

The Healthy Church: Embodying Worship

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The title for this series of twelve articles on the healthy church makes use of the term “embody.” Generally, this gives the sense of bringing to life. The essays have shown how the healthy church embodies, or brings to life qualities of forgiveness, diversity, hospitality, and so on. The same will apply to this topic: embodying worship. We will consider the ways in which worship is brought to life in healthy congregations. But, in a more literal sense, we also consider how worship is a physically embodied activity. It is brought to life in the congregation because it is an array of activities in which human bodies engage. When Christians gather for public worship, they physically come together, multiple bodies merging to become a local configuration of the body of Christ. Together, we do things: we sing, pray, speak and listen, move, stand, sit, kneel, bend, bow, touch, taste, wash, eat, and drink. The healthy church remembers that worship is all about human bodies become the body of Christ. Knowing this will help us to keep worship focused on the right activities; it will also help us to keep our priorities straight. Unhealthy worship, if we may use that term, is often that which confuses the issue of embodiment. Either it focuses on the role of individuals to the exclusion of the gathered body, or it loses sight of the fact that it is the body of Christ that is present and active in worship. This was the classic mistake of the church in Corinth which led Paul to reprimand those who turned worship into a time of hoarding and feasting. They neglected the sense that the whole body of Christ was gathered to share the Eucharistic meal. [1 Corinthians 11:21-29] In order to explore these issues of worship in healthy churches, let us consider three key issues that have to do with bringing worship to life: worship leadership,

performance, and inspiration. Each of them, as we will see, relates directly to the sense that worship of God is an embodied activity.

Worship Leadership

During the final decades of the twentieth century, North American churches were engaged in what was commonly known as the “worship wars.” It was largely a series of disagreements over worship styles or idioms. Because the most readily identifiable stylistic aspect of worship is the type of music being employed, the worship wars seemed to be largely about what kind of music a church used. In churches that leaned toward “contemporary worship” styles, the term “worship” came to be singularly identified with corporate songs (or choruses) of praise. A contemporary worship service might have a twenty or thirty minute song set termed “worship,” followed by a reading from scripture and a sermon. Accordingly, the “worship leader” was the person who led congregational singing from a microphone. He or she was frequently a guitarist or keyboardist who had the skills to lead a worship band and to lead the people from one song to another in a stylistic flow.

In recent years, the worship wars seem to have subsided and churches of various liturgical perspectives are seeking to learn from one another. Liturgically traditional churches are incorporating new music from “praise” oriented churches, congregations from “free church” traditions are adding more liturgical elements (such as more frequent celebration of communion) to their weekly gatherings, all are seeking to use traditional hymnody in fresh ways, and churches of every kind are making extensive use of the arts in worship. With fresh winds blowing in many quarters of the church, it is possible to reclaim the term “worship leader.” Worship is not merely the set of songs sung by band and congregation, but the whole array of activities that take place when God’s people gather (and when they are sent out). And worship leaders are all those persons

who have prepared well to lead the assembly in prayer, praise, lament, and response to hearing God's Word.

The term worship leader includes far more than musical leaders. When an individual shows up for worship on Sunday morning, consider the range of activities through which she is led: entering the building, being welcomed, finding a seat, meditation and silent prayer, listening to or reading about congregational activities, greeting others, singing songs and psalms, standing and sitting, praying, listening to the Word, being taught about the scriptures, reciting liturgical texts, participating in the sacraments, blessing and being blessed, and being sent forth in witness. Each element of worship is designed to involve the individuals that gather and each needs to be carefully planned and well led in order for worshipers to engage successfully in an encounter with one another and with Christ. Worship leaders for every worship activity are needed. Their focus is not upon themselves, but the roles they are recruited to execute. When they succeed, they draw people into an encounter with the Living God through the ways that they use their own bodies in the execution of leadership roles. Knowing when to gesture, when to smile, when to speak up or remain silent, when to turn, where to look, whom to address, and so forth—these are the responsibilities that worship leaders learn in order to lead assembled worshipers into the activities designed for their participation. Being thoughtful, intentional, and careful in their execution, worship leaders will achieve the biblical standard of leadership.

What is the biblical standard for leadership? The answer can be found in numerous places in both testaments. Regardless where it is recounted, the implied standard is always the same. Leaders are servants of God and God's people. Jesus' words to the disputing disciples in Luke 22:24-27 is an explicit example: "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the

one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.” Those who lead in worship are like those who wait at tables. They serve those who gather for the rites and the meal; they do so as efficiently and as invisibly as possible so that God’s people can be drawn into the fullness of the event.

Leading worship is a privilege and a joy. But it is not an entitlement for those seeking center stage. Worship leaders take the lead only insofar as it enables them to serve God and God’s people. They do their work not for their own sake, but for the sake of those that God has drawn together. Worship leaders, whether preachers, prayer leaders, acolytes, choir or band members, guitarists or organists, ushers and greeters, will lead in ways that draw attention not to themselves, but to Christ and those gathered in his presence. In healthy churches, worship leaders know that leadership is not “all about me,” but about the body of Christ, the people that God has given into our care during the gathering hour.

Knowing what to do with their bodies suggests that worship leaders know something about performance. This is another term that bears reconsideration.

