



Dr. James C. Howell eWorship

eWorship 25 - Funerals

"Jacob breathed his last, and was gathered to his people. Joseph fell on his father's face and wept over him, and kissed him. He commanded the physicians to embalm his father... and they wept for seventy days" (Genesis 50:1). The funeral happens at the intersection of a life ending, complex preparations for burial, a broad range of emotions - and God. The funeral is worship.

People wonder whether the body should be in the sanctuary or not: one is a reminder of our death, our offering up of the body to God in hope of resurrection; the other reminds us that "He is not here; he is risen." Is embalming or cremation better? Generally in Bible times, neither was practiced; bodies simply were allowed to return to what they had been in the beginning - some stuff. We trust God to do with us as God wills in eternity, no matter what has happened to us in this place.

The funeral may be uplifting, but its measure is not whether it makes us feel better. Bonhoeffer, reflecting on family he had loved and lost, wrote, "Nothing can make up for the absence of someone we love... That sounds very hard at first, but it is a great consolation, for the gap, as long as it remains unfilled, preserves the bonds between us. God doesn't fill the gap; God keeps it empty and so helps us keep alive our deeper and richer memories... Gratitude changes the gaps into tranquil joy. The beauties of the past are borne as a precious gift."

The early Christians worshipped in catacombs, subterranean burial vaults where the faithful believed they enjoyed a proximity to heaven; the grave was the portal through which one traveled to the direct presence of God. We pay meticulous, reverent attention to the dying and their survivors; our best dress, flowers, and music and dress express love. The funeral declares we never stop being loved, by our fellow worshippers, and by God. "If the Lord had not been on our side, we would have been swept away" (Psalm 124). We may eulogize the deceased, but the focus isn't the grandeur of a life lived but the amazing grace of God. We are saved not by a high mountain of accomplishments, but by the power and mercy of God.

And yet the goodness of a life well-lived is honored in the funeral. Moments of wisdom and charity are recalled - not merely to extol the deceased, but to remind us of what life with God looks like. The service's prayers, hymns, and words give our amorphous, overwhelming ache some shape, a frame to make intelligible our loss - and to take solace in the hope that the last word pronounced is not the death certificate, but the resurrection of our Lord.

So the funeral is for the deceased, but also for the survivors, and so it is for God. We bow our heads in sorrow and commend the one we have loved - and ourselves! - to God. Faith "is not a matter of getting a bulldog grip and not letting the devil pry us loose. No, faith is letting go rather than keeping hold. I am coming to think God loves and helps best those who are so beat and have so much nothing when they come to die that it is almost as if they had persevered in nothing but had gradually lost everything, piece by piece, until there was nothing left but God... It is a question of his hanging on to us, by the hair of the head, where we cannot see or reach. Who can see the top of his own head?" (Thomas Merton)

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eWorship 24 - Benediction

Paul concluded each of his letters with something greater than "Sincerely" or "Au revoir." "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you" (1 Corinthians 16:23) - a prayer, a blessing, calling down the most precious, priceless realities on somebody else. Words have power; they package love across space and time.

The ancient Israelites understood these verbal blessings. The oldest scrap of Bible archaeologists have ever found are little scrolls of thinly hammered out silver, with Numbers 6:24-26 scratched onto the surface: "The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace." And how were these miniature silver scrolls used? They were placed in the grave with the body of a loved one - a simple, striking expression of faith, a recognition of the only thing that matters in the end, to see the face of God, to rest in God's peace, to be blessed by God and each other.

When someone dies... what were his last words? and what did I last say to her? Our last words in worship matter. We pronounce a "benediction," a good word, underlining the love and grace we have just experienced, a common plea for that love to envelop us as we exit, and to be the protective, driving force until we return.

Some clergy cleverly say, "The worship has ended, now the service begins." Indeed. The Greek word for "church" is *ekklesia*, which means "called out." Worship catapults us out onto the streets, into our neighborhoods and workplaces, where we will be different. We do not rush; we don't have to. We do not fret over the day's schedule; we are freed from that. "When we leave worship, we ought to go out the way Moses descended Mount Sinai: with his face shining, with his heart brave and strong, to face the world's difficulties" (Oscar Romero).

Yet in most languages, we do not say "Goodbye" with any finality. The French say *au revoir*, and we may say "See you later." We anticipate the time we will be together again; even when unlikely or impossible, our minds naturally gravitate toward a future togetherness. So it is when we leave worship. At the close of worship, the early Christians uttered an Aramaic word that lingered long after anybody spoke Aramaic: *Maranatha*: "Come, Lord!" (Revelation 22:20). As we leave we not only long to be with the Lord, but to see each other's faces again: "Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love... When we asunder part, it gives us inward pain; but we shall still be joined in heart, and hope to meet again" (John Fawcett's hymn).

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eWorship 23 - Holy Matrimony

In a culture where "love" is trivialized, and style trumps substance, it is hard to remember that a wedding is worship, an offering of the people (led by bride and groom) directed to God. It is hard for God to be the star: the bride glows so brightly, the groom darkly handsome. Yet "unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain" (Psalm 127:1).

In a wedding that is worship, God is praised, music is sacred, thanksgiving is tendered, Scripture is proclaimed, the party high-fives must wait, all is dignity, commitments are solemnized. Consider the theological beauty of commitment in our age that flits here and there and knows more about contracts than personal covenants: "Somewhere people make and keep promises. They choose not to quit when the going gets rough. They stick to lost causes. They hold on to a love grown cold. If you have a ship you will not desert, if you have people you will not forsake, if you have causes you will not abandon, then you are like God" (Lewis Smedes).

How is God's love mirrored in a wedding? This matters, since unchurched unbelievers attend, and might notice. When Martin Luther stunned the world by getting married, he invited a friend: "You must come to my wedding; I will make the angels laugh, and the devils weep." When God is glorified by the wonder and sanctification of human love, heaven sings, the evil that would poison and divide is shoved behind some bush.

The wedding is to marriage what Baptism is to the Christian life. How do we continue what we began in the worshipful wedding? Just as we remember our Baptism, the married remember their wedding; we find ourselves (as voiced eloquently in Wendell Berry's poem) "choosing again what I chose before" - and not just her, or him, but God, and the Church!

Marriage's chance at success isn't having fun, intimate relations, or enjoyable activities - but God. Henri Nouwen once suggested that many marriages "are like interlocking fingers. Two people cling to each other as two hands interlocked in fear. They connect because they cannot survive individually. But as they interlock they realize they cannot take away each other's loneliness. Then friction arises and tension increases. Often a breakup is the final

result. But God calls man and woman into a different relationship - one that looks like two hands folded in an act of prayer. The fingertips touch, but the hands create a space, like a little tent. Such a space is created by love, not fear. Marriage is creating a new, open space where God's love can be revealed to the stranger, the child, the friend, the visitor."

So in the wedding we glimpse our life together with God: we do not know what will unfold, but we determine to stick together, with God at the center, serving together, kneeling side by side.

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eWorship 22 - Seasons and Years

At one moment, Time feels like an expansive gift, and at the next like a fleeting nemesis. Worship takes time seriously, and provides us a framework in which to understand its movement, and to live into its passing with purpose.

