of the time, while the repetition was occurring and I was expending energy counting instances. I affirm that the prayer was not wasted on me. I also affirm that the leader’s heart is not at issue. And yet....)

When habits take over our prayers, we need to look at what we’re doing, and why. Why do I always put something this way, or that? Why do I always address God in a particular way? Is it intentional and reverent, or habitual and meaningless? Perhaps especially in *public* praying, when the ears of other humans are involved, habitual wordings can render the prayers less effective.

Prayer 8: Closing Prayers and Readings

Let’s admit it: closing prayers can be pointless—just an opportunity to get one more man involved in “serving”/leading. For every relevant, meaningful closing prayer in my experience, I could count 20 that represented nothing but the excuse to involve someone else in the “service,” and 120 more that were mere parroted rituals that were devoid of meaning and were nearly exact repeats of what another person said during the closing prayer at last week’s assembly. (Ever wonder if certain people are assigned closing prayers with the tacit thought “What harm can he do if it’s just the closing prayer?”)

Why perpetuate this kind of thing? If you have a closing prayer, think it through. Make it meaningful. Make it a blessing, or make it a continued probing into consciences following some especially “meddling” lesson. Make it a declaration of praise, or make it an expression of the people’s solidarity as they leave the worship hall. But make it something!

Here’s one possibility for a “closing prayer”:

For the lift that came from seeing and visiting with people who encourage us, we thank You, God.

For the unanimity that emanates from caring and thinking about _____ together, we thank You, God.

For the power that comes from recognizing, in vocal praise, that you are exalted above all else, we praise You, God.

For the instruction in the area of _____, we are grateful.

Because of the blessed confidence that we have entered into your holy place, by the blood of Jesus, in resigned, vulnerable worship, we stand in humility.

For love shared and grace realized, we are indebted.

For compassion and care shown by our brothers and sisters today, we thank You.

In the experience of collective worship and the knowledge of private devotion in individual hearts, we are bolstered and encouraged.

Given the promise of Your presence this afternoon, tomorrow, and always, You

have our undying devotion.

With the believing cry of “MARANA THA!” in our souls, we say “thank you” for today and “please sustain us” for tomorrow.

If you would like to try something different, what about this: Instead of perpetuating that it always be a closing prayer that concludes the assembly, why not a reading? A word *from* God might be even more appropriate than a word *to* God as the final thing heard and meditated on collectively by the saints. I don’t recall ever experiencing a concluding scripture reading *per se*. As a fairly verbose person, I think it is sometimes rather difficult just to read the Message—even a short passage—without adding an interpretational comment, but it might be worth the effort.

Of course, the choice of a particular scripture may be significantly human: if the preacher makes the choice, it could be intended to “drive home” a final point from his humanly conceived sermon instead of truly giving God’s word full reign. But we probably can’t go too wrong by letting God have the final say in an assembly.

Expression & Emotion

Why must we subtract all the feeling and emotion from scripture when praying or reading aloud? Why not attempt to be a vehicle of *bona fide* communication when reading the Message aloud to gathered saints? No life in the eyes? No apparent interest on the part of the reader beyond that which would be expected for the reading of annual financial reports or shopping lists? Spiritually criminal.

There are different ways to exclaim, for instance. Different moods and “feels.” “Worthy is the Lamb!” may be intoned in multiple ways. Do any of these enhance your sense of expression of that particular utterance?

- ◆ As if bowing in His presence for the first time
- ◆ As if attempting to raise a saints’ worship chorus in honor of the Lamb
- ◆ As if pricked in conscience at my own unworthiness
- ◆ As if beginning a series of repetitions of the phrase
- ◆ With the knowledge that no one else is worthy (with the emphasis on the word “Lamb”)
- ◆ With deep knowledge of the fact, letting it sink in
- ◆ Emphatically, with almost equal stress on each word

It just seems thoughtless to read so many non-Leviticus passages with repressed emotion.

Clapping in the Assembly

Randall Bradley, in a long-past issue of *Worship Leader* magazine, shared some thoughts on clapping:

Applause in worship can easily present a false sense of excitement, whereas excitement in worship must be spiritually generated. Applause tends to bring attention to the messenger instead of the message . . . When applauding [an assembly or worship act], . . . one must decide, “Am I applauding the message or the gifts of the presenter(s)?”

Even for those of us who are not accustomed to worshipful presentations—preferring only activities that call for full participation of all the gathered saints—I believe the above statements are of value. Bradley continues:

If congregations do indeed applaud the message (as opposed to the messenger -bc), why is it that slow, meditative presentations receive rounding ovations less often?

The connotation of applause, when offered following acts of worship, is most often secular and has been borrowed by the church in an effort to create a theatre mentality in which the congregation cheers on the performers who do the worship, instead of allowing the congregation to do their own worship for the singular audience in worship—the ALMIGHTY GOD!

Personally, I am not against applause in the context of an assembly. I have clapped before and probably will again. In my experience, though, the applause has sometimes been appropriate and sometimes inappropriate. We should be intentional and discriminating; not all moments call for the same type of response. Bradley has another good point along these lines:

Church leaders must not overlook the response of silence in worship. Some acts of worship are too profound for verbal expression. It seems that our culture is so obsessed with chitchat that we feel compelled to comment on everything—unfortunately, we bring this mentality with us to worship.

Some believe clapping has its place in the worship/assembly context; some believe otherwise. Whichever side you find yourself on, please consider that there is more than one appropriate, worshipful response to the awe-inspiring activities in assemblies. Not every inspiring thing demands applause; neither does it all call for a shout of “praise God!” or an “amen.” I will offer Bradley’s conclusion as a final reflection here.

Worship leaders need to help congregations develop other appropriate responses, too. [They] must model sensitivity in worship that goes beyond a singular, rote response to all acts of worship. We must thereby continually seek fresh ways to restore worship to the congregation.

Bilingual Assemblies

In our increasingly diverse country, there appears to be an increasing move toward uniting in the same building Christians whose primary languages are different. For scriptural inspiration, some might look to the message and event captioned in Acts 2. Certainly, God is not a God of one ethnicity only, and Jesus “purchased for God with His blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation” (Revelation 5:9).

It bears consideration that a given assembly’s spoken word may not always be in a single language . . . however. . . .

If your congregation is, or is becoming, binlingual, I invite you to consider that it may not serve the Lord’s goals for the spoken and sung messages to be thoroughly bilingual in the assembly. Sometimes, there is a need for the same things to be said and done in two languages. Sometimes, translation from one language to another is desirable. But I suggest that it is more advantageous *not* to be overly concerned with inclusivity and “success”—as seen in crowded pews—in order to get two people groups in the same room at the same time. It is to the advantage of the people of each primary language to hear in their own language *without being distracted by the other*.

Despite the fact that many of us are interested in passively improving our language skills, if prayers and readings and welcomes and announcements are habitually, alternately spoken in one language and then the other, the result may be a disconnected series of interjections. The sense, it occurs to me, is like that of someone with Attention Deficit Disorder. Speaking for myself: I’m scatter-brained enough and have difficulty focusing at times. I find it distinctly challenging to apply my heart to a one-minute scripture reading and then to retain that focus while the scripture is subsequently read in another language that I cannot understand. Sure, I might recognize the word “sangre” in Spanish or “pardonner” or “peché” in French, but at that moment of cognizance, am I perhaps more in the world of left-brain academia than the world of informed faith-filled devotion?

For me, the benefits of bilinguality in the Christian assembly are not sufficient to counteract the auditory confusion. I suspect that those who benefit from such language-switching are those who are already more or less fluent in both languages. These people might find enhancement of meaning as they hear one language, then another they’re familiar with. I’m thinking, though, that most of us aren’t bilingual enough for the benefits to be realized.

On the other hand, on several occasions I have noted Messianic Jewish interest in a sort of lingual bounce from one language to the other. It seems to enhance meaning for those familiar with metaphors in both languages, or at least for those who've been hearing both languages for some time (maybe more for the speaker than for the audience?).

If songs are customarily sung simultaneously in two languages, or if scripture is read in two languages in sequence, it may strike the mind and soul as an exciting sort of confusion, but after the initial "wow" that stems from thinking *how great it is that our church includes these other people who speak a different language . . .* the disconnected muddle remains, and the excitement does not.

May we be inclusive, forgiving, and welcoming of other languages and ethnicities, without feeling the compulsion to be trendily bilingual.

The Invitation

Some Sundays, if I could change one thing, it would be to eliminate the "invitation" (or "altar call," if you please). In my experience, the ritualistic frequency hinders the effectiveness of God's true call.

The invitation is not always a natural outgrowth of the spoken message, and its predictable, sometimes unduly emotional appeal tends to obscure a much more important spiritual constant: that Jesus' heart is open to receive us *at all times*.

I perceive that often, the invitation actually works *against* the genuine, life-changing encounter with God that both He and His children desire. Small-group settings, as opposed to large, whole-church assemblies, would seem to be a better place for confession and accountability to begin.

I would not eliminate the invitation altogether (what?! do away with one-tenth of the paid guy's Sunday morning responsibilities?); rather, I would use it more intentionally and powerfully, though much more sparingly. The "invitation" tradition is, after all, extra-biblical and appears largely to be a tradition rooted in the American Frontier religion of the 19th century, carried forward by evangelistic conferences and related revivalism of the 20th century.

The Lord's Supper 1: Far from the Intent

My feeling is that the Lord's Supper experience in every church building assembly in which I have taken part—bar none—is far from the intention and example of Jesus and His apostles. Dignified and reverent? Maybe. We typically have no problem with at least the "dignified" part, and reverence is certainly one worthy goal. But ritualistic, ceremonious observance is *not* the intent.

In the words "ritualistic" and "ceremonious," I include some of the following common aspects of the Lord's Supper experience:

after the third song, four men rising in unison to process funereally toward the table
patterns of getting trays into each man's hand (e.g., pass two to the guy on the end, two to the guy on the other end, one to the guy on your left . . . but never let the other guy take three all at once and pass two along while keeping the other!)

"servers" that are official "leaders," functionally speaking
concern over the order of solids and liquids

In addition, the utter lack of actual *communal* experience is notable. Though the design of a typical assembly room may foster vertical communication, i.e., with the Lord (a type of communication I heartily affirm), we consistently end up looking at the backs of people's heads. And such a situation is not communal. Only in a pitifully few camp and retreat settings have I experienced horizontal aspects of communion. Pews may come from a Catholic or Protestant tradition, but they certainly do not come from Jesus.

