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Worship as a Dramatic Experience

Considerations for the non-liturgical Churches

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Dramatically effective worship succeeds in lifting the worshipper out of himself and in bringing him into the spirit or presence of something higher than himself. This may be from a source within himself or from something he feels outside himself. True worship establishes a relationship with this presence or spirit. The enduring quality of the relationship and the intensity of the reality are tests of the validity of the experience. In this sense, then, true worship is the recognition, identification and relationship to the noblest, the highest and the best that one can conceive. It is a coming into the presence of God and remaining there.

Worship is this relationship in process. The effectiveness of worship can always be judged by the way in which the self is prepared for the experiences of this relationship to the highest and noblest and by the resultant effect on the self. It is, therefore, a 'two-way' experience. It is the soul or spirit of the individual going out to a higher spirit, the opening up of the avenues of approach and, at the same time, the coming in of the influence of the greater spirit. Like all experiences, it is at first self-conscious. The more one comes into the practice of it, the more certain does the experiment become natural and spontaneous. It is always possible to have the experience of worship immediately and without even the consciousness of an attempt. When this happens, it is one of the supreme experiences of life—a moment in eternity when the physical self is broken through and enjoys a spiritual existence. As man succeeds in discovering this spirit world, as surely he must in his progress toward higher levels of living, the union and relationship with the supreme spirit will become the truly noble and energizing experience of his life. It will, of course, colour every other experience and grow to be a more continuous process in his every activity of life.

The technique of practising the presence of God demonstrated by the medieval monk, Brother Lawrence, is in a very real way perfection of the technique of practising worship. Worship is an extraordinary thing or an unusual experience only because it is not continuous. In the progress of spiritual life, it should become more continuous so that all life becomes a worshipping experience.

On the other hand, the very complexity of living, the distractions of the materialistic world and the 'busyness' of life are all characteristics that make the true experience of worship all the more unique.

This does not mean that worship should be an escape or that it is a running away from day-by-day experiences. On the contrary, it should be the means whereby these ordinary experiences are given meaning and are elevated to the distinction all life should have. The necessity to 'be still and know' is a prerequisite to strength, poise and inward peace. As one prepares himself and comes into the relationship with the spirit of life, he is participating in the preparation for and experience of worship. When the union between the spirit of man and the spirit of God becomes one, true worship takes place.

The Meaning of Dramatic

The dramatic is always the genuine because it arises from within and expresses itself in the truly sincere. It is always an experience from the inward outward. It must be differentiated from the theatrical which is more likely to be a surface experience originating through something that one has 'put on' from the outside. The theatre always uses characteristic trappings, depends upon settings and lighting to gain a mood and atmosphere. It puts these on like a cloak and to gain its ends, uses the broad effects, often the obvious and the impressive. It strives for immediacy in reaction and it will use any method possible to become effective in communication. It is, therefore, oftentimes artificial and at best a surface technique.

The dramatic, on the other hand, by its very nature is more fundamental. It is the expression of depth feeling. Its expression reveals its origin. Dramatic speech is characterized by its sincerity, by its depth of feeling and its meaningful expression. Theatrical expression in contrast is likely to be bombastic and flamboyant. To test the dramatic quality of speech one must evaluate the sincerity of its origin as well as its effect. Like produces like. The theatrical, therefore, will probably cause superficial reactions. The dramatic should cause depth reactions. Deep calls to deep.

The end of worship is so much a depth experience—in fact, it should be the deepest experience of life—that it should always be dramatic. *All effective worship is dramatic.* It arises out of deep feeling of relationship and it succeeds because it establishes that relationship.

The Leader of Worship

The leader of worship, therefore, occupies the important place of transmitter. To bring the individual worshipper into the experience of worship needs a transmitter who is also a worshipper. Unless the leader of worship himself is having the experience of worship, there can be little hope for a worship experience on the part of an individual who seeks this experience. He must, therefore, feel genuinely everything he does. He transmits through the experience of his own feeling. He is not playing a rôle, he is not assuming a position. He is worshipping. He is part of a total process. Until this happens there can be little chance for a genuine worship experience.

This means, therefore, that in group worship the worship leader must prepare himself for the worship period as surely as the worshipper in the group is prepared. Dramatic group worship can be effective only when the group itself is prepared for the experience and is helping in the parti-

cipation. This same principle applies to all those participating in the worship, the assistants, the choir, the organist and those in charge of seating or administering any part of the service. The entire personnel in leadership as well as those in the congregation must be in a unified worship atmosphere. The distractions caused by interruptions through insensitive worshippers can destroy the dramatic effectiveness of worship.

This is particularly true because dramatic worship is always unified worship which begins with the entrance into a receptive attitude and continues as the worshipper is raised to that point of unity and relationship with God which is the end of dramatic worship. It continues until the experience is completed. The object of worship should be the creation of an experience that can be carried out and continued after the group is disbanded. The more one becomes experienced in worship, the more fully he will be learning the ways in which the experience is continued.