Time isn't just an arrow flying forever in one direction, but a circle, a web, life given, life lost, life renewed, so natural, witness to God's constancy. Time has a rhythm, a pace. Imagine a world with no seasons... and although a calendar can feel like an albatross, imagine life without the marking of time... Worship is an alternative calendar, revealing the hidden plot of time, the subtle activity of the Lord of time. Children learn colors and symbols, and we dress up for sacred days. The secular calendar is all about busy-ness, productivity, while the worship calendar is all about God, who made time, blessed time, entered time, acted in time.

"You crown the year with your bounty" (Psalm 65:11). In ancient times, the Israelites were obligated to join pilgrim caravans and travel to Jerusalem for the great festivals marking each year. At Passover, the feast of Weeks (Pentecost), the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), and Tabernacles (read the calendars in Deuteronomy 16 and Leviticus 23), Israel remembered God's great acts in history, and in nature, and you brought your best livestock, your first grains, for sacrifice, to express gratitude to God.

The Christian year begins (appropriately?) just after Thanksgiving, with Advent (from a Latin word that means "coming") - a time of waiting. We prepare for the coming of Jesus at Christmas the way a mother feels a stirring of life unseen, prepares a crib, struggles through some agony before life dawns. The Christian life always is waiting, longing, yearning, like winter for the spring, the presence of Christ something we want, long for, reach toward, but never fully possess. Our true life is out in front of us, beckoning, promising to show up. Then Christmas comes, and we bask in the glory of the angels and shepherds until the twelfth night, when the season of Epiphany (meaning "appearing") begins. Just as the star appeared to the foreign Magi who were drawn to Christ, the truth of the Gospel is for all people, not just us insiders - and so Epiphany is a season when we focus on missions. Easter is coming - but not without Lent, a period of intense repentance and even fasting, lasting forty days (just as Jesus willingly endured a forty day test of faith), beginning with Ash Wednesday. Holy Week is the pinnacle of the year, as we re-experience Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, his last supper (Maundy Thursday), the crucifixion (Good Friday) and then the resurrection (Easter). Then the Holy Spirit rushes upon the Church at Pentecost - and then next year, we re-rehearse the full Bible story all over again, we find ourselves as "extras" in the Bible's dramatic epic, now living inside the story. My clock now seems to run differently, each tick, every lap a finger pointing to the goodness of God who came just in time - and my life makes sense. "For everything there is a season, a time for every matter under heaven" (Ecclesiastes 3:1).

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eWorship 21 - School or Theology and Virtue

Worship is what we offer to God, yet at the same time the sanctuary is like a classroom in which we are the students, learning by listening, participating, repetition and discovery. What is the subject matter? and the intended outcome?

We want to know about God, but never merely the facts. After a lifetime of intense theological inquiry we will never

grasp more than a handful of sand on the vast seashore of who God is. But we want to know, and to know more, and to love more. We come with questions, only to be surprised by new questions; we pick up a few answers, which whet our appetite to ask more, and to be more like the One we have come to know in worship. The soul is like some great gothic cathedral, decades in the making, slowly rising out of the ground, unimaginable labor involved, yet in the end a beautiful place where God is glorified, loved and served.

Worship is a school of theology - and virtue. Our society suffers from a bleak confusion when it comes to ethics. We think "I'm a pretty good person," and do not think much of ethics until we come to a crisis, a huge decision, a moral dilemma, and then we scratch our heads and wonder "What would God want me to do?" - a good question, but as hard to answer as it would be for me to decide whether to use a steel girder or a brick facing on a construction site if I had never been trained in architectural engineering. I could pick, but the building would fall down.

"Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, so you may prove what is the will of God" (Romans 12:1-2). In worship, we cultivate habits of thought, we are trained in how to be, how to be solid, as if some gyroscope or compass is slowly being installed in the heart, so we will know God's heart. We can then trust the worshipful self and its instincts. Some improvisation will be required - just as well-trained actors learn their characters so well they can improvise on stage. Worship is a rehearsal, living into who I am in God's drama. The virtues instilled in worship keep me calm in a crisis; I know which way is north. And who knows? Faithfulness in worship may actually prevent us stumbling into a crisis or two.

Think about prayer, and the difference it makes: God trusts us, and lets us get involved in what transpires down here! God gives us immense responsibility. "Response-ability": God has made us able to respond to God's grace. So we listen to Scripture, sing hymns, pray, hear the Word, give money, knowing that we are being schooled to respond appropriately, faithfully, courageously to the grace of God.

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eWorship 20 - Repentance and Forgiveness

In the 70's, Karl Menninger wrote *Whatever Became of Sin?* Citizens of Western civilization seem to have lost their sense of how we live at odds with God. Guilt and remorse seem psychologically unhealthy to us; we prefer to think positively, to look on the bright side of things. A sunny brand of Christianity has emerged that does not dig into the underbrush of sin. Worshipers grin in celebration.

And yet humanity's plight has not changed: in worship, we notice that murky waters have seeped into the soul. We have forgotten about God for swaths of time. We have (like Atlas) hoisted the world on our own shoulders. We have delighted in what is evil. We have ignored the sorrow of others. We have hurt others and ourselves, and the air must be cleared. Our fractured relationship with God must be renewed, or else we cannot worship, any more than we can share in tender conversation over a lingering dinner with a spouse we had wounded just a few hours before without saying something, an abject apology, a pledge of contrition.

Repentance is not a mere apology to get ourselves out of trouble (a la "I cannot tell a lie, I did chop down the cherry tree"). Repentance is not a mood or a feeling. The Hebrew word *shûb* means to do an about-face, to make a 180° turn: Lord, I have been charging off in the wrong direction, and now I turn to hurry back into your arms. The Greek word *metanoia* means "change of mind": Lord, my thinking has been confused and self-indulgent, but now I am changing my perspective so I can think your thoughts, and will what you want for me. I cannot do this alone: to repent depends on a miracle, the firm labor of the Spirit who loves us too much to leave us to our own devices. "The mercy of God is necessary not only when we repent, but even to lead us to repent" (St. Augustine).

Repentance won't settle for less than a repaired relationship. If we notice clutter in some corner of the heart, or an unconverted knot in our actions, we turn it over to God, wheeling 180° to think - and behave differently! True repentance bears fruit (Matthew 3:8); we prepare for change. "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me" (Psalm 51:10).

In worship, we have the mutually embarrassing (and therefore encouraging) privilege of exposing our waywardness in front of other people! Early Methodists were required to be in small AA-type groups in which each person would be asked "What sins have you committed since we were together last week?" When we confess sin together in public worship, we enjoy a humility as we are reminded of how we all struggle; we lift each other up. We realize sin damages not just me, but the community, the world. But there is hope, there is power for change. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote that repentance is "not thinking about my need, my problems, my sins, and my fears, but allowing myself to be caught up into the way of Jesus Christ."

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eWorship 19 - Praying for Others

Christians at worship hardly notice what is most stunning, the moment that is sheer nonsense or else the most priceless jewel. On cue, we bow our heads, close our eyes, and mentally express love and concern toward a God we cannot see, and even on behalf of people we do not know. Even more strangely, we believe God hears, and cares even more than we do - and gets involved.

"Does prayer work?" is the wrong question, of course. Prayer is love, and love is never wasted. We love, and so we pray. God loves, and so God hears our prayers. Worship is proximity to the heart of God, and our concern is a hazy yet palpable reflection of God's heart.