Maybe you are one of the many who prefer to "focus on the cross" in your mind, or on scripture that deals with the crucifixion or on self-examination, or on any number of other inward or upward directions. All those are good things to do, but they are not the only viable things.

Maybe if we just stopped using the word “communion” exclusively? This term implies the horizontal aspect at least as much as it suggests the vertical.

Speaking of which . . . you do know that it is impossible to *take* communion, right? I wonder if that expression were coined when Protestantism began to rise. We were not allowed say “take the holy eucharist” any more, so we substituted, somewhere along the way, “take the communion bread and wine,” and then it was probably shortened to “take communion.”

Aside: Have you ever noticed the awkward mini-pause in prayers before the phrase “fruit of the vine”? “Bless us, Lord, as we take the bread” comes out fine, but “And now, as we partake of the . . . fruit of the vine” sounds awkward, and we can not seem to find any other acceptable expression but the outdated one. We should probably focus less on the substance being taken than on what it represents, anyway.

Siblings, we commune with one another *and* with the Lord. *Commune*. It is a verb. And communion is not something you “take.”

The Lord’s Supper 2: Central?

For centuries—depending on how you look at it, from two to twenty—many have considered the Lord’s Supper central in the Christian worship assembly. I want to probe this idea.

For me, as you might presume from reading the last section, the actual experience of communion has left me “high and dry” far more often than it has produced in me some meaningful meditation, a compelling spiritual inclination, or appreciable growth toward Jesus and His will. Note that I say the *actual* experience—not the envisioned one—is the issue.

I must admit that an inner longing continues to nag . . . something inside me wants to feel what others say they feel. In my worst moments, I suspect that many people are fooling themselves by thinking communion is really central for them. In my better, more self-probing moments, I realize my own lack of deep love for Jesus and wish I could increase the intimacy of the communion experience.

It is for no small reason that people often think of the communion activities as the core of the assembly. We have quite a persuasive legacy! Even if we set aside, for the moment, the Lord’s own words and those of his apostles, we have hundreds of years of Roman, Lutheran, etc., tradition—plus two centuries of the Supper’s biblically based pedestal in the American Restoration Movement—that come into play in our thinking and feeling about communion.

But I am much less interested in tradition and legacy than in what God wants in our observance of the Lord’s Supper. Is communion central in the heart and mind of the Lord? If so, how would we know it to be so? Probe with me, please. . . .

First, communion would appear to be central because of the priority Jesus placed on the “Last Supper.” It was no accident that the twelve reclined with their Rabbi around a table on the night he was betrayed. Along with the events of that ominous night, we should never forget the words of Jesus Himself: indicating some personal emotion, He placed a value on the communal experience of the Passover memorials simply by saying, “I’ve been wanting with my whole heart to share this experience with you , and I won’t ever get to do it again . . . not in the same sense, at least” (my loose paraphrase of Luke 22:15-16).

Next, we could certainly point to Paul’s instructions in 1 Corinthians 11—in one of two sections that flank the “love chapter.” The horizontal connections here are clear, too: Christian assemblies are where we remember Jesus’ sacrifice, where spiritual gifts are used for the “body of Christ,” and where love is to be manifest. Incidentally, the *discerning of the body* in 1 Cor. 11: 29 seems more clearly related to human brothers and sisters in the church body than to the physical body of Jesus.

Even if we had no New Covenant writings at all that dealt with the topic of the Last Supper and the believers’ perpetual remembering of the Lord through observance of a similar “meal,” we would still be compelled to place this experience on center stage in our assemblies. Clearly, our *raison d’etre* as a people is centered in Jesus’ sacrifice, and the Lord’s Supper symbolizes that sacrifice, acknowledging our identity in Him and “proclaiming His death until He comes again.”

Early church history also confirms, in large measure, the emphasis placed on the Lord's Supper. In the end, I'm likely to remain convinced that it is fitting that centuries of tradition suggest the conceptual centrality of the Lord's Supper.

Now . . . how to make it central in our current-day experience—that is an even more important subject.

The Lord's Supper 3: Weekly (Weakly?)

All Christian Connection churches served communion as a part of their worship services; but many did so only a few times a year, or when a minister happened to be present; and almost none of them placed the emphasis which Campbell did on strict observance of the Lord's Supper every week. (James Gardner, *The Christians in New England*, 102)

For as long as I can remember, I have experienced the observance of the Lord's Supper distantly. It has so rarely been the *communion* I want it to be. I have wondered if the thinking of Alexander Campbell and the vast majority of his spiritual descendants was askew on the point of weekly observance.

The Churches of Christ, Christian Churches (Independent), and Disciples of Christ have for their entire history been known for a few distinctives. Weekly communion is not exactly a distinctive, I suppose—the Romans and, presumably all the Orthodox churches do the same—but it is one hallmark of these groups collectively known as the American Restoration Movement (or, colloquially, as Campbellites). This weekly observance does not come out of thin air, but it's a weak hermeneutic that has legislated weekliness. A few points:

Jesus said, "As often as you do it, . . ." He did not say, as far as we know, "Do it each and every Sunday, and only on Sunday." In fact, the founding of what we think of as communion was on the night He was betrayed—either Wed. or Thurs., depending on how you reckon things.

Paul does imply a weekly gathering (although not a weekly collection) in 1 Cor. 16:1-2.

Luke makes mention in Acts 20 of Paul's having waited a week in order to meet with the church on the first day of the week. The text does not clearly specify communion with the phrase "break bread"; in fact, a glance back at 2:42 and 2:46 shows that the same phrase apparently refers to daily eatings-together. Whatever the text means in 20:7, it may be significant that Paul waited around for a week to get to do it at Troas.

Early church tradition, I'm told, strongly does imply that weekly communion was common.

The devil is in the details, I suppose. While it's certainly a Jesus-honoring intent that seeks to remember Him formally on a weekly basis, the actuality has become, for me and at least some others, rather humdrum . . . and weak in its working-out.

I currently have the spiritual pleasure of being a part of a church that almost always sets up the Lord's Supper thoughtfully through comments and/or sung worship or prayer. The Lawson Road Church does so much better than most. But the formality of the passing of the trays, and the general lack of familial communing "around the table" does hamper. It so often seems to be a ritualized observance—that individuals are left to imbue with personalized significance. Not that personal meditation is bad, but I'm persuaded that the communal "meal" was intended to be different.

The Lord's Supper 4: Practical Ways to Emphasize It

In the assembly, what does it look like for the Lord's Supper to be the cardinal event? Is it *always* to be the activity on which everything else hinges?

I doubt that Jesus intended for our assembly minutes to be tallied, with only those gatherings that had 51% or more of the time devoted to the Supper considered acceptable. I do not think it is a

matter of arithmetic. Yet our entire identity is based in having been purchased by His bodily sacrifice, and there must be many ways to manifest our acknowledgement of . . . our belief in . . . our contemplative spiritual meditation on His death, burial, and resurrection.

Following are some real-life, practical (or not so practical, depending on your situation) suggestions:

- ◆ Use a scripture-and-song sequence that is basically failsafe in focusing everyone's minds and hearts.
- ◆ Use projected images (produced by artistically gifted members of your church, if possible) of crosses, of people looking as if toward the cross, of tables spread for Passover, of Jesus looking upward or outward, of the Temple veil torn in two . . .
- ◆ Have different ones plan the sub-focus—perhaps use families, single women, etc., who otherwise would not have the opportunity to contribute in this way.
- ◆ *Start* your assembly with communion. And don't fret over the latecomers. It's not a sacrament; it's an opportunity.
- ◆ *End* your assembly with communion, having intentionally progressed through other activities toward it.
- ◆ Change the physical arrangement of your chairs, if you have them, so that people may share more with one another.
- ◆ Play video of well-done movie reenactments of the Supper as you lead toward the observance.
- ◆ Use songs on CD or tape that do not require active participation but that encourage meditation.
- ◆ Extend the time spent on the Lord's Supper (and do not apologize for it!).
- ◆ Instead of a regular sermon, use several mini-lessons on aspects of the crucifixion, on the "seven last words of the cross," or on virtually any aspect of Jesus' life and teaching.
- ◆ Teach for a series of weeks or months on the "agape meal" that is known to have been common in the life of at least some early Christian churches, and implement some aspects of table fellowship in your "Lord's Supper" event.
- ◆ Sing something appropriate during and after the Lord's Supper "proper." Consider an "arch form" that places the Supper at the center and uses the same musical or scriptural material as "bookends." This way of organizing activities may help to centralize the experience, without further explanation.
- ◆ Consider the tasteful use of unaccompanied vocal solos. There are so many worthy songs that could help people contemplate Jesus.
- ◆ Use scripture devotionally.
- ◆ Read a Pauline paean such as Ephesians 1:3-12 between the taking of bread and wine.
- ◆ Project scripture (John 1? Isaiah 53? Revelation 4? Matthew 26? Colossians 1?) during the entire observance.
- ◆ Invite the believers to hum a familiar song (suggestions: "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross," "The Old Rugged Cross," "Lamb of God," or "I Gave My Life for Thee") while an appropriate passage is read aloud. An important consideration here: the song should be very familiar so that all mental faculties may be available for taking in the scripture message.
- ◆ Share a historical document that references communion practices and/or beliefs about the practice.
- ◆ Following the taking of the emblems, provide a time for individuals to approach one another to affirm relationship in the Lord, *a la* 1 John 1:7 . . . or to confess sin to one another.
- ◆ If you are really daring, if your congregation is already accustomed to varying methodologies regularly, provide an actual wooden cross made from landscape ties,

some note paper, and some thumbtacks. Invite people to write worldly concerns, confessions, or expressions of gratitude to Jesus, and then to nail them to the cross during silence or while a song is sung. (Perhaps you remember the impact of some experience like this in your past.)

- ◆ A variation on the above that requires a different kind of advance preparation: invite the people to deposit their confessions into an open flame in order to bring home the fact that He remembers our sins no more.
- ◆ Don't use official servers. Have one person (or one person in each section of seats) start the passing of bread and wine, and just allow the trays to continue from person to person, with each one serving the next one. (Doesn't this seem communal?)
- ◆ In smaller groups (say, 25 or fewer), serve one person with a spiritual word offered to him or her . . . then continue the chain, one by one, with each person serving another while everyone else either sings, meditates, or listens. If your group is too large to make this practical, divide into subgroups first.
- ◆ Allow a time for individuals to speak to the entire congregation spontaneously of their personal meditations on the meaning of the experience. Don't be discouraged if this doesn't go well the first time.
- ◆ Immediately before and after the Supper, worship Jesus through song and prayer.