Performance

Thoughtful worship leaders, singers, and preachers know that they should not be mere performers. We understand that our roles should be executed authentically, without pretense, and without distance from the people. This has often led to the misunderstanding that worship leaders and preachers ought to be seen as chummy and relevant. What is needed today are preachers and worship leaders who know that they need not be so culturally influenced so as to win favor with the people. Their job is to prepare themselves for a role that is larger than themselves and outside of their own social range. They are not to be the pals of the worshipers, but servants. Worship leaders and preachers need to understand the unique demands of their roles, and to execute, or perform

them with care and effectiveness. This means that worship leaders will want to learn what other kinds of public performers know: to prepare well in advance; to learn their parts and rehearse them until they are ready for public presentation; to move well; to stand in the correct place and to sit at the right moment; to gesture fully and gracefully; to speak audibly, but with flexibility and emotive power; to sing or chant beautifully, but without ostentation; and to serve with grace and good humor. While it is true that we should not be mere performers, it is also necessary that we should not be less than performers. A stage performer's job is to entertain an audience. A liturgical performer's job is to engage an assembly in a more active way. But the need for careful preparation and execution are equally important in both roles.

Too frequently in worship, we see things go awry because leaders forget to do what performers always know to do. Take a single example, one that is repeated in nearly every house of worship: the ineffective public reading of scripture. Since nearly everyone has the capacity to read aloud, public scripture reading is often used as an opportunity to involve more people in worship leadership. Often, the role is thrust upon people at the last minute: "Let's get Julie to do it, she has a nice voice." Now Julie is placed in a quandary. If she is eager to help out, she might say yes and make the most of it. But, if she would be given the chance to read the lesson in advance, scrutinize it for difficult pronunciations and phrasings, rehearse reading aloud, and give attention to meaning and emotion in the text, she would allow the text to come to life. In other words, she needs time and opportunity to practice. She needs to rehearse vocal range and quality, facial gestures, and body posture to bring the scripture to life. Sadly, we seem content to let this critical aspect of worship (it is the "Word of the Lord" after all!) be poorly performed. What is lost is not an opportunity to learn how well people can perform, but what God has to say to God's people. As the body of Christ, we are shaped by the Word. Let it ring among us with clarity and precision.

Reading scripture is one place where rehearsal is critical. But all worship leaders are performers in some way. Each needs to know his or her role and work on it so as to disappear in its execution. To practice one's performance is to allow oneself to make the most of the spiritual gifts that God has given us.

Inspiration

Everyone hopes that worship will be inspired. We want it to engage people, connect with their emotions, draw them deeply into prayer and praise, allow them to be touched by the working of the Holy Spirit. But, how do we embody that kind of worship? How do we tap into the forces, human and divine, that allow for such inspiration? We do so by attending to the creative gifts that God places in our midst. The key, again, is to listen to Paul's advice on the nature of the body of Christ.

In the passage following his Corinthian rebuke [I Corinthians 12:1-27], Paul teaches about the body of Christ and the gifts of the Holy Spirit that bring it to life. He makes it clear that not all persons have the same spiritual gifts. "To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom," Paul says, "and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues." [verses 8-10] The truth and sense of this is self-evident. Yet, in worship, we so often conduct our affairs forgetting that God has placed a tremendous array of gifts before us in the gathered body of Christ. Even in small congregations, there will be people specially gifted for many different kinds of worship leadership. There will be kindergarten teachers who make magnificent scripture readers because they read publicly to children with emotion and energy for a living. There will be those who love to serve quietly, behind the scenes who will

prepare the sacramental elements better than another person who is gifted for teaching. There are musicians of every size and skill level who, with the proper leadership and encouragement, can contribute their gifts meaningfully to corporate worship. There will be poetically gifted people who can draw others into public prayer in ways that are deeply engaging. There may even be people with gifts for preaching that can be employed. This is just the beginning of a long list of spiritual gifts that the Holy Spirit places in the local configurations of the body of Christ that we call congregations. Worship is inspired when unexpectedly good things happen. The spiritual gifts among us are many and some would surprise and delight us if we found ways to use them in worship. Worship is embodied, or brought to life when pastors and church leaders learn to be highly attentive to the spiritual gifts among us and find ways to encourage them and equip for their use in public worship.

How can we remain attentive to the gifts of the body of Christ? I encourage seminarians and pastors to see spiritual perception as a key part of their role in the church. Or, to put it more plainly, we need to be spiritual talent scouts. People are often unaware of their own special gifts; they might know they possess a certain capacity for some art or work, but think it is a common skill. We need to call out their gifts, name them, and encourage their use. People in public ministry know how this works: most of us do not enter the ministry without someone (if not many persons) perceiving and calling out in us the pastoral gifts of public speaking, compassion, and teaching. We need to do the same for our people. Persons of all ages in our congregations are the bearers of gifts for worship leadership. We can make a point in our ministry to look for those gifts, call them out in people, provide opportunity for their nurture, and finally employ them in the worship life of the congregation. When we have done so, we have served as agents of the Holy Spirit who first placed those gifts in our midst, and who, it is not hard to imagine, hopes they will be well used in the public ministry of the body of Christ.

Conclusion

How does the healthy church embody worship? We have seen three ways in which it is done. We can highlight and celebrate the many roles of worship leadership, learning to do all things well for the sake of God's people. We can realize the responsibility we have as performers who know that being well trained and well prepared makes for effective worship leadership. And, we can learn to draw the spiritual gifts out of the body of Christ in order for them to serve the church in ways that may surprise and delight us. By doing these things, we are using the uniqueness of our own bodies and the special gifts of the local body of Christ to bring worship to life.

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