To pick up an ancient image, in prayer we remind God to be God, and we in turn are reminded that we are the people of God. Public prayer, corporate prayer, is the invaluable gift that stretches me and my spirituality beyond merely praying, "Gimme, gimme, help me, help me." Thumb through the Episcopalians' Book of Common Prayer, and you will find prayers for schoolteachers, prisoners, justice, peace, the environment, industry, soldiers, doctors and nurses, the President, the hungry, handicapped and lonely. We pray for people in Sri Lanka, Lithuania, Biloxi, across the tracks in our own town, and on the other end of the pew. When we pray, we are part of something bigger than me and my little concerns; prayer is huge, enormous, as large as the heart of God.

Together we learn what Israel knew how to do: to cry out not just for individual needs, but also for issues that face larger bodies of people. When Israel as a nation faced tragedy or challenges, they fasted, gathered, and cried out with a single voice to God (Psalm 74). In worship we name the world's hurt, refusing to be sheltered from it just because our little corner of the world is comfortable.

C.S. Lewis once wrote, "It is far easier to pray for a bore than to go and visit him." Prayer is not an unloading of responsibility. We pray, "Lord, show us how we might in some way be the answer to our own prayer." If we pray for the hungry, or for peace, or for strangers, we cannot help but get busy doing something. If I am praying for anyone at all, my attitude toward that person is changed, softened, and infused with grace.

And so it is the pinnacle of God's largesse that, when we worship by offering up the world and our very selves, God listens and cares, and so we listen and care. Prayer matters. Prayer changes the world.

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eWorship 18 - The Lord's Supper

At his last meal with his friends, Jesus said "Do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19). For 2,000 years, the Lord's supper (often called "the Eucharist" or "Holy Communion") has been the heart of Christian worship.

To understand the Lord's supper, we begin by remembering the way Jesus conducted himself (or failed to!) at table: one faux pas after another, violating social custom. He ate with tax collectors and sinners (Luke 15:2), and was accused of gluttony; he rudely urged his hosts not to invite their friends or the "right" people, but the poor, maimed, and blind (Luke 14); Jesus permitted an unseemly woman to wash his feet with her hair (Luke 7); he in turn washed the feet of his disciples (John 13). When we "do this in remembrance" of Jesus, we expect surprise and even offense,

social subversion, the shattering of what seems "normal."

Theologically, the Lord's supper has several nuances: it is an act of thanksgiving (Acts 2:46), a fellowship meal (1 Corinthians 10:16), a memorial (Luke 22:19), even a sacrifice (Hebrews 9:14). Ignatius called it "the medicine of immortality," for this meal anticipates the biblical vision of the glorious banquet that heaven will be.

The Church's passion to understand this mystery has inflamed fiery (and sad) division. The initial "winners" were the proponents of the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, the belief that God powerfully alters the elements into the true body and blood of Christ. The leaders of the Protestant Reformation disagreed - but did not agree with each other. In 1529, Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli argued over what Christ meant when he said "This is my body" (Mark 14:22). Luther asserted a "real presence" of Christ, Zwingli a spiritual fellowship of believers with Christ.

Christians debate what kind of bread to use, and whether to serve wine or grape juice. The Welch's label says "since 1869," the date Thomas Welch, a dentist (and communion steward), due to his scruples about wine, concocted "unfermented sacramental wine" for his church. Methodists generally do not use wine; Catholics and Episcopalians do. Frederick Buechner wryly claimed that grape juice is "bland, a ghastly symbol of the blood of Jesus Christ. Wine is booze, dangerous; it makes the timid brave and the reserved amorous. It loosens the tongue and breaks the ice. It kills germs. As symbols go, it is a rather splendid one."

Denominations continue to parry opinions, even excluding those who disagree, again not out of stupidity but of a passion for truth in these matters. Yet the Lord's Supper should be a haven of unity instead of a source of dissension. "The Lord's supper takes place on the basis of an invitation which is as open as the outstretched arms of Christ on the cross. Because he died for the reconciliation of 'the world,' the world is invited to reconciliation in the supper" (Jürgen Moltmann).

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eWorship 17 - Baptism

Paul wrote, "There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism" (Ephesians 4:5). So why can't Christians get on the same page with Baptism? How much water is required? How old should the person baptized be? Must Baptism happen at all?

Jesus himself was baptized (Matthew 3:16), and his last words instructed us to go out and baptize other people (Matthew 28:19). The Jordan River is shallow, more of a winding creek; you can't get your head under the water. The Greek word, baptizo, means "dip" or "pour." For centuries, Christians used Roman baths or shallow pools, and candidates stripped off their old work clothes, descended into the pool to then emerge, be handed a lighted candle, clothed in a new white robe, and given a drink of milk and honey: mind-boggling imagery! Baptism is a sign of union with Christ (Romans 6:3), membership in the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:13), the gift of the Spirit and forgiveness (Acts 2:38).

But the mere application of water doesn't seem to do much good in itself. Hitler, Stalin, and plenty of other wretched people were baptized. Baptism happens at the intersection of three promises: parents promise to raise a child as Christian (or the believer promises to lead a Christian life), the Church promises to nurture that faith, and God promises to envelop the person with grace and power. These promises are deadly serious, and so to trivialize Baptism as something cute or routine is to misunderstand everything. "Baptism is not some social rule in the traditional pattern of life. Baptism is the breaking of all rules and customs" (Karl Barth).

Many churches baptize infants. The symbolism is profound theologically: no matter how old we are, we are vulnerable, totally dependent before God. We are cradled by God's grace; a voice declares "This is my beloved child" (Matthew 3:17). Martin Luther's advice to the Christian facing difficulties? "Remember your baptism!" But how can I remember if I were baptized at 3 months? You notice other children, you imagine yourself loved by God when you were fragile, you know God knew you before you knew God (or anybody else), you trust God's strong embrace.

And yet many others baptize only adults - and this is theologically wise, too. We come for Baptism, not boasting of

me and my brilliant spiritual decision, but as humbly obedient, ready to be washed of the grime that has accumulated, thirsty for the water that only Jesus can give. The theological posture required for believers' baptism and infant baptism are really kin, aren't they?

What about the volume of water used? The sprinkle of a few drops is as tenderly beautiful as the morning dew, or the gentle rain falling down from a generous God. The flood of submersion is as powerful as catching a curling wave, or leaping in the deep end - and it's risky! Yet God's strong hand is there to buoy us up, to quench our thirst, to cleanse us again, and again.

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eWorship 16 - Sacraments

The first biographer of St. Francis of Assisi praised his preaching: "Not with enticing words of wisdom, but in virtue of the Holy Spirit he proclaimed the kingdom of God with great confidence; he never used flattering words, and he despised all blandishments; what he preached to others in words, he had first experienced by deeds, so that he might speak the truth faithfully."

We know that words, powerful as they may be, are never sufficient. Deeds, actions win the day - and the Church has always relied upon special Words in Action, which we call "Sacraments." In Latin, a sacramentum was an oath of allegiance taken by a soldier, a vow to keep a promise. The earlier Greek word translated "sacrament," mysterion, was a secret revealed from the very heart of God. In the Sacraments, God opens up God's deepest self to us, and invites us to swear our loving devotion in return. St. Augustine defined a Sacrament as a "visible word," as "the visible form of an invisible grace."