I wrote the above in a period of about thirty minutes. You can doubtless come up with an even greater variety than is represented here . . . just think of all the freshness and meaning we can bring into the experience of communion with the Lord and His Body on earth!

The Lord's Supper—(Mis)conceptions

In the ARM (American Restoration Movement), we have a lot of conceptions around the Lord's Supper. Some of these are only decades old; others are a couple of centuries old, and others may be older than that. Some, I'll flatly suggest, are *mis*conceptions. They are no greater misconceptions than Roman ones in this area, and they don't use the fabricated term "eucharist" or consider that metaphysics are disturbed by clerigified incantations (i.e., "transubstantiation"). But consider, for example, on a lower level, the ideas that the Lord's Supper is . . .

- ◆ to involve a thimbleful of grape juice and a morsel of cracker
- ◆ to be observed in quietude
- ◆ to be observed in the morning ("Supper"? morning?)
- ◆ to be observed no less than one time per week, necessitating evening "mini-communion" with the Sunday morning absentees
- ◆ to be observed no more than one time per week
- ◆ to involve a single cup, or is
- ◆ to involve multiple cups
- ◆ to involve trays (and pews, and people who pass said trays through the people in said pews)
- ◆ called "The Lord's Supper" when that phrasing is used only once in scripture (and no other phrase is much more prescriptive)

Non-ARM readers may be going, "Huh?" to most of the above. Dyed-in-the-wool ARM readers may also be going, "Huh?" (but for different, more closed-minded reasons). We have had such a legalistic view of "the Lord's Supper" that we've manufactured and bought little communion "kits" in which can be packed a little cracker and juice, so shut-ins and convalescing members can eat and drink. (Talk about a sacramental view! "If only I can eat a morsel and drink a trickle, I will receive grace!")

Yet it's *our* problem more than theirs. We ambulatory ones are the ones who've perpetuated it. Do those who care for shut-ins in this way eat and drink *with* them, or do they think, "Wait . . . I can't do that again . . . I already did that earlier today 'at church' . . . I'd better not do it again"? Do they make it a mini-communal experience of some sort, or do they just shove the cracker toward the bed and tenderly hold the nonagenarian's head up so she can sip the juice, thinking somehow that the substances are grace-giving? Wouldn't it be better to do away with this morsel model and have a small group meeting with the shut-in person *as church*, experiencing more of the whole of the Christian assembly, and also eating and drinking "at the table," including the memorial bread and juice.

What about the common ARM practice of having mini-communion on Sunday evenings for those who were sick or traveling or at work on Sunday morning? Some congregations have the formerly missing congregants come to the front pew while the congregation sits (im)patiently and tries to feel simultaneously devoted, all the while going "umm . . . *did* this already in the morning . . . wasting my time now . . . uh-oh, bad attitude . . . back to trying to feel devoted." Others have the people stay where they are and raise their hands if they want to be served by people passing the trays. Even more churches have the folks leave the assembly hall and go to some little room elsewhere. If they're off by themselves, they're certainly not communing with the whole gathered body, and perhaps are feeling more familial with the few . . . and at least you don't have the weirdness of having 96% of the people in the sanctuary twiddling their thumbs . . . which certainly isn't very communal.

The thinking around *one cup* has probably had entire books written on it, and Catholics and a small sub-sect of ARMers agree on that aspect. I'm not very interested in this scruple, although if germs weren't part of our world, I'd probably prefer the unifying aspect of the same cup. As it is, I simply can't fathom how so many people can be satisfied with a wiping of the rim of a cup with a dirty rag and then drinking after someone else. Onward....

I've greatly appreciated [Alan Knox's](#) writing on this subject. I have found only one minor flaw in his particular blogpost that probes pretty much all the scriptures that might relate to this topic. One of his conclusions has been that "When the Lord's Supper is mentioned in Scripture, it is mentioned in the context of a meal." While this appears true from the Last Supper through to Jude, where the plural *agapais* (usually translated "love feasts") is found in a single instance, I would take minor exception to the term "the Lord's Supper," because it has come to connote, for many, a ceremony that seems worlds apart from the essence of that which on Alan (and Paul and Luke and Jesus) were really discoursing.

I have for years taken exception to those ARMers who try to suggest that the reference to "breaking bread" near the end of Acts 2 refers to what we think of as the Lord's Supper. (Please stay with me to the end of this post.) In verse 42, many of "them" have said, it is the "Lord's Supper" being referred to, while virtually none of "them" would have said "breaking bread" in v. 46 has the same event as its referent. That inconsistency is galling. It's the same expression, penned by the same writer, in the same book, and in the same immediate context. How could it possibly mean anything different the second time? Whatever "breaking bread" means in v. 42 must be what it means in v. 46.

Moreover, the nearly amusing (to *us*, at least, two millennia later) incident with Eutychus has shown to some that it was very important to Paul and to the disciples there that they have "the Lord's Supper" together. Some, however, have conveniently ignored the second reference to breaking bread *after midnight*. Without checking other time references in Luke-Acts, I would suspect that Luke reckons time as the Greeks would have, not as the Jews would have; if this assumption is correct, you have these Acts 20 Troas folks meeting on Sunday evening and observing "the Lord's Supper" on the 2nd day of the week, *after midnight*. Or, perhaps, you have them meeting to observe the Supper and then having a six-hour sermon and then observing "the supper" again. I don't really think either of these expresses full truth.

What if there was a table fellowship that they all looked toward, and there was a special significance on the first day of the week, when they remembered Jesus' body and blood in a special way? What if they did this twice at Troas (Acts 20)? Or what if the ceremonial remembering didn't actually occur at all that night, because of the near-tragedy with Eutychus? Had they erred

religiously (here I'm intentional with the choice of "religiously" over "spiritually") and displeased God, simply because they didn't observe a ceremony? *Isn't communion more than ritual observance?*

At this point, I would formally put forward the notion that the "Lord's Supper" might never have been conceived by Jesus or by the Father in the way that most of us have conceived of it through the years.

I do absolutely think He wanted us to remember him in a focused way at the table. But I also think he wanted us to participate in table sharing for its own sake, because of what such sharing of food and conversation can create among us, pausing *during the meal* to remember his sacrifice especially, through bread and vine juice. Pardon my bold speculation, but I doubt He particularly prefers the stoic observances that are the rule these days in liturgical and non-liturgical churches alike. The dis-integrated experience of bread and thimbleful of vine juice, while looking at the backs of others' heads or at Bibles or while praying silently, whether in silence or with "special music" being offered, has very little to do with the communion practiced by Jesus at the Last Supper or with that He wants for us today.

Alan Knox's minor flaw, by the way, was semantic and was found in his summary calculations—that certain phrases were used X number of times to refer to "the Lord's Supper." The term "the Lord's Supper," I think, throws us off the scent. It is not what we think of as "the Lord's Supper" that's the issue. Instead, it is *the nature of the Christian assembly* that deserves a serious look (which is consistent with how I read Alan's overall thrust).

Let's eat together more often. In homes, preferably. In the church building or in restaurants, if necessary. But let's eat together, and let's be spiritually minded enough not only to bless the food in the name of God, but to remember—specifically and intentionally, during the meal—the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus. In doing this, the "supper" (or lunch or brunch or whatever) can become "the Lord's" in a very meaningful way.

The Collection: On Being Inhospitable

Despite the relatively recent (in the modern era, at least) push toward "seeker sensitivity" and "seeker orientation," churches have a penchant for being inhospitable to guests. We insiders rarely realize how un-oriented we really are to those who are not us. It's not that we're intentionally rude toward outsiders; it's just that we're obtuse and intermittently stupid about some things.

The collection/offering/so-called "tithing" opportunity offers us but one example of how blind we can be to the feelings, if not the presence, of visitors in our assemblies.

Picture this real experience from our life (perhaps you will be able to relate) ... the collection is in progress. We're sitting on the end of a row. No one is beside us; in fact, no one is sitting anywhere else on our pew. One of the servers/collectors is coming down the aisle toward us. There is no one on any of the four rows in front of us, and, despite my attempts to avert my eyes, the man's dutiful gaze meets mine. I'm a visitor in his church, and he has never seen me before. He looks at me expectantly, beginning to hold out the tray in my direction. I shake my head almost imperceptibly, also raising my forearm and bending my wrist back, giving the universally recognized "stop" signal. My message is clear: please don't bother handing me the tray, for I am not prepared to put anything in it.

It's a mildly awkward moment for both of us. This has happened to me far too many times, though, and I'm saying something about it.

Given a) the last 30+ years of history with money-grubbing televangelists in this country, not to mention sordid stories of CEOs and CFOs in the business world, and b) the utter lack of clear, New Covenant example for regular, required offerings in the assemblies of the church, all ushers and servants and leaders and all other type of collectors should think five times and pray for guidance (and forgiveness) before offering an unknown visitor a collection tray.

Specifically, regarding the concept of tithing: we do find scriptural precedent for paying someone to do the work of the Kingdom. There is also precedent for paid "regular staff" under the

Old Covenant—the Levites were professional regulars. But I see no precedent for anything like what we have today in churches. We are not Jews, and laws such as tithing are not applicable, *per se*, since we should not have Levites to support. The vast majority of our religious professionals work in roles that are fabricated from human tradition much more than they emanate from the pages of scripture. . . . Most of Jesus’ teachings aren’t given to convincing folks to dropping more in the plate. No, most of what He said appears to indicate the need to avoid an undue focus on money. (Ergo, the lack of more than one installment in this book that mentions contributions.)

I realize that if I’m in a 2% minority on fighting the clergy system, I’m in a .02% minority on fighting the notion of tithing . . . so I hasten to point out that the idea of being charitable and supporting the Lord’s work is *not* relegated to the Old Covenant. It’s the strict tithing concept that is an Old-Covenant thing.

Whether you find the notion of the tithe foreign to the New Covenant or not (and at least one of my good friends has verbally disagreed on this point), I hope you will accede on this final statement: *it’s uninviting, inhospitable, and downright dumb to assume a visitor will help to pay your church bills.*

Inhospitability, Considered Further

Truly, even *hinting* to a visitor in a church that s/he should contribute to that church’s bill-paying fund is inhospitable. I find abhorrent the slightest glance in the direction of someone you don’t know, as you’re passing the collection plate. No, let a person in a pew make the first move toward dropping money in the plate. No usher or table servant should be in the position of demanding money.