Dramatic unity is always achieved by recognizing a beginning, a rising action, a climax and an end. These are not artificial markings. They are essential elements in the structure of a worship service. For this reason the place of worship, the establishment of the atmosphere and mood, the call to worship, the participation leading up to the climax of the moment of emotional and intellectual unity in the spirit, and the holding of that until it is established and becomes reality—all are component parts of the total dramatic worship experience.

Ways to Dramatic Effectiveness

The setting of a worship service can be either dramatic or theatrical. If it is theatrical, there will be trappings that will call attention to themselves. A dramatic setting never calls attention to itself. It always becomes part of a total picture. This means that when lighting, costuming, setting and any other atmospheric conditions calling attention to themselves obtrude so that they distract from the purpose which is to lead the inner spirit of man to unity with the spirit of the universe, then the dramatic element is lost and the service ends in a theatrically impressive but superficial experience. Anything new may often be considered theatrical. It must be introduced with explanation and through an educational process. If it startles it may succeed in being impressive but only superficially so. Changes in an accustomed service are oftentimes so distracting that they negate any chance for betterment. This does not mean that worship needs to be stereotyped or that changes cannot be made. The way in which they are made is important. Worshippers must be prepared for changes or worship is likely to be theatrically exciting but not dramatically effective.

Dramatic unity which has the structure of a beginning, rising action and a climatic ending, is not an artificial structure. The tone and intensity of worship should obviously not be the same at the beginning as they are at the climax. There should be rising action or intensifying feeling as the service progresses. The worshipper comes into the atmosphere and experience from myriad distracting experiences. Each person coming into group worship is coming from a different kind of distraction. In the theatre the lowering of the lights, the magic moment before the curtain rises when the audience is stilled, the use of music and the

device of a curtain are all means to galvanize a group into a whole and to prepare it for a unified dramatic experience. The church has no such opportunities. Yet it must use lights and setting and create moods even more effectively than does the theatre.

The theatre recognizes the distractions from which the audience comes. The church must also recognize this same problem. It should not ask people to come immediately from a distracting world into the sudden experience of worship. For that reason if the congregation can be brought into a service sufficiently early so that they are present at the beginning, the auditorium should not of necessity be dimly lighted nor all of the setting of worship completely established. If a congregation is friendly and chatty, it is much better to introduce worship gradually. This can be done by means of lights or by the use of music or by the preparation of the altar or worship setting which will be the visual objects on which the worshipper will concentrate. The ritualistic churches do this by lighting candles, etc., *after* the congregation has assembled. If there is a worship setting, the worship leader as well as the congregation should be facing it. Nothing is more absurd than the average Protestant procedure of introducing a worship setting and then having the minister or worship leader sit with his back to that setting. It should be the focal point to hold the attention of the congregation so that there is no distraction. Dramatic worship appeals to all the senses, for it is a complete experience. It appeals, therefore, to the sight and to the hearing. In certain churches the atmosphere is equally important, and the purification by holy water and by incense is not accidental. The non-ritualistic church must find an equivalent for these features. A church that is stuffy or poorly ventilated can offer a real detriment to a genuine or dramatic worship experience.

Dramatic Unity

Dramatic unity in a service is related directly to the movement of the service. Once the mood has been established and the service has begun, there should be a continuous development. The intensity may be relaxed at moments in the service, but the unity should never be lost. The qualities that will hold attention, direct thought and supply the feeling of spiritual relationship must be arranged in logical progression.

The preparation of a group for worship has been grossly neglected in the non-Roman church. The preparation of the setting of worship, the establishment of a mood and the call to worship are fundamentally important if the dramatic values are to be initiated. From distractions and noise to quiet concentration is the aim of the beginning of the service. For the service begins whenever the congregation is directed toward a setting, and attention is concentrated on the purpose of the participation. The call to worship should be truly a call to worship. This does not mean a few mouthed lines that have little or no meaning to the congregation. It does not mean a superficial call. The call is dramatic only when it is genuine, when it pulls people out of their distractions and reminds them of the purpose for their being present. Here as much as any place in the service creative ability needs to be introduced. A good call to worship that has become established in a church can help enormously to bring about an effective total experience.

A dramatic service will rely on experiences that are familiar to a congregation as well as those that are new. A familiar call to worship and familiar hymns have genuine value and place, just as certain litanies, creeds and prayers have significant contributions to make. The introduction of new material can have appropriate significance because of the meaning of the day or of the time or purpose of the worship. Obviously, this is best illustrated in the use of the materials for Christmas, for the celebration of various days in the Church calendar or for the particular needs of the congregation.

Dramatic Prayer

Dramatic unity is accomplished also by the maintaining of a mood and a spirit. The offering can be as dramatically effective as the reading of the scriptures and the prayer provided it is thought through in terms of the mood of worship and of its place in the service. How it is introduced and carried out is, of course, of great importance. The repetition of prayers and