As Christians reflected upon Scripture over many centuries, they began to focus on these visible words, tangible signs that conveyed God's grace - and in practice, there were seven Sacraments: Baptism, the Lord's supper, Confirmation, Penance, extreme unction, ordination, and marriage. But during the Reformation, Martin Luther shortened the list to two (Baptism and the Lord's supper), insisting that Jesus instituted just these two, not the others. Penance still happens (even if informally) for Protestants, although often it's in private prayer or in counseling with the pastor. We confirm young people after a battery of classes to establish their ongoing, full membership in the Church. Extreme unction is not formalized but we do pray special prayers by the deathbed. And we ordain and marry... and while these acts are pivotal and worshipful (we might even say sacramental), they are not strictly Sacraments, explicit means of grace demanded of us by Jesus himself.

The Sacraments are shimmering moments of power when God acts, when community is formed, when we are all reshaped and we discover our true place in God's family, shattering our isolation, uniting us with Christians who have engaged in these same "visible words" for 2000 years all over the world. The pastor may be highly skilled or plodding, but the Sacrament "works" because it was designed by God and advocated in Scripture, and is received in faith by those who worship. In eWorship 17 and 18, we will focus on Baptism and the Lord's supper.

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eWorship 15 - How To Listen To Sermons

Most of worship is repetitive: Creed, hymns, offering, prayers. The novelty each week is in the sermon - or is it? What exactly is the preacher trying to do? While we may think we're listening to the preacher's fresh ideas via catchy stories or memorable soundbytes, good sermons are utterly unoriginal. The subject matter was defined centuries back, and there are really only about five sermons, repeated over and over. A sermon is like putting a new frame around an old painting, setting the familiar in a new perspective; or the sermon is like the docent in the museum drawing the viewer's attention to a particular set of brushstrokes, or the painter's usage of color. Nothing is new; yet the surprises of what is old are not yet exhausted, and they wait for us to notice, and then - perhaps a bit differently from viewing a painting - to do something.

Richard Lischer wrote, "What the preacher comes up with is not so much a new meaning but a new performance of the text, one that will enable its listeners to perform it themselves in their daily lives." Listening to a sermon is not like sitting in speech class, rating the skill of the orator. Instead we ask, "Is there any word from the Lord?" (Jeremiah 37:17). This Word is not necessarily heard in the slickest, funniest, most charming speech. In fact, a smooth, clever oration, intoned with a resonant baritone, may shove the still small voice of God aside - and the listener is impressed with the talker and does not notice God, who can and does speak through the preacher who lacks theatrical gifts...

Preachers do not try to guess what you want said, or to flatter you or buttress your preconceived notions about God and the world. Scripture is read, and through that lens we hunt for the intersection between that ancient Word and life in this place and time. Barbara Brown Taylor says the preacher is like Cyrano de Bergerac, supplying words and passing notes between two would-be lovers. So the preacher cannot do the work alone! Listening is a labor of love - for preacher and pew-sitters.

Can we overhear God's Word in the words? and are we prepared to perform that Word in our lives? How can I be a good listener? Come with an open mind; ratchet up your expectations. Do not sit back in judgment and decide whether you agree or disagree. Expect that a true, faithful, honest word from God will crowd your style, step on your toes, expose your ideas as half-baked, rattle you, and even bring you comfort and hope when you were numb to the possibility. Get yourself ready to hear - during the service, before the service, during the week. Pray, thumb through the passage ahead of time, converse with friends before and after. Then we see right through the preacher and, poised for action, we ask "Speak, Lord, your servant is listening" (1 Samuel 3:10).

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eWorship 14 - Creed

In ancient times, hundreds of Christians, under interrogation, refused to bow down to the empire's gods, stood their ground and declared, "I believe in God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth..." and were executed for saying so.

Every time we say the Apostles' Creed, or the Nicene or another of Christendom's historic creeds, we step into a long, steady river, the great two thousand year story of believers, missionaries, and martyrs. When I say "I believe in God...", "I become part of something bigger than myself. My faith is something in me, my reaching out, my believing... The Latin root of credo ("I believe") means "I give my heart to." "I believe" is not merely saying "I feel" or "I want" or "I think," but rather, "God is" - and I fling myself upon God, I attach myself to God, I promise to live into God's story. So faith is also outside myself. Faith has content, and it is old, time-tested. "Deep convictions are not hazarded, but grown into slowly" ([Nicholas Lash](#)).

Reciting the Creed in worship helps us grow into deep convictions. To believe without the Creed would be like baking without a measuring cup, or building furniture without a ruler. To believe with the Creed reminds me my faith is no solo act. The Nicene Creed improved upon the Apostles' by changing "I believe" to "We believe." We need each other, and faith ushers us into God's family, where we read the Bible, sing hymns, ask questions and reflect together on theology - but it is easy to miss the forest for the trees. What is at the heart of what we believe?

The Creed is a story - the Bible's story. "What the Scriptures say at length, the Creed says briefly" (Lash). The Apostles' Creed is a quick summary of the 66 books of the Bible, a bird's eye view of the high points of the story spanning thousands of years. How easy it is to get mired in the 1,189 chapters and 31,000+ verses of the very long Bible! The Creed helps us detect the plot, maneuver the crucial turning points in the narrative.

Dorothy Sayers wrote a book whose title poses a choice: [Creed? Or Chaos?](#) Christians opt for the Creed, declaring there is such a thing as truth, and that truth matters. So we repeat what is true every week, maybe perfunctorily - but perhaps with the solid substance that is manifest when a couple parts in the morning with a kiss that is little bit perfunctory, but bears witness to something deep and large. That depth is the revealed love of God in Jesus. Ancient Christian teaching is not a straitjacket, but a loving, tender, experienced tutor; it is "the job of doctrine to hold us still before Jesus" ([Rowan Williams](#)).

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eWorship 13 - Listening to Scripture

"When Jesus went to the synagogue on the Sabbath, they handed him the book of the prophet Isaiah. He opened the book and found the place where it was written, 'The Spirit of the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and the recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed.' Then he closed the book, and sat down; and he said, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing'" (Luke 4:16-21).

This drama is played out every Sunday morning, and if we dare to be confident about anything in worship, it is the reading of Scripture. Even at the Church's most embarrassing, least faithful moments, no matter how vapid the preaching, how offkey the music, how vicious the infighting, Scripture was read. Truth insisted on getting a hearing; beauty, if only for that moment, dawned on the room.

The Scripture reading is not the warmup band for the main act (the sermon); rather, the sermon hopes to put a frame around the text, and to hammer together some bridge between the text and our lives. The whole service, music, prayers - everything is constructed around the featured reading of the day, the way an entire symphony is fashioned around a simple melody.

Many churches say, "Turn in your Bible to..." - and facility at finding chapter and verse in Scripture is a life skill every Christian should master. But as much as I want people digging into their Bibles throughout the week, part of me wonders if worship is a time to put the Bible down, and with faces up, we simply listen to the reader, we hear a Word together. Think about the most poignant moments in your life: words are exchanged face to face. Scripture is God speaking to us. For most of the history of Christianity, Christians didn't own personal Bibles; nobody much knew how to read! The Word was read aloud, and people listened intently. Martin Luther suggested that "the organ of faith is the ear, not the eye" - for we "walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Corinthians 5:7). But then perhaps it would be even better if we all brought Bibles and dug in while the Word was read... Either way, we never forget that our zealous obsession is to become "doers of the Word, not just hearers" (James 1:22). The Bible is not some relic out of humanity's religious past, eliciting quizzical interest. The Bible is a script for your life. You hear it; then you go and do it, you mimic its pattern, you let it take on flesh when you've left worship.