I’d like to add to these thoughts the idea that even those within a church—even the regular members—should not be guilted into contributing. I “contributed” toward this kind of guilt inducement one recent Sunday myself, and I repent.

In the Church of Christ, we have this odd legacy that leaves us with *three* parts of communion: the bread, the juice, and the collection. Many churches have been accustomed to making a point of separating the first two from the last through the use of the words “separate and apart,” but it really hasn’t been separate at all. Some of this, I imagine, developed out of convenience: those men serving the elements of communion were already up out of their pews and in their service mode, so why not just use them, right then and there, to pass the collection trays? It’s efficient, and I get this. But the feigning of separation—the silly *declaration* that it was separate when the *reality* was that it wasn’t separate at all—has not served our assemblies or our minds and hearts well.

On rare occasion, when I have been in charge of such things, I have made a point of switching up the order and having the collection first (understand that it would have been my first choice not to have it at all, and I’ve often inadvertently almost left it out, but it would have been too radical to do this intentionally!). This change in pattern has never lasted; the linking of communion and collection in the practices of the Church of Christ now appears fixed.

I vaguely recall that Tommy, a fellow leader at a church in Texas years ago, was of the mind to link communion and collection even more solidly and inextricably than most—by intentionally connecting 1) what *Jesus* gave to 2) what *we* give. On the surface, this seems as logical as it is spiritual. What could motivate us more to give money but a fuller realization of the fact that Jesus gave it all? Strains of gospel songs waft over the Christian airstreams:

*Jesus paid it all! All to Him I owe.
Sin had left a crimson stain. He washed it white as snow.*

~ ~ ~

But drops of grief can ne’er repay the debt of love I owe.

~ ~ ~

*Savior, Thy dying love Thou gavest me.
Nor should I aught withhold, dear Lord, from Thee.
In love my soul would bow, my heart fulfill its vow,
Some off'ring bring Thee now—something for Thee.*

~ ~ ~

*Why did my Savior come to earth and to the humble go? ...
Why did He drink the bitter cup of sorrow, pain, and woe? ...
He gave His precious life for me because He loved me so.*

~ ~ ~

I led the immediately preceding song last Sunday, and I'm afraid it contributed to a negative kind of guilt induction. Follow the line? "He gave His precious life" naturally leads, at that time in the official Sunday proceedings, to "well, at least I can give 50 bucks like everyone else." This is not what the Lord had in mind with communion ... and He doesn't appear to have had anything in mind at all with regard to the Sunday collection of an offering, since there is no example of, or instruction related to, such an offering.

Perhaps the worst of all is the song I have led around communion and collection in past years (many churches would call this song the "offertory"):

*I gave my life for thee; my precious blood I shed,
That thou might'st ransomed be, and quickened from the dead.
I gave, I gave my life for thee.
What hast thou given for me?*

The crowning ~~glory~~ embarrassment is in the final stanza:

*And I have brought to thee, down from My home above,
Salvation full and free—my pardon and My love;
I bring, I bring rich gifts to thee.
What hast thou brought to Me?*

See what we have here, in the words of this song? Jesus standing there in front of our adoring eyes, having left glory, having died lovingly and sacrificially, and having re-ascended to glory, now imploring us, "I gave my physical life willingly. I gave you the salvation of your souls. This is a lot. Can't you give money to Me?" (In our warped, legacy-ridden minds, the "Me" of the last line is somehow morphed into "church treasury." Please don't overlook this parenthesis; it is really quite material to these thoughts.)

Does Jesus want our money? Well, yes. But He wants so much more, and the monetary angle of the institutional church has been so corrupted through the centuries that I think it's both logically and spiritually dangerous to link His gift to us only to our gift of money.

In themselves, the words of Frances Havergal's song seem apt enough, almost unique, and worthy of the Christian's time. But **not** at the time of collecting money, as though we could possibly satisfy the debt we owe to our Lord by dropping a check in the plate. **Not** as though our response to Him is summed up, or even answered in any substantive way, by offering money.

I'm sorry that I recently went along with the program and led a song that contributed to a concept I don't believe in. I don't intend to do that again, and I shall never, ever lead "I Gave My Life for Thee" in connection with the collection.

Tithing By Choice

Tithing is a matter of choice under the New Covenant, not having been explicitly continued from the Old. Here are a couple of ideas that manifest choice:

1. I know of one couple that puts money aside over time, considering it part of their "tithe," and using it periodically for a scholarship at a Christian school. They don't know that I know this.
2. I know of another couple that has for years been sending rather significant sums to a large church in another city for safekeeping in their investment fund. This couple's intention is to have large sums available to draw out for the funding of mission or benevolent efforts when those needs present themselves. This couple's practice began during a time of detachment from viable churches, and I think it was a terrific way to "lay by in store," as the KJV has 1 Cor. 16:2.

I find both the above practices to be a) within the prerogative of individual Christians in our age, and b) smack-dab in the intentions of the wording of I Corinthians 16, which encourages setting aside money on the first day of the week. To be clearer: this brief passage, which contains a relatively rare NC-document mention of money, does not require, or even suggest, passing plates around, dropping money in a bag in the pews or in the back, a weekly corporate collection at all, or any sort of reincarnation of the tithe. Paul spoke more of putting money aside or away—*saving*, if you will—than putting it forward.

If one wants to tithe in subservience to an imagined law, one may. Far better: if one wants to tithe *in honor of God and in support of His kingdom*, one may. My points are that a) there is more than one way to go about it, and b) since tithing is nowhere indicated in the New Covenant, it is a matter of choice.

So ... charitable giving is a choice—a good one, but a choice nonetheless. Yes, "God loves a cheerful giver," but He does not say, "First, love me. Next, love your neighbor. Third, give 10% of your money." The decision to give, and *the percentage* are up to the individual.

I once felt good about approaching 10% and even surpassing it over a fiscal year or two, way back when. As I recall, more than half of this was given to Christian organizations other than my church, and that was because I found the church budget philosophically and practically wanting. I would have been found in direct contradiction to scripture *if* scripture had any command for Christians to tithe, but it doesn't. (There is no Levitical priesthood in the church, so there is no reason to tithe. That part of it really is that simple.)

Since then, I have had to feel good about smaller amounts. It's not easy, because I would like to give *more* to Christian and humanitarian charities I believe in. If I had more of a surplus for daily living, I would give more. *Remember the widow with the two pennies*, I try to tell myself in my discouragement. But I still have questions. Here are some more.

- ◆ *Should we "tithe" according to our pay schedules—every two weeks, on Fridays? bi-monthly on the 15th and 30th? or every month, in some cases?*
- ◆ *In calculating, does the 10% come off the top, or after tax? Should we wait to calculate until after the final reckoning of the tax return? How can we know how we've "prospered" until after April 15? What would the institutional church do if no one paid the bills until sometime after April 15 every year?*
- ◆ *Would the answer be different if paying taxes to Caesar were a choice and not exacted by mandated withholding?*
- ◆ *What about tithing by credit card? (Although that might be convenient and get me "rewards" which I could then tithe based upon (!), it sure does seem cold and institutionalized.)*
- ◆ *When a Christian college student receives a paycheck for \$72.51 for two weeks of every-other-day work, does he exempt himself from tithing because he is a poor college student, or does he*

give \$7.26 (rounding up would seem to be safer than cheating God out of a half-penny) to the collection plate next Sunday? Does he hold Christians around him to a different tithing standard because they're not college students?

- ◆ When college students or foreign missionaries receive care packages from Aunt Sue or Martha Supportive, do they offer 10% of the cookies to poorer students or to indigenous neighbors?
- ◆ Does contributing to the Red Cross or to Hope International or to the World Bible Translation Center "count" as part of your tithe?
- ◆ Does an individual have the right or responsibility to approve or support the spending of the money she tithes?

This last question makes me think of the question of ownership of a retail establishment and spending money in that store. For instance, at one time, a large grocery store chain was owned by Mormons. Did buying a gallon of milk there give me the right to say "No, you can't send a penny of my \$2 to the LDS Church"? Well, no, but it did give me pause about patronizing that store when I had a choice.) In this age of mobility, global communication, and lots and lots of free choice, I figure I have some responsibility to be prudent in where I spend *and* contribute money.

If large portions of a church budget are allocated to salaries for staff positions I don't believe in, or for physical plant/facilities, it makes me look elsewhere for a greater "return" on my dollar. While this may seem overly humanistic and even crass in its monetary outlook, the alternative, for me, is a careless, thoughtless, or even halfhearted dropping of a check into a plate—which ends up being a gesture of upholding the status quo and religion's establishments than a faith-based offering to advance God's Kingdom.

All this would be pretty troubling if tithing were an in-force law, wouldn't it? :-)

Announcements

In the context of leading worship in song, I suggested that leaders *avoid extended periods of leading with closed eyes*. Here, in the context of speaking informationally, it is a similar matter: it is important to communicate with those being led.

When making announcements, look primarily at the people you are attempting to communicate to, not at any printed information you may have with you. Of course, there will be times that you need to refer to factual data, but it helps to connect with people if you will look at them when you are telling them something. Look at your audience first, then refer to paper if you need to do so, then look at your audience again. What you are doing, in effect, is linking information with people. If you do not communicate with your eyes, you appear to be less convicted, less interested, less invested ... and the information is much less likely to be delivered meaningfully and enduringly into the ears of the people.

Preachers and Preaching 1: Generalities

It seems to me that preachers and preaching are overused in assemblies, if not overrated.

Sermons—ostensibly the preacher's "bread and butter" task—have in my tradition been used primarily for instruction and exhortation, which puts sermons in a category separate from worshipful praying and singing. Instructional sermons tend to occupy an unjustifiably large proportion of time in the assembly. Just as with any other activity in the Christian assembly, though,—regardless of the length of time devoted to them—sermons should be *effective*.

When one person talks to an assembled group for an extended period of time, it is incumbent on that speaker to ensure that he is actually *communicating* and not merely going through the motions of sermonizing just to say it has been done. Sometimes, in their attempts to communicate, preachers will come out from behind a large piece of furniture and descend from the platform. This gesture is well intentioned and may be just what the physician's assistant prescribed, in some buildings. But if you step down off a raised platform to a lower level, take care that you are not

inhibiting visual communication. Don't make it more difficult for the gathered saints to see your face while you talk.

Paid preachers often have huge lists of responsibilities (that go unnoticed until not handled). If we need to hire staff people to mow grass, buy supplies, answer phones, and such, OK. In many cases, it may not be a wise use of church funds to pay a man to teach publicly. More certainly, it is not the best use of corporate time to spend 30 minutes listening to one man. Pay him for what is needed in each autonomous congregation, but do not insist tacitly that he must preach in order to earn his keep—especially if his sermons are not effective.

It might also be noted that sermons can contribute more than instruction to the gathered believers. There is such a thing as preaching that inspires, convicts, and ushers hearts into a greater God-consciousness. When a sermon does one of these things, it can be vitally connected with worship, as well as with teaching.

Public preachers/teachers, if you have not already done so, you might add to your spiritual arsenal some sermons that point more to His perfect holiness than to the “three points and a poem” of your perfect outline. Why not resolve to direct hearts and minds more to the Almighty than to individual ideas and interpretations?

Preachers and Preaching 2: Preacher-centrism

We used to say “preacheritis,” but I don't think that was quite right, grammatically speaking. The preacher might well have been inflamed, but that wasn't what we were talking about.

The subject was, and is, centering on a human. (The phrase “centering around” is redundant, I might point out.) (And so I did point it out!)

My wife had to head in one direction to pick up her grandmother one fine Lord's Day, and headed in another. Only having two wheels (the motorized kind) available, I went about 25 miles north to the meeting of a church in Perry, NY. We've driven by this place numerous times, and I thought it was about time I visited. After all, when a church is called “New Testament Church,” I'm intrigued.

I must tell you I've visited scores more churches that bore more resemblance to the ideal I see described in the New Covenant writings. This one, like so many, was centered on its preacher. (I've opted for the word “preacher” because it seems more a functional umbrella than “pastor.” All of them preach, for better or worse, but not all of them “past.”)

As soon as I walked in the door, I could tell that my second handshake met a *preacher's* hand. There's a certain centering that occurs in a church lobby when the preacher is there, you know. Everything revolves around him, and all the body language and verbosity manifests his centrality. My suspicions were born out when he walked over, used-car-salesman-like, 30 seconds later and introduced himself: “Hi. I'm Gene. I'm the pastor here.”

- ✓ It was his wife, as in many churches, who was the “worship leader.” (Not that she led me, really, but she did play the keys and made the decisions as to how many repeats on the choruses.)
- ✓ His daughter ran the overhead projector.
- ✓ He made the announcements.
- ✓ He plugged an upcoming event.
- ✓ Asserting his centrality, he interjected (mostly unnecessary, unhelpful) comments between songs.

And as if this weren't enough, he did what every other preacher does, 99.4% of the time. **He preached for too long.** It took, in this case, approximately two-thirds of the assembly time. Often, it's only half the time, but this was even more disproportionate.

Who put the pope and all other religious centeroids high atop Clydesdales? Not one of us is infallible, and no single human should be talking that long. Jesus or the apostles, yes, but not a 21st-century preacher. There's more *collective* wisdom (read: wisdom in other people, too) in most churches than we tend to access; congregational worship and edification have many forms that can and should be exploited; and, hey, what ever happened to letting God speak through oral readings of the scriptures?

Preachers and Preaching 3: Christ Receiveth Sinful Men

“Christ receiveth sinful men.” So goes the first and final lines of the chorus of a gospel invitation (altar-call, if you prefer) song. And, despite its outmoded verb tense, the line expresses truth!

Today I’ll expand on a few thoughts from yesterday on church roles—those of the elder and preacher/pastor, particularly.

I’m no church history scholar. Just a passive observer who picks up a tidbit from time to time and has a few study resources. What I do, instead of researching historical developments and discursively discussing timelines and influences, is to compare my understanding of scripture to church practices as I observe them. And I see sinful men receiving sinful men a lot. The focus gets a little blurry the way we do things sometimes.

Who receives confessions in your church, and how, and why?

I remember Lynn Anderson (gifted communicator, above-average writer, and Christian leadership mentor, with the true heart of a servant leader himself) in a presentation once. He mentioned the previous church he had served as preacher, saying the shepherds/elders of that church had “freed him to take more of the prophetic role.” In saying that he was in no way implying a miraculous foretelling gift, or even of speaking as the oracle of God, per se. He was saying that his role in the pulpit was primarily to speak the things of God, regardless of how much they ended up pricking hearts and poking souls and quickening tender consciences. Then, Lynn said, after he spoke, it was the shepherds’ role to stand up front and receive the sheep who needed help.

Now, I call into question the effectiveness, if not the very conception, of the invitation song or altar call. This event is a completely human invention that seems to me to put souls to sleep more than it enlivens spirits and encourages true repentance. Seems to me that confession finds a more effective avenue in free, non-obligatory, private (read: not in a booth with an authority figure!) conversation or in small groups than in the congregational assembly, but to each his own. . . .

If a church is going to have an invitation, it surely seems to me that it’s more appropriate that a shepherd (remember, the pastor, biblically speaking, is a shepherd; this role is more closely tied to that of the elder/bishop than to that of the teacher/preacher/evangelist) receive the confessions, the wounded, the needy, the responsive.

While the preacher, if there is one, may legitimately speak the words that lead to the response, it is the shepherd who, by definition, cares for the sheep.

Microphones: Use Them

First principles first: **Use** them. *Use* the microphones. For every church facility in which microphones are not necessary, there are 199 in which they are. When mics are present, use them.

If I only had a dollar bill for every macho male who claimed he didn’t need a microphone but actually couldn’t be heard when making an announcement or leading a prayer! For some reason, men seem to want to present themselves as big and tough ... and *loud*. “Why, I don’t need one o’ them things.” But you do, O man! In twenty-or-so years of regular church assembly observations, I can recall only two men who could truly get by without amplification for substantial periods of time. (They were not preachers, by the way.)

It’s really very simple, and it doesn’t reduce you to a mere shadow of a man: stride up to the microphone; adjust it deftly, if necessary; and speak into it. Most voice microphones pick up fine at a distance of about 4-6 inches. No need to swallow it. Don’t stand beside it, pointing it at the extension of your ear, either. Just speak fairly near it, and toward it. Ideally, someone is near the volume control and can make slight adjustments where necessary, leaving the one speaking free from such concerns. The adjustments are best made from some point in the back half of the audience—not by the one speaking, whose vantage point does not give him an adequate sense of things.

I have a fairly small voice myself, but I’ve had enough experience and training to be able to project in fairly large spaces. It’s tiring, though, and I can’t keep it up for long without sounding

affected. It's much more advantageous for me to speak *naturally* into a microphone instead of *unnaturally* attempting to project beyond the limitations of my natural voice.

On the other hand, amplification is unnecessary at times. The effectiveness of spontaneous singing after an immersion or during the Lord's Supper, for instance, is often hindered by use of a microphone. On some of these occasions, all the church needs is a to hear a few notes in the air as the song starts; it's not necessary to be a solo voice ringing out above the congregation through the speakers. If you are not really attempting to lead in some way (in terms of dynamics or tempo or other expressive aspects), sometimes it is better just to stay out of the way.

One final piece of advice on the use of microphones: when practical, position the mic just *below* your mouth, *angled up* toward your mouth. Despite the pervasiveness of the pop-star example that seems to cover as much of the face as possible with the microphone, it is advantageous *not* to block the line of sight to the lips when one is attempting to communicate.

Sound Systems: Technical Stuff

Perhaps a little (*very* little, but helpful, I hope) advice on knobs and sliders would be in order. First of all, you should know that not every mic is the same. In addition to general quality considerations, some mics are omnidirectional (with a pickup pattern that extends in the general shape of a spheroid), but most in churches are unidirectional (which means the speaker should speak pretty much directly into it).

It also bears mention that some amplification systems may be set to compensate for—or, on the ludicrous side, to exploit—preachers' shouting. If possible, have someone man the volume control so that slight adjustments may be made for each person. Song leaders and preachers may need a little less amplification than less-experienced men who make announcements, read scripture, or pray aloud.

Now, specifically about equalization. . . . For the EQ-uninformed, allow me to share the benefit of my 10-cents' worth of knowledge. Not that this is fool-proof or represents any true acoustical principles, much less that it takes into account the unique characteristics of each room/auditorium . . . but in general, the pattern on the EQ bands should follow this pattern, assuming a 1-10 range on the dial:

Low Freq Band 1 6-8	Band 2 5-6	Band 3 3-4	Band 4 3-4	Band 5 5-7	Band 6 6-8	High Freq Band 7 7-9
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If your system has only three bands, or just one "tone" control, the general principle is the same: The extreme frequencies need more artificial "boosting" than the middle frequency ranges. The sound might be richer if edged toward the low frequencies, but the understandability of lesser orators will be sacrificed somewhat if the higher frequencies are not accentuated enough. Understandability is the priority.

Get Over It

Presumably several were annoyed. The preacher and I were both a little worried, but I'm not sure that the concern on our parts was all that warranted. You see, several things on this particular Sunday, including 3-4 minutes of extra comments from me as the song/worship leader, added to the overall time in our church's assembly. And we were a little anxious about it.

But the anxiousness I felt makes me even more anxious on a larger scale. "Brethren and cistern," *we need to get over the clock-watching* while we're gathered together.

It's one thing to be sensitive to duration and to the imprint on people's bottoms. It's quite another to worry that worthwhile activities that happen to be slightly more prolonged than "normal" be tossed out the window, simply because we "ran over by 10 minutes."

I must tell you that in most churches I've been part of, there was no published "end time" for the assembly activities. It was merely assumed at Cedars, for instance, that 9:45 assembly went until 11:00, and classes then went from 11:05, or whenever they started, for 45 minutes. Then when Cedars switched and had classes first at 9:30, the assembly began at 10:30, and everyone assumed

that it went until 11:45. So sometimes getting out at 11:50 or 11:54 was seen as “going overtime,” but that was ridiculous. If something is important, it’s important—whether worship or the so-called shepherd’s blessing or the renovation program or the family business or the sermon.

This is not to put a guilt trip on someone who has a plane to catch or some other closed end. By all means, individuals should leave if they need to leave. But if the assembly is a few minutes longer than “normal” this Sunday, what’s the big deal? Of course, if you’re in a church with multiple assemblies in the same building, if the first one runs overtime, it throws everything else off. I do understand that!

Another convention we need to get over is the notion of heading back to the church building on Sunday nights for a mini re-experience of Sunday morning. Culturally, this appears downright silly to me, and I was raised with it. It’s not the idea of more togetherness with my spiritual siblings. Far from it. I want more, not less. It’s that Sundays are draining, and people are drained, and cramming two similar events into one day, asking people to make two round trips, simply isn’t efficient. It doesn’t make sense.