How do we choose which passage(s) to read? Sometimes we think and pray, but more often we simply follow the lectionary, which is a sequence of readings from the entire Bible. Most Christians around the world follow the same recipe of readings, so we are all on the same page. Over hundreds of Sundays, we are exposed not to the preacher's favorites but to the broad scope of all God has shared with us in the Bible.

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eWorship 12 - The Offering

If "Acts of gratitude make you grateful" (Nouwen), a regular, disciplined act of gratitude in worship is the offering. Early in my ministry, I was a bit embarrassed, almost offended, by the attention we give to money in worship. Valuable minutes are used up passing the plates. We haul the proceeds right up to the altar, lift the money up high, say a special prayer... Never do we take the time to gather pledges of holiness, or mission volunteering. Why all the attention given to money, which already gets the lion's share of attention outside worship?

But I have come to understand how crucial the offering can be. In a world where money talks, where the reigning idolatry says "Money is the answer," and we are tutored to believe I earned it, I deserve it, and it's mine to do with as I wish - we need desperately to take some time, to be instructed that it belongs to God. In worship every week, I have the chance to declare "I will not bow down to the idol of money; God alone is the fullness of life." Maybe passing the plates is like handing out a test: you've been in class, you've heard the material - but did you get it? Worship is subversive, and we engage in this delightful matchmaking - between people who unwittingly let themselves get lied to by money and need desperately to give a lot of it away to grow close to God, and the desperate need in the world for

the work the Church does which just can't get done without significant funds.

In ancient Israel, when the wheat finally ripened, instead of rushing in to bake the loaf for which your family was desperately hungry, you took that first grain, and burned it on a stone altar, the smoke curling heavenward, an expression of thanks to the One who sent the rain and made the soil yield something good. If your flock of sheep prospered, you expressed gratitude by killing and burning the most stalwart male (not the runt), the one you thought you needed for next year's breeding. Yet if you trusted God, this was the sheep that you gave up -- proving you knew the sheep and your future belonged to God in the first place. To grow in gratitude, we need to be sure our "thanks" are tangible: our stuff offered to God, shared with the poor.

Tithing has been a historic standard in Christendom. John Wesley thought a mere 10% for God was chintzy, since not 10% but 100% of what I have belongs to God! But as a starting point to develop more generous habits, the tithe is a real delight to those who go there. Does my giving reflect the spectacular wonder of God's grace? Am I living for me? or is God at the center? How many of my expenditures are self-indulgent? or do they give glory to God? "You must give what will cost you something. This is giving not just what you can live without, but what you can't live without or don't want to live without. Something you really like. Then your gift becomes a sacrifice which will have value before God. This giving until it hurts, this sacrifice is what I call love in action" (Mother Teresa).

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eWorship 11 - Thanksgiving

From our opening theme in worship, praise, we move toward a related mood: giving thanks. Praise is awestruck and glorifies God for who God is. Thanks is dumbfounded and grateful for what God has done for us.

We think of gratitude as good manners: you write a note; children are instructed to say "Thank you." Or we think of gratitude as a feeling you have spontaneously, or else you just don't - and far too often we don't. We nurture grievances and file complaints. Advertisers incessantly lull us into a sense of dissatisfaction so we will buy their products. Even the season of Thanksgiving becomes one more day of vacation, when the malls have sales and we gorge ourselves with a bit too much turkey and dressing.

Worship is school of gratitude. The ancient Israelites enjoyed a huge advantage over us in terms of feeling grateful. Lacking technology and financial security, they knew they were utterly dependent upon God for their bread (if they had any bread), for shelter (if they had any shelter), for taking that next breath, for the sunshine and rain. We modern people are so smart, so self-sufficient - especially in America, where we prize "independence" above all else. In an "It's all up to me!" and "Look out for #1" culture, how will we learn gratitude?

Worship subversively turns independence on its ear. In worship (the only refuge from the demands of autonomy) I can relax and say: I am not the master of my fate. It's not all up to me. "Every good and perfect gift comes down from the Father" (James 1:17). I don't "earn" what is genuinely good in life. It is all gift, all grace. "Grace and gratitude belong together like heaven and earth. Grace evokes gratitude like the voice an echo. Basically, all sin is simply ingratitude" (Karl Barth).

Henri Nouwen understood how gratitude takes practice: "The discipline of gratitude is the explicit effort to acknowledge that all I am and have is given to me as a gift to be celebrated with joy. Gratitude as a discipline involves a conscious choice. I can choose to be grateful even when my emotions and feelings are still steeped in hurt. It is amazing how many occasions present themselves in which I can choose gratitude instead of a complaint. I can choose to be grateful, even if my heart is bitter. I can choose to speak about goodness and beauty, even when my inner eye looks for something to call ugly. I can choose to listen to the voices that forgive and to look at the faces that smile, even while I still hear words of resentment and grimaces of hate... The choice for gratitude rarely comes without some real effort. But each time I make it, the next choice is a little easier, a little freer, a little less self-conscious. Acts of gratitude make one grateful."

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eWorship 10 - Praise

Praise is cheap nowadays, misdirected at what is trivial, superlatives squandered on the innocuous: celebrities, junk to buy, TV drivel, sophomoric diversions. So the first chord sounded in worship is counter-cultural: taking refuge from the racket of mindless fawning over what is ridiculous, from the glitz of what vaunts itself as delivering the good life, worshippers praise the Lord, the only One worthy of praise.

When we praise, we delight in Who God is, instead of on What's in it for me... the way a lover dotes on a photo of the beloved, admiring her beauty, musing on his qualities. Praise is our amazement at God, our recognition of the power, goodness and tenderness of the creator. Praise enjoys God's love. Praise is our best attempt to feel, say, or sing something appropriate to God. Yet in our busy lives, praise of God will require some retraining. Praise doesn't "work," it is not productive, it isn't even about me. Praise is being lost in adoration, awestruck by the divine beauty.

Teach us to praise! In worship, we sing hymns whose lyrics, melodies and harmonies lift us out of bondage to our selves and what pretends to be praiseworthy, the centrifugal force of the Spirit luring us out of me and my smallness, upward to the joys of celebrating God's character. Praise cures much of what is wrong inside us. "Adoration leaves no room for pride" (Fred Pratt Green). "Praise is the antidote to despair" (David Ford). Worship solves problems, since we were made to praise, since being "lost in wonder, love and praise" (Charles Wesley) is our true vocation.

Praise happens not just in the congregational hymn or the choral anthem. Praise happens when heads bow, when the stranger is warmly welcomed, when a listener nods (or hollers "Amen!") during the sermon. Praise is profound in the stammering silence, and in our departure from the sanctuary: for then we are determined to praise God by noticing God's stunning creation, striving for excellence at work, studying hard, expressing love for family, pausing now and then to sigh over God's wisdom, might and compassion.