Let’s stay longer on Sunday mornings and do more while we’re together. Or meet mid-afternoon and hang out through dinner time. And let’s have midweek and/or Friday night studies and worship times and service activities that help the community. But don’t send me home and ask me to pack up and do the same thing over again. Can we get over this, too?

Closing

It seems anticlimactic to end this collection of thoughts with information on technical things such as amplification, and a semi-subdued rant about timing in the assembly. Yet not all aspects of worship and the assembly are sublime! Some run-of-the-mill, common-sense items simply need a little more consideration.

It is my hope that you have benefited from these writings. More than that, it is my hope that these attempts at expressing my own opinions, positions, exhortations, and dreams will seem to represent well God’s own dreams for the earthbound assemblies of His people.

Lord God, my Rock and Redeemer, please accept this offering of musings and words from a heart that wants, when it is at its best, to please You. May Your reign be complete even now. And please return in our lifetime so we might assemble at last with **all** the saints who will forever surround Your throne in glorious worship.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Worship, Service, and the Christian Assembly

Cliff Ganus III

Worship is central to the life of the Christian; this is a fact accepted by all. Yet we often disagree on what we mean by worship, some saying that it is a way of life, involving all we do, and others saying it takes place only at the appointed meetings of the church. Some believe our “worship services” to be the core of Christian activity, while others consider them somewhat incidental to the Christian life. A clearer understanding of these matters can be achieved by an investigation of worship, service, and the assembly as seen through the pages of the New Testament.

Worship

The word most often translated “worship” in the books of the New Testament is the Greek *proskuneo*. Meaning literally to “kiss toward,” the word implies the sort of humble adoration a subject might render a king. More than praise is involved; one might praise a lawyer for a particularly well-handled case, but that is not worship. True worship requires that the one worshipping be recognizably inferior to the object of worship and that he proclaim that inferiority along with adoration.

Worship, as the word is used in the New Testament, has no tangible beneficial by-products; it does not feed the hungry, clothe the poor, or take care of widows. Worship is between creature and Deity. In none of the sixty appearances of *proskuneo* does the word imply a way of life, benevolence, or conformance to religious ritual. It always denotes adoration, mixed with humility.

Worship was a natural part of the early Christians’ lives, whether they were together or apart, manifesting itself primarily in three ways. The first was in the hymns, by definition “songs of praise.” Every song that has been preserved for us from the first few centuries of the church is a song of praise. Our current emphasis on songs of encouragement, hope, sentiment, and fellowship, along with our tendency to emphasize the music of our songs rather than the texts, makes it difficult for us to appreciate the intensity with which the early Christians **worshipped** [emphasis mine-bc] as they sang hymns.

The second area of worship was in spoken acclamations of praise, which must have interspersed the vocabulary of believers. Paul’s letters give us some insight into the sort of rhapsodic paeans which were threaded into his conversations and writings. The description of the early Christians is a description of a people who often directed their attention heavenward, not with a perfunctory “praise God,” but in thoughtful worship, announcing the wonderful greatness of the Godhead.

Finally, they worshipped in prayer. Paul’s prayer in Ephesians 3:14-21 is one that he might have prayed on his knees before writing it.

Their prayers were not simple recitations of needs and acknowledgements of blessings; they were occasions to come before the throne of God, as individuals and as the assembled body of Christ, to describe and praise the attributes of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit.

Service

The relationship of servant to master is expressed in the Greek *latreuo* and its derivatives. Though sometimes translated “worship,” it is more often rendered as “service” and is used to describe “the carrying out of religious duties.” Worship and service are responses and responsibilities of the Christian, the first carrying a greater connotation of praise, the second of action. Jesus reminded us of this twofold accountability in Matthew 4:10: “Thou shalt worship (*proskuneo*) the Lord thy God, and Him only shalt thou serve (*latreuo*).

Latreuo carries the idea of a way of life, of activity. It sometimes refers to the religious rituals of the old covenant. Paul recognized that the *latreuo* of the Jew involved sacrifices, and he internalized the concept in Romans 12:1: “I beseech you . . . that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice” . . . your *logiken latreia*. That is, we give ourselves to God as a mental act of service, a reasonable ritual. Christian service involves acts of obedience which result from a

person's total dedication to God as a freewill offering. Obedience without mental assent is not a part of the new covenant.

In a similar manner, Jesus demands that Christian worship be mentally directed and not done simply as a matter of form. In speaking to the Samaritan woman He asserted that conditions of place and time that formerly had been considered necessary would soon be superseded by the mental attitude of the worshipper: "Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshippers will worship (*proskuneo*) the Father in spirit and truth." (John 4:23.) Under the new terms, form is less important than commitment.

Assembly

When we consider the purpose of the Christian assembly, we do so with centuries of tradition influencing our thoughts. We have been conditioned to believe that we are to come together for a "worship service." We generally understand our primary function to be worship, and we assume that everything between the opening prayer and the closing prayer fits in that category.

The first-century Jewish Christians did not have this particular understanding. Their assembly was largely patterned after the Jewish synagogue, which was a place of worship, to be sure, but also of fellowship, learning, discussion, and education. The synagogue was something of a social center.

In New Testament accounts of the early church, we read of no time when disciples assembled just to worship. In the second chapter of Acts we find that they were together on a daily basis, sharing fellowship and food, praying, and discussing the teachings of the apostles. In I Corinthians 11-14, in a church with more Greek than Jewish members, we find the church celebrating a fellowship meal and engaging in mutual edification with the assistance of the Spirit. Worship was a part of the assembly, but it was not the totality.

The Christian assembly is a time for the Christian family to conduct family business. It is a time to do with and for one another the things we cannot do while we are separate. It is a time for worship, because when we praise together, we are all blessed. It is a time to teach each other about spiritual matters. It is a time to share needs and blessings; a time when the church leaders fulfill their responsibility of preparing Christians to be servants (Ephesians 4:12); a time to unite in petitioning and praising the Father; a time for each of us to incite others toward love and good works (Hebrews 10:24).

CONCLUSIONS

Would it be possible and helpful for us to change some of our terminology? When we use the term "worship service," we throw the momentum of centuries of Catholic and Protestant tradition into action. The term implies that the meeting is, in itself, the work and service of the church. It implies that anything which is too mundane to be called "worship" is inappropriate (we're even embarrassed to have too many announcements about events taking place among members of the body). We envision, perhaps involuntarily, an ecclesiastical setting where all is quiet and reverent, where no one talks to his neighbor, where no questions are raised, where nothing unexpected intrudes upon the regular order of events, and where those attending are told to "put all thoughts of the world from your minds."

It's no wonder that many folks consider such meetings to be irrelevant to their lives. Paul might very well have felt the same way. The meetings of his time were not cloistered withdrawals from everyday life; rather, they provided occasions for *remembering* the problems and persecutions of the world, and learning to deal with them; for sharing insights and difficulties; for celebrating together the glories of the new life; for enjoying families, and the growth and achievements of children. They were times when the Christians did together what they had been doing separately the rest of the week. Christians did not change their identity when they met; they assembled to confirm their identity.

Some of our difficulty in deciding what is appropriate and effective in our meetings comes because of our doctrinal heritage. The Church of Christ has inherited a theology which emphasizes five “acts of worship.” According to this belief, when we sing, pray, give, preach, and eat the Lord’s supper in the course of our assemblies, we are worshipping; and we worship *only* when we do these five things.

Viewed in the light of New Testament teachings about worship, this understanding appears fallacious. If worship is *proskuneo*, bowing in praise and adoration, then we engage in it only when we sing, pray, and acclaim the greatness of the Godhead; and even in our songs and prayers we are often more concerned with petition than praise, with exhortation rather than adoration. True worship occupies only a small fraction of our time together, and we are missing blessings because of our failure to praise.

If we use the term “worship” to refer to *latreuo*, or “service,” then we can certainly include giving, eating the Lord’s supper, and preaching in the classification. But a fellowship meal could also be included, justified by teaching and example; and other activities involving instruction, information, benevolence, and encouragement would be appropriate. We were not called to be Christians in order to support the church meeting; rather, we are to assemble in order to fulfill our own needs.

As we change the way we think about ourselves and our assemblies, we may be forced to admit that a change in the form of our meetings may be in order. It is a fact that a church member can attend every meeting for years, and consequently be considered a remarkably faithful member, while never speaking to a brother or sister a single word of spiritual substance. If we desire to follow the Biblical example of mutual edification, with individual members being trained for the work of service (serving one another in addition to serving the world), we should make allowances for a greater amount of individual participation in our meetings. This might be accomplished by encouraging greater discussion in our Bible classes, by meeting in small groups on Wednesday and/or Sunday nights (or at other times), or by setting aside certain times when the men of the congregation are invited to share appropriate comments in a more informal manner. Our customary combination of “Bible class” and “worship service” serves a purpose, but there are many other possible arrangements that might offer greater possibilities for praise, mutual edification, education, and fellowship.

We claim the desire to restore New Testament Christianity, but our actions and teachings sometimes belie that claim. Perhaps we have failed to take a fresh look at the sort of body that actually existed while the apostles were actively teaching, whose activities and assemblies are described in the writings of the New Testament. We might just find that breaking away from the traditions of Christendom and returning to the examples of the early believers would help us to produce an assembly of Christians that is vital, relevant, active, and blessed by the Father.

NOTES:

Proskuneo appears fifty-nine times in the New Testament, and the King James translators rendered it as “worship” in every instance. It always carries the sense of adoration and homage. The word *sebomai*, meaning “to venerate” or “to hold in reverence,” occurs six times and is likewise translated “worship.”

Latreuo is translated “worship” in Acts 7:42, Acts 24:14, Philippians 3:3, and Hebrews 10:2 in KJV and NIV; in NAS it is so translated only in the last two of these passages. In each of these references, as well as in those in which it is translated “service,” it means a way of life rather than an act of homage.

Paul indicates in Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16 that as we sing praises to God we are at the same time teaching and admonishing one another.

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Appendix B: Defining Worship

Rob McRay

The debate over worship reform begins with the definition of worship. The Five Acts model implies that worship is coming together and doing the divinely mandated acts. Interestingly, in advocating the Edification model, Mike Root also defines worship as obeying God. However, the terms “obey” and “worship” are not synonymous. God is certainly glorified by our obedience to His will, but the Biblical words for worship do not mean simply “to do God’s will.”

The meaning of the basic terms for worship in the Bible are well-known and often studied, but we will summarize a few relevant points. The most common words translated “worship” in our Bibles are the Hebrew *hishtachavah* and the Greek *proskuneo*, both of which mean “to bow down, do obeisance, worship.” These words connote honor and praise directed to God and a recognition of our humble place before Him. New Testament and Old Testament uses of these terms are markedly similar.

A second common word pair sometimes translated as “worship” are the Hebrew *abad* and the Greek *latreuo/latreia*. The basic meaning of these terms is “to serve,” and they are often used of religious service offered to God. In the Greek Old Testament, *latreuo* means to serve or worship through religious rituals, especially by sacrifice (cf. Isa. 19:21,23). The term is used in a spiritual sense in the New Testament (as in Rom. 12:1) but still with sacrificial imagery. Even though it is not attached in the New Testament to specific temple rituals such as sacrifice, it still conveys the image of ritual service.

A third pair is the Hebrew *sharath* and the Greek *leitourgeo/leitourgia*, which mean “to minister or serve.” *Sharath* is used most often of servants to the king and of priestly servants ministering to God. Like *latreuo*, *leitourgeo* is generally used in the Greek Old Testament of service of priests in the temple; however, while *latreuo* is used of the whole people, including priests, *leitourgeo* is restricted to priestly functions. In the New Testament, the term is usually used in a spiritual sense unless referring to the rituals of the temple.

Advocates of the Edification model (the model which views “worship” as service offered to God through our daily lives and through edifying one another in the assembly, rather than as praise expressed to God in word and song) of the assembly assert that the Old Testament vocabulary of worship is spiritualized in the New Testament. Therefore, they say the Old Testament should not be used to define Christian worship as coming into God’s presence to do specific acts of worship and praise. Rather, they assert that the basic terms for worship are applied in the New Testament to the Christian life (Rom. 12:1). All we do is done to God’s glory, and our lives are our sacrificial offering to Him.

This is only partly correct. It is true that these terms are not used in the context of the church assembly, except *proskuneo* in 1 Cor. 14:25 where it is an unbeliever who falls down and worships. However, it is only the temple ritual imagery of *latreuo* and *leitourgeo* that is spiritualized in the New Testament. The basic concept of worshipping and honoring God inherent in the Old Testament use of *hishtachavah* is still present in *proskuneo*. In John 4, Jesus does not take temple worship and give it a new, spiritual meaning in the Christian life. Rather, He says that the test for acceptable worship will be whether it is genuine and spiritual, not whether it is offered in the right temple. The basic meaning of worship remains the same as in the Old Testament—it is the offering of honor and praise to God. In fact, the Old Testament had already applied similar tests (e.g., “the sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit,” Psa. 51:17).

A basic assertion of the Edification model appears to be that worship in the Old Testament was merely ritualistic, whereas in the New Testament it is spiritual and ethical. This dichotomy between the Old and New Testaments is a pervasive concept in our tradition that cries out for re-examination. We cannot address this problem here, but we must point out the deficiency of this line of argument with regard to worship.

The concept of worship in the Old Testament was not merely the performing of ritual acts. Spiritualized images of Mosaic rituals were applied to life as well, including such concepts as circumcised hearts (Deut. 10:16; Jer. 4:4), a sacrifice of a contrite spirit (Psa. 51:16-17), a sacrifice of thanksgiving (Psa. 50:23), a fast of helping the poor (Isa. 58:6-7), and obedience as better than sacrifice (1 Sam. 15:22). True, spiritual, ethically based worship in all of life gave validity to the rituals (cf. Jer. 7:1-15). Yet even in the Old Testament, neither sacrifices themselves nor spiritualized images of sacrifice supplanted private and corporate worship or honor and thanksgiving and praise directed to God.

Not only were these spiritualized concepts of worship already present in the Old Testament; by the time of the New Testament, they had become major characteristics of the Second Temple period of Judaism. Keeping the Torah, giving to the poor, prayer, thanksgiving and praise were already viewed as spiritual sacrifices. Far from presenting a radically new understanding of worship, the New Testament stands in continuity with the Law and the Prophets, as well as the synagogue, in presenting the essence of religious service as residing not in ritual acts but in the sacrificial devotion of one's life. What is truly distinctive about Christian worship is its focus on the death and resurrection of Christ rather than on the Exodus event, and its recognition that the priesthood and one-time sacrifice of Christ have replaced the sacrifices of the Levitical priesthood.

We must draw a clear distinction between the ritual acts of worship that are spiritualized in the New Testament, and direct communication of honor and praise to God that continues unchanged. Perhaps this could be assisted by altering our translation practices. The English word "worship" means to ascribe worth to someone. By its denotation and connotation it is fairly well suited to translate *hishtachavah* and *proskuneo*, and thus to communicate the idea of praising and honoring God in prayer and song. The word pairs *`abad/latreuo* and *sharath/leitourgeo* might be better rendered "religious service" and "priestly service," communicating their basic meanings of service in the context of temple rituals.

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Appendix C: On Children and the Worship Assembly

Bettye Casey

Let your children know *you* are thinking about God. Don't neglect to sing just because you are a mother. Participate reverently in prayers and communion.

Sit where you and your family can gain and give the most to the assembly. This will not likely be on the back or the fringes of the seating area. Remember that nearer the front there will be fewer distractions to the child *and* you, and you will be demonstrating a keen interest in what is going on.

Keep children on the pew when not in your arms or lap, not standing up "entertaining" the people behind or trying to get away from you on the floor. If you maintain the policy of not letting them down on the floor (from the beginning), you will have fewer problems.

Teach your children to be quiet. A little thump on the mouth usually stops disruptive cooing or other vocal sounds in an infant; this is a simple matter of association and conditioning.

Keep the children happy—remember that your goal is to make assembling with Christians a joyful experience as well as a reverent time.

Don't reward misbehavior with liberty (roaming the halls, getting a drink, etc.).

Don't be hesitant to take a child out when necessary—whether to change a diaper, to walk a colicky baby, or to correct misbehavior. Do not keep a crying baby in the assembly! If a child needs to be spanked, take him out, spank him, and bring him back in. This policy works!

Five-year-olds can listen for a key word (love, Jesus, heaven) in the sermon, marking occurrences on a card. Six-year-olds can copy little sentences. All can sing and give. "A little child is close to God. Let's keep him there."

Your own reverent demeanor coupled with consistent home training and age-appropriate discipline can go a long way in training your child and building good attitudes in him. Yes, you may have to sacrifice some of what you might otherwise gain from the worship, but would not God expect such sacrifice if it enabled you to care for and properly train your children?

Three Prime Objectives When Dealing with Children in the Assembly:

- 1) Teach & train the child
- 2) Keep them from disturbing/distracting other worshippers
- 3) Get & give as much to the worship as the parent can (while doing first two).

Three Objectives to be Avoided When Dealing with Children in the Assembly:

- 1) Show off cute outfits
- 2) Amuse people in close proximity who might otherwise be bored
- 3) Amuse yourself by playing with the children, so they will know they take center stage to God, and routinely walk out with the kid so everyone will know you are an attentive parent.

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Appendix D: Worship When the Wonder Withers

Mike Armour

The Christian lives in two overwhelming worlds. First, the world of *worship*, where we encounter afresh 1) a risen Lord, 2) a reigning Lord, and 3) a returning Lord.

Second, the world of waiting for His return, where we encounter 1) discouragement, 2) disillusionment, and 3) defeat.

In the world of worship, we experience the foretaste of things eternal. In the world of waiting, we experience the frustration of things mundane.

These two worlds “overwhelm” in entirely different ways. The world of worship overwhelms with wonder, awe, and mystery. The world of waiting overwhelms with worry, anxiety, and misery.

The world of worship invokes overwhelming silence. The world of waiting injects overwhelming noise. . . .

Is there consistency between the values we extol in the world of worship and the values we exhibit in the world of waiting? . . .

Worship divorced from ethics is neither Biblical nor Christian. Thus, the two great word families for worship in the New Testament:

proskuneo—worship that takes the form of adoration and praise (Matthew 28:16-17)

latreuo—worship that takes the form of service and ministry (Romans 12:1)

The crossover point between the two is our encounter and involvement with the holy. Through proskuneo worship we experience the majesty and magnificence of the Holy One. He infuses our lives with the empowering strength of the Holy Spirit. In that context He calls us to become holy ourselves in all our behavior (1 Peter 1:14-16). This commitment to personal holiness in conduct then becomes the basis of our latreuo worship, where we become living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God (Romans 12:1).

The dual calling to proskuneo and latreuo creates a life-pattern that always threatens the loss of wonder. Proskuneo puts us in the realm of marvel and majesty. It then reminds us of our calling to latreuo. Latreuo transposes us into the mundane and trivial, which begin to shoulder out the sense of wonder.

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Appendix E: Yearning To Worship: A Personal Journey

Gary Selby

I grew up going to church—Sunday morning, Sunday night, and Wednesday night. On Sundays, twice a day, we had what we called our “worship services” consisting of “five acts,” the proper observance of which we believed set us apart as the true church. Beyond our defense of that set of activities, however, we spent little energy struggling with what should have been for us the more basic and essential question: What are these “worship services” all about? What are they supposed to accomplish? And while I love the people I went to church with and will be forever grateful for their influence on my life, I must admit that those worship services left me unmoved. More often than not they were an exercise we dutifully endured.

When I went to college, I thought I had found the answer. There I was exposed to the teaching that said, “Worship is your life!” The New Testament, so it went, often describes “the Christian life” using language that, in the Old Testament or pagan Greek society, had denoted ceremonial worship activities (see, for example, Romans 12:1-2). That made a lot of sense to me, and in some ways it still does. This understanding of worship helped to tear down the wall between the “sacred” and the “secular,” bringing a holiness to all of life. From this teaching I learned the importance of a personal relationship with God, of seeking his presence all the time—not just on Sunday mornings. But it still didn’t answer my question about the Sunday morning assembly. “That’s for one another,” I was told—and I told others. “We’re here for the horizontal more than the vertical.” Certainly, there should be an emphasis on the horizontal dimension of our worship experiences. After all, there is a reason that we’re called to do this *together*.