To learn praise we need mentors. St. Francis, nearing death, racked with pain and hemorrhaging, his eyesight gone, wrote, "Most high, powerful, all-good Lord, All praise is yours, all glory, honor and blessing, through all you have made." He praised God for "my brother sun, who brings the day... Of you, Most High, he bears the likeness"; then for "sister moon and stars, brother wind, sister water, brother fire and sister earth." On his deathbed, John Wesley broke a long silence by singing a hymn: "I'll praise my Maker while I've breath, and when my soul is lost in death, praise shall employ my nobler powers. My days of praise shall ne'er be past..."

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eWorship 9 - Teach Us To Worship

No matter how old we are, how often we've worshipped, how much Bible we've absorbed, or how spiritual we may be, we always find ourselves with the disciples, scrambling to keep up with Jesus, humbly asking, "Lord, teach us to pray..." and teach us to worship (Luke 11:1). "We do not know how to pray, or to worship, as we ought" (Romans 8:26). Worship is the place where we do what we do not yet know how to do. We are pupils, getting our legs under us: a glimpse here, a leap forward there, but always amateurs, toddlers.

The barriers that block us from true worship are legion. "You are anxious and distracted about many things" (Luke 10:41)... although a clever worshipper, feeling her mind wafted away toward the afternoon's busy-ness or the evening's worries, simply offers the distractions to God: here is my life, Lord, do something with it! We have to admit we dress ourselves up in a defensive shield, rightly suspecting that if we let ourselves be vulnerable to God in worship, not just a few things, but everything, will be fundamentally different when we exit. If worship is boring, the problem may be me: "Much of our coldness and dryness in prayer may well be a kind of unconscious defence against grace" (Thomas Merton).

Worship is like learning to swim as an adult: you'd strongly prefer to keep your head above water, under control, and your struggle to swim is mere flailing against the water. You have to rest, to trust the water, to trust God's Spirit to be the buoyant power to hold you up, to sweep you along its tide, and then - if you just let yourself go - you begin to

delight in its wonders.

Does worship work? is the wrong question. I do not value my wife based on whether I get the desired results when I push her buttons. We are a relationship, we love, listen, serve; we stick with each other, we are getting older together - and we always learn more about each other. So it is with God. Children mature only when they are shaped and molded in ways that may not suit the child's immediate desires. To worship in spirit and truth, we must be wrestled to the ground weekly and taught to lose ourselves in praise, pray for enemies, sing unfamiliar lyrics; to show up, to say "thine" instead of "mine," to hear a word that lashes the heart, to believe when it's easier not to. We submit our innocuous, self-serving notions about God to the rigors of worship: America need this, as crazed brands of Christianity that have little to do with Jesus are wildly popular (as articulated recently by Bill McKibben). Our only hope at getting our faith right is worship with integrity, letting it do its corrective surgery on the soul.

All good learning requires repetition. Annie Dillard was visiting a Church when the priest, kneeling at the altar leading the prayers, stopped suddenly, looked up to the ceiling, and cried out, "Lord, we say these same prayers every week!" Then the service proceeded. Dillard wrote, "Because of this, I like him very much."

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eWorship 8 - Worship Space

Christians have always worshipped indoors: interesting, since Jesus taught out of doors, our devotion to creation, and our mission to go "out" into the world. Jesus said "Go into your closet to pray" (Matthew 6:6). We need a closed in space, not merely as shelter from the elements, but to shut out the glare and racket of the world, to focus, the shut-inness not shut-in at all, but the required opening into God's atmosphere, the way the children in *The Lion, Witch & the Wardrobe* went into the wardrobe which surprisingly opened out into the magical land of Narnia.

Early on, Christians worshipped in catacombs (a grave being the closest place on earth to heaven), then in massive basilicas with glowing mosaics, soaring gothic stone shrouding stained glass, an A-frame on a country road, a storefront with a framed print of Jesus tacked up front, a converted factory in China. Every worship space is beauty, just as a Rembrandt and your child's coloring are both "art."

What goes on in the worship space? It's a reception hall, a classroom, a coliseum where we celebrate a victory, a locker room where we strategize what we'll do out in the field. We call it a "sanctuary," which is a hint that this is a "safe place." We are safe in God's presence, we can be honest, we can express emotion, and love. There is a vertical and a horizontal dimension (and worship strikes a delicate balance between the two): Worship is about God, so we kneel in hushed reverence; and worship is about a community gathered, so we hold hands in joyful friendship.

What's in the room? What isn't? You don't bring a cell phone or a handgun. What about an American flag? Maybe not, if the flag stands as a rival to God's kingdom; but maybe so if we long for our nation to submit to God's will and judgment. What about the tattered carpet you'd never tolerate in your living room? Isn't our goal to "give of your best to the Master"? The best excellence we can muster is the goal: so maybe you dress respectfully, wearing your "Sunday best."

Who's in the room, and who isn't? Are we mirror images of each other? or do we glimpse the diversity of God's kingdom? Are we merely "friendly" with each other? or do we exercise a holy "hospitality," zealous to include the outsider, the people nobody else wants? ...and so maybe you dress down a little so the unchurched or the poor, might not feel intimidated.

Worship space is all about God's presence, invoked, expected, noticed. God is everywhere, but focused into a palpable intensity when we gather. "The Lord is in his holy temple: let all the earth keep silence before him" (Habakkuk 2:20). "Surely the presence of the Lord is in this place" (Genesis 28:16). "In this very room there's quite enough love for one like me... and there's quite enough hope and quite enough power to chase away any gloom; Lord Jesus, Lord Jesus is in this very room" (Ron Harris). And since the Lord Jesus is in this room, we are reverent, we are warm to each other, we wink, our chattiness subsides, as together we wait in humble, joyful expectation for his words, his healing, his sending us out...

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eWorship 7 - Symbols and Technology (part 2)

Ancient theater builders were masters of acoustics, but in modern times, comforts (like cushions and carpet) have created new worship space problems technology has resolved: microphones and speakers (thankfully) enable us to hear. We can record a service, a significant blessing to a shut-in who can't be bodily present in worship, or to a family years after a funeral. The hard of hearing get special equipment.

In an economy whose dual engines are the internet and the media, we need not be surprised that technology has become a powerful feature of worship. But do we embrace it as an unadulterated good? Or are there perils? Outside worship, for all the unquestionable wonders of advancing knowledge (such as open heart surgery), we may peek beneath the shiny surface and notice its sneaky underside. The microwave simplifies cooking, but now families eat dinner together far less frequently. Valuable information is at our fingertips, but then so is a vast array of immorality. Technology's ethic is "If you can, you should." But hasn't even Hollywood (from Jurassic Park to The Matrix) warned us of the dangers? and haven't thinkers like Neil Postman warned us that we are "amusing ourselves to death"? In a culture of vapid sitcoms, trashy "reality" TV and iPods, what are the risks that inevitably spill over in worship?

Rev. Ken Carter of Providence UMC wrote an insightful column about technology's "invisible culture" and its impact on faith. TV lulls us into passivity. We burn or play CDs instead of learning to play an instrument. Is reality real? or merely "virtual"? Isn't everything fake? or spin? The media answers unasked questions; the media feeds our narcissism. On the internet, everybody's an authority - which means there is no authority. Indeed, isn't there "a connection between the progress of technology and the decline of faith" (Albert Borgmann)?

Worship-wise, we might reflect upon the pitfalls of technology, both in the culture and in the sanctuary itself. Technology is all about speed; some gadget will fix whatever slows us down. But we need to slow down, to engage in some labor, in reflective meditation. If worship succumbs to the pressure to be snappy, fast, glitzy, then our attention span will miss God, who is like those wise trees in The Lord of the Rings who speak Entish, "a lovely language, but it takes a very long time to say anything in it, because we do not say anything in it, unless it is worth taking a long time to say, and to listen to." Technology may make it difficult to "Be still, and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10).

On the internet we can research the Bible easily; you can read this email...J But can we get so connected to the web that we don't connect with real people? Our sermons are available online - but then some quit attending and just listen, alone, comfortable, not stretched or relating. Technology increases the odds worship will feel like entertainment: see someone with a microphone and you're thinking "American idol" before you know it - and you wonder if you can change the channel. For technology is all about individuality, what suits me (check out this hilarious clip on the "Me-Church"). How's this as a test for technology in worship: Does it elevate the space and heighten our awareness of God? Is it subdued enough to push us to work at our worship? Is reverence cultivated? Is excellence offered to God? or does it feel "slick?"

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eWorship 6 - Symbols and Technology (part 1)

Worship has always been innovative. Prehistoric people figured out how to scratch flint to start a sacrificial pyre. The first Christians huddled in the catacombs and scribbled religious graffiti on the walls. Martin Luther led worship in the people's German instead of ancient Latin. The Wesleys crafted new music. Architectural wonders we consider "traditional" once were mysteriously avant-garde. So innovation is old, and even "old-timey" hymns are really newcomers on the 2000 year old Church scene. When do we innovate? and how?

Tom Beaudoin tells how he experimented in worship, using a TV set as an altar, sermons built around "The Simpsons," clips from Star Wars, and crackers and Coke for Communion: "Each of these experiments left a disappointing aftertaste. Instead of the spiritual electricity I had anticipated, the worship space felt cheapened instead

of elevated." Now he sees worship "as a sanctuary from media culture, a haven safe from pop culture, a place that offers a counter-cultural symbolic order, with awe and grandeur of God as mystery present in the suffering mystery of human life." We must constantly renew and update how we worship. Does our innovation elevate? or cheapen? Do we present an alternative to our vapid culture? or merely mirror it? Is it about God? or about us and what we think might be "neat" or "traditional"?

What about symbolism? When does it become tired, insider-oriented, plasticized, like a fossil in a museum instead of a living image? To dispense with old, corny images (a rattly bronze cross or pastel kitsch) may be a good thing. Many churches have jettisoned all icons, symbols, vestments, and candles in order to appeal to the young; but a new mood among today's young adults finds mystery and symbolism to be powerful, transforming. To dispense with images entirely would be like a parent not wanting to force his values on his child: society is not shy about pushing its values - and society is a potent wielder of symbols. The Nike swoosh, flag magnets, ads, celebrities: we are a people bombarded with symbols; silently they speak volumes, and we listen, and buy. The Church has symbols, counter-symbols in our world: the Cross, old Greek letters, candles, a beautifully bound Bible, God's rich invitation to enter into the divine realities to which they are windows. Symbols tap into the imagination, and shake us out of our stupor. A stained glass window with St. Francis urges me to be holy, to make peace. A cross is a reminder of my mortality, and a nagging question mark against bogus values. Images are not "decoration" to make the building pretty: gazing is required, meditation, reflection, letting the Cross get under my skin, and deeper inside me than where words go.

Without noticing what happened, our society has an ultimate idol of its own making that is usurping top billing: technology - and its impact on worship we will consider in part 2, eWorship7.

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eWorship 5 - Style? or Content?

When spiritual people decide where to worship, or when leaders strategize about how to worship, much of the talk is about style: what sort of music, technology, attire, and décor will be most effective? or will reach people we aren't reaching? Do we trash robes for shirt-collars? or litanies for skits? or the organ for a rock band? But doesn't all the hoopla about style tempt us to lose our bearings and dilute the content? Who rules? Style? or content?

Of course: content must be the driving force. Style can mis-speak or throw a cloak over the content; a service can feed people's self-indulgence, trying to "suit" their "tastes" without drawing them out of themselves, and toward God. The challenge is voiced in a book by Marva Dawn: *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down*.

Yet style is not unimportant. Bare content can be bone-dry, lifeless, unconnected to life. What is "style" anyway? An expression of my self, a delightful manifestation of the way God made me, letting others peek into the heart of who I am. But "style" can be bogus, too. Hopefully, my "style" is genuine, emanating from who I really am on the inside; but "style" can be phony, geared to cover up who I am, pretending to be who I wish I were. Is our worship style consistent with who we really are? and what our faith is about? Does our style deepen? or pretend? Are we pasting something hip or stiff on the outside - and there's nothing in there anyway?

Here's a peculiar twist: in worship, it's not about me and my style; rather, I am part of a community, a Body. A worship style can't be packaged like advertising to appeal to me solo in a sea of consumers. Worship style is about me being part of a larger family, where together we find ourselves lost in wonder, love and praise. Parents may love the Rolling Stones or Chopin, but they also listen to Raffi or Anna Nalick; families diversify. And in Church, should we always get the style we prefer in the rest of life? or is it wise to expect a style very different, since the Gospel isn't exactly business as usual? If worship mirrors the rest of my life, have I been ushered out of a crazed world and into the corridors of God?

Jesus suggested that we worship "in spirit and in truth" (John 4:23). Truth: the goal of worship is not to please me. It is about God, and the truth is counter-cultural, a jolt to my system after living all week in a world that thinks nothing of God. Worship is not an entertainment venue. And yet spirit matters; people need to be able to connect. I might have difficulty worshipping if the service were in a foreign language, or if the leaders all wore Mickey Mouse ears. But then worship is like learning a foreign language, and some of our customs will look silly to outsiders.

How do we test the intersection of content and style? Does the service express the truth about God? Does it comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable? Do we over-simplify? Does it titillate me like TV? or does it lure me to be still, to lengthen my attention span and learn to pray? Is it "show"? or is it something the people labor joyfully over together?

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eWorship 4 - The More You Worship

Walter Brueggemann has analyzed the various high festivals of ancient Judaism (Passover, the Day of Atonement, Hanukkah) and concludes, "The main point would seem to be, 'You must show up!'" For Israel, the regular holy days with singing, sacrifice, and much more were obligatory. You must show up! And why? "In order to give visible attestation that you are publicly aligned with the Lord and the Lord's people"... like a woman I knew years ago who had grown totally deaf, but still showed up every week for service. When asked why, she said "I want to be clear about whose side I'm on."

In America, we treasure "freedom of worship," our "freedom to worship the way we want." Unfortunately, that freedom slyly twists itself into a freedom not to worship. Worship feels optional, something we do when it's not too inconvenient. Don't you wonder whether our casual, might-or-might-not attitude is our undoing, letting a cloud of "my preference" or "my lifestyle" block our view of God? To be in worship just now and then is about as effective as trying to speak French or unscrambling a differential equation once in a great while: we're always playing catch-up instead of reveling in the moment; we're still scraping wax from our ears and miss what God's trying to tell us. If I go jogging once every ten days, why am I surprised to be breathless and cramped? Worship is exercise, discipline, obligation.