Nevertheless, the “one-another” emphasis still left me dry, spiritually barren, yearning for something more. Somewhere in all of this, in response to what I believe was the Holy Spirit’s call, I gave my life to full-time preaching. I found myself in a tradition that gave me little sense of what preaching is all about—what it was supposed to accomplish. Our “preaching tradition,” such as it is, dictates that the preacher’s job is to do exegesis on a text (or to try to understand a “theological concept”), and then to get up in the pulpit and explain the text or the concept. So that’s what I did, to the best of my ability. But something was still missing.

Through all of those years, I found myself drying up spiritually. Most Sundays I left feeling like more should have happened than did. And since the preacher, in our tradition, is the star of the show—whose performance everything else is a mere prelude to—I felt guilt and frustration over my inability to add that missing ingredient. Looking back, I realize that I was yearning for more than a stellar performance. I was yearning for what I now know to be an encounter with God, a glimpse of the Transcendent, an experience of the presence of the Most High whom I had come to worship.

Glimpses of Worship Ten years of wondering what to do with the assembly led me back to Scripture, to the rich heritage in the Old and New Testaments of the worship and adoration of God. I went back to Exodus 19, where the nation of Israel meets God at Mount Sinai. God comes to them there as the God of grace and compassion—“I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself”—the God who chooses them, out of all the nations, to be his treasured possession (19:4-5). He also comes to them as the God who is awesome and mysterious, whose power they cannot begin to comprehend. What is the response to this God? They don’t just amble up to the mountain. They prepare themselves—three days’ worth, washing their clothes, abstaining from sexual relations, so that they can meet their God with joy and love but also with great reverence.

I thought about David. Times had been hard for God’s people. The visible, tangible Presence of God—the Ark of the Covenant—had been stuck off in someone’s basement for years. There it had stayed throughout the disastrous reign of Saul and the first bloody years that David spent consolidating his power. But now King David, the man after God’s own heart, is the undisputed ruler of Israel, and one of his first acts is to bring the Ark to the capital city. With great rejoicing and fanfare, with the shouts of the people and the sound of trumpets, the procession makes

its way toward Jerusalem. Out in front, leading the parade, is Great King David—wearing nothing more than the apron-looking garment called an ephod, and dancing before the Lord “with all his might” (2 Samuel 6:14). Picture it. David the mighty warrior, his long hair and full grey beard flying, the muscles on his exposed arms and legs rippling, his forehead bathed in sweat, his great chest heaving, as he wildly leaps and twirls and shouts in praise to God. Worshipping with all his might.

My mind also went to the experience of Isaiah who, in the context of a “worship service,” finally glimpses the God he is worshipping. “I saw the Lord seated upon a throne, high and exalted,

Like the Israelites centuries before, Isaiah sees the power and mystery of God—and the sight completely overwhelms him.

and the train of his robe filled the temple.” Like the Israelites centuries before, Isaiah sees the power and mystery of God—and the sight completely overwhelms him. “Woe is me,” he cries. “I am ruined, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell among a people of unclean lips,

and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.” But then, at the moment of his undoing, Isaiah glimpses the grace of God, as the seraph brings a coal from the altar and touches his lips. “Your guilt is taken away,” the angel says, “and your sin is atoned for.” It is a religious experience so profound that Isaiah’s life is changed forever, so that when the call goes forth, “Whom shall I send?” Isaiah without hesitation cries, “Here am I! Send me!”

I thought about the time that Jesus was anointed by the “sinful woman” in Luke 7. Jesus is on display at Simon the Pharisee’s table, under Simon’s critical eye, when in comes this woman whom Jesus had earlier loved and forgiven. She breaks open an alabaster jar of perfume—what, we learn elsewhere, would have cost a year’s wages!—and pours it out onto the feet of the Lord. She begins to weep uncontrollably, bathing his feet with her tears.

And then, to crown her worship, she lets down her long, flowing hair and begins to dry his feet with her own hair. With her whole self—in a way that is sensuous, emotional, sacrificial—she pours out her heart in worship to the Christ.

I wondered about the worship of the early church. No doubt it was a far cry from the Temple worship the Jewish Christians had known before their conversion. Yet I began to question whether my image of early Christian worship as a “spontaneous devotional” was accurate. The early church leaders came to their roles with a rich heritage of worship, knowing what it meant to enter into and experience the presence of God Most High. I thought about the sacramental, almost mystical language Paul used to describe the Lord’s Supper in 1 Corinthians 10:16: “Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the Blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the Body of Christ?” Perhaps it was this exalted view of the Supper that led Paul to give his dire warning one chapter later: “Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord” (11:27).

The early church leaders came to their roles with a rich heritage of worship, knowing what it meant to enter into and experience the presence of God Most High.

I wondered, as well, about those “liturgical texts” scattered throughout the New Testament—prayers, blessings, hymns, expressions of praise. Passages like Romans 11:33-36, Ephesians 1:3-14, Philippians 2:6-11, Colossians 1:15-20. These, and many others like them, are texts we now believe to have been sung or recited in early Christian worship settings. They are designed, ultimately, to do more than convey theological information. They are intended to move, to touch worshippers at the level of their emotions, to stir their hearts. And finally, there is Paul’s command in 1 Timothy 2:8, a passage which has always made me a little nervous: “I want men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer, without anger or disputing.” What in the world?

A Holistic Experience of God’s Presence

When I look at these “glimpses of worship” and others like them, I begin to get a clearer picture of what worship is all about. Ultimately, worship is an encounter with God. Worship is the activity that ushers me into God’s presence. Specifically, for God’s people—Old Testament and New—worship was a holistic experience. That means that worship involved more than their minds. It involved their hearts, their voices, their feelings, their bodies. This was driven home to me when I began to look at their worship experiences in terms of the modern study of Neurolinguistic Psychology. According to

tenets of this discipline, we take in and process messages in three different ways: (1) Audibly—through listening; (2) Visually—through seeing; and (3) Kinesthetically—through acting or doing. Each of us is oriented primarily toward one of the three. Some of us learn best by hearing something. Others of us have to see it. Still others, the kinesthetic learners among us, ask for “hands on” experience. Yet, while each of us leans toward one of the three, all of us take in messages by all three means. Amazingly, when we look at worship experiences throughout Scripture, we find people worshipping and encountering God on all three levels—hearing, seeing, and doing. They see, they hear, they smell, they dance, they weep—their whole selves are involved! Their experiences, moreover, are never merely intellectual exercises. They are deeply emotional, life-changing encounters with God. Not surprisingly, because worship was a complex, holistic experience, it was something people prepared themselves to do—washing their clothes three days in advance as in Exodus 19, examining themselves as in 1 Corinthians 11, or crafting soul-stirring worship texts as in Romans 11, Ephesians 1, Philippians 2, or Colossians 1. It was something they prepared for, and that preparation made them ready to experience the spontaneous, wonderful, unpredictable workings of the Spirit of God.

Our Worship Tradition When I look at our own tradition against the worship experiences of Scripture, several points become clear. In no way can our worship services be called holistic experiences. They are overwhelmingly audibly oriented activities. We have rejected visual elements of worship. We do not decorate our meeting places. Each Sunday we enter buildings architecturally designed not with worship in mind, but rather, as lecture halls—bare white walls, harsh florescent lights, rows of seats facing the “speaker stand.” Not much room for mystery there! We have largely rejected any kinesthetic elements of worship as well. Except for the occasional times we have them stand for a song, our worshippers sit while we preach, pray, read Scripture, and bring the elements of the Lord’s Supper to them. Our tradition of worship, moreover, is heavily weighted toward intellect and away from emotion. Our rationalistic heritage has programmed us to fear our emotions. “Decently and in order,” for most of us, has not been the check on chaos that it was intended to be, but rather, a prison that stifles our worship and oppresses our spirits. We feel ourselves moved and stirred, and almost instinctively we cross our legs and fold our arms.

Ultimately, I can speak for no one but myself, but this tradition of worship has left me spiritually parched and empty. It is no longer enough for me to leave church having been taught. I yearn to leave having worshipped. When I worship, I yearn to encounter God—God’s majesty, God’s grace, God’s mystery. What I desperately need those worship activities to do is to usher me into the presence of the living God. I’m here to feed more than my mind. I’m here to feed my soul. I’m here to do more than add to my store of biblical knowledge. (I can’t do half of what I already know to do! What in the world do I need with more information?) I need to meet God, to feel God’s presence, to be transformed by that experience. I’m here to experience, in the bread and the wine, the presence of Jesus. In our prayers and our praise, I yearn to have my vision lifted, to glimpse the mystery and the power of God. I want what Isaiah had—a vision of God, high and exalted!

Some Questions . . . Out of that yearning, combined with my glimpses of worship in Scripture, I end by asking these questions—some of whose answers are beginning to come clear, and others I am just now learning to ask:

1. How can we worship so that our worship becomes an emotional as well as an intellectual experience? Can we find a place for the aesthetic and the intuitive in our worship, alongside the rational and logical?
2. What can we do to make our worship the holistic experience it is in Scripture—so that we worship not only through audible activities, but through visual and kinesthetic activities as well? What about decorations? What about architectural designs that show sensitivity to what is supposed to happen in worship?
3. What role does “body language” play in our worship? The way we carry our bodies both reflects and determines what’s going on in our hearts. While we traditionally react against religious groups that kneel, I wonder what would happen if just once, when we were about to pray, we invited

any who wished to kneel before the Lord. And what would happen if, as we celebrated the Lord's invitation to "come to his table," we actually got out of our seats and came to the table, rather than sitting there while the emblems were passed out. And what would happen if, in obedience to Paul's instruction in 1 Timothy 2, we lifted our hands in praise and prayer?

4. What is the role of the sermon in worship? Is it really supposed to be the main event, for which everything else is the warm-up? And is it enough for us who preach merely to explain texts and concepts? And what would happen if we who lead in worship focused on planning "worship experiences"—to which the sermon is subservient—rather than preparing a sermon and letting the rest "just happen"?

5. Finally, what is the role of preparation? Is worship something we "amble on into"? Do we have any real sense of who God is, and what it means to encounter God in worship? And because of the wonder and awesomeness of meeting God in worship, do we make ourselves ready to enter into his presence?

I don't pretend to know all of the answers. I'm just beginning to understand a few of the questions. And I don't know for sure where the journey will take me. But out of my own yearning for meaningful worship, I must ask the questions. In my worship and my leadership, I will seek for myself and for the people I serve nothing less than Isaiah's vision of the Lord God, high and exalted. And with all of my heart, I believe that when God's call, "Whom shall I send?" comes to us, no one will have to beg or cajole us to respond. Having encountered God as Isaiah did, with one voice we too will cry out, "Here am I, send me!"

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