But this kind of talk feels heavy. Today we can't say "You must show up!" But we can say that, in order to understand worship, you have to worship. Lovers never get anywhere if they keep one another at arms' length; you put in the time, you have to get close, and often... Decide if worship is going to be huge in your heart and schedule - or not. Check your ego at the door, unwrap your inner self from all the agendas you think are so urgent (but are really mere busy-ness) - and be curious. Imagine you are a child on your first holiday at the beach: feel the sand beneath your feet, notice the other beachgoers, scan the horizon, get into the rhythm of the regular, predictable, powerful waves lapping in now, and now, and now. We enter the place, we sing, we profess, we pray the same prayers every week, we sing, we listen, we sing... You go back home, but you have that conch-shell you found, and even at some distance you can still hear the roar of those immense waves.

But you must show up. And not just bodily: show up personally, emotionally, intellectually, never sitting back devising your critique, but pushing open the window of your heart, the door of your mind, to let God in, for the work of sanctifying to begin, and continue. It's a discipline: the more you worship, the more you worship.

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eWorship 3 - The End of Worship

What is the goal of worship? Worship is misconceived if we think of it as a means to some other end, such as "I will worship to feel better, to rescue my fractured marriage, to improve myself, to cure loneliness, to meet neat people, to recharge my batteries." All these and even more benefits may happen, but worship is the end, not the means to anything else. The Westminster Confession declares that the chief end of life is to "glorify God and enjoy God forever."

St. Augustine made an important distinction between two Latin words used in his day for love. First there is *uti* love, love of "use." I may love money, not because I delight in handling it or hanging it framed on my wall. I only love money because I can use it for something else. Then there is *frui* love, love of "enjoyment." I love chocolate, not because of what I use it for (which isn't all that advantageous to my waistline or cholesterol level!) - I just love it, will go to great lengths to get it. Augustine suggested that too often we love God with *uti* love: we want to use God to get

other things we really want. What God yearns for from us is fruit love, when we simply love God because of who God is, what God has done, no matter what we get out of it, no matter what that love might cost us.

A classic definition of worship is to glorify God, and to sanctify humanity. When we worship God, when we think of ourselves as existing in order to glorify God, then we are changed. Regular worship excavates a place in the core of our being, shoveling out the accumulated trash that is not of God, leaving an open space - a sanctuary within. We can visit that sanctuary, then, through the rest of the week, by day or night, and worship God at work, in the den, while driving, as we fall asleep. If we neglect that sanctuary, it becomes overgrown and choked with dust. But when we worship in the Church, and build a bridge between those weekly encounters by inhabiting the sanctuary built inside us, we are sanctified, made holy. Nothing is the same, but we don't miss the old two-bit life we leave behind much at all.

From the vantage point of that sanctuary, we see the world and everyone around us differently. In the comic film, *Bruce Almighty*, the Jim Carrey character, having squandered his relationship with Grace, finds himself face to face with God, who asks if he wants her back. Surprisingly he says to God, "No: what I want is for her to find somebody who sees her the way I see her now - through Your eyes." Worship is like undergoing some kind of corneal transplant, and gradually we rub our eyes and begin to see what God sees, and to understand with a new heart, strangely close to God's heart, and then we love as God loves, not smugly distant from the world, but more zealous than ever to engage the world as God's hands and feet.

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eWorship 2 - Changing the Subject

Worship isn't something humanity thought up after living on earth for centuries. In the dim recesses of history, our ancestors knelt, lifted arms, painted religious art in caves, groping after faith long before we'd invented books or buildings. Archaeology shows that "with the birth of human consciousness there was born, like a twin, the impulse to transcend it" (Alan McGlashan).

Consider two rather hifalutin images of worship. Amos Wilder: "Going to worship is like approaching an open volcano, where the world is molten and hearts are sifted. The altar is like a rail that spatters sparks, the sanctuary like the chamber next to an atomic oven; there are invisible rays, and you leave your watch outside." Or Annie Dillard: "We should lash ourselves to the pews and wear crash helmets" if we have "the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke."

But let's be honest: it doesn't feel that way. More and more "spiritual" people feel no need for "organized religion." Worship can be boring, routine, or even fun. But invisible rays?...and you hang on to your watch. Congregations and denominations are flailing about, trying to lure people into the pews, devising catchy new ways to worship, arguing vehemently with one another about how to worship. Stick with the organ? Recruit a band? Do we keep doing what we've always been doing, and grouse about the fools who don't get it? Which age group to target? We are like peddlers hawking wares, or a drama troupe eager to titillate the crowds.

Isn't it confusion to treat potential worshippers as consumers to be entertained? They do "church-shop," but consumers, even if they find what they want in the worship mall, have not worshipped at all, and the successful peddlers haven't worshipped either. Kierkegaard helped us understand worship: while a service looks like performers (minister, choir) on stage before an audience (the congregation), the fact is that we all are the performers (minister, choir, congregation), and God is the audience of One. We are not passive spectators evaluating what's going on up there. We are the actors: we are offering something to God.

To think about worship, we have to change the subject. Worship isn't about me and my religious feelings, or what I like or don't like. Worship isn't like pulling up at the gas pump and getting a refill. Worship is about God; in worship we glorify God. Worship is maybe only time during the week that it's not all about you, it's not all up to you. Worship is the one time you shelve being a consumer. The word "worship" is derived from the Old English *weorthscipe*, "worth-ship." What has real worth? What gives us worth? What is worthy of our attention? What is worthy of investing your life in? Worship answers these questions: when I worship, I find myself on stage, with others, and together we look out at

God and say "Here we are, we've prepared something special for you, we hope it is pleasing to you."

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eWorship 1 - The Way to Worship

Today we venture out into a new email series - on worship. We find ourselves in a spiritually intrigued society, but one that is uncertain about organized religion, public worship, or the need for any kind of Church. Even those of us who are determined to stick with the Church either duck or take up arms ourselves in the so-called "worship wars," as debates rage over how to attract worshippers, hold their attention, while being true to who we are.

In this series, we will look at worship: what is it? Why does it matter? What are its essential elements? Does style matter? and if so, which style is the right style? What is Baptism? and how old do you have to be? What happens in the Lord's Supper? How do we listen to sermons? or sing hymns? What's in the room? and what shouldn't be in the room? Who's in the room? who isn't? and who cares?

To answer these questions, we will weigh how worship happened in the Bible, and investigate the theological richness in ancient practices. We will also try to get inside the psyche of the modern person and think about why worship might be a good thing, a transforming activity, an education that reshapes you morally, or an experience to make your knees buckle.

We will even dare to declare some of what we do in worship to be out of bounds, invalid, or theologically counter-productive. Naturally, I would expect some debate, some conversation - and as always with these email series, discussion is welcomed, and expected. Click "reply" right now to ask any questions, or to stake out a position - and as we proceed, I will be eager to hear from you. Sharing of emails is not only permitted, but encouraged. We know of classes and small groups that use these emails. Part of the delight of writing and reading is that even as you and I seem to be solitary individuals peering into a computer screen, we find ourselves to be part of an online community reflecting on what really is the reason we were placed on this earth: to worship God in spirit and in truth. That is all grace, all miracle to me.

So thanks for joining in this journey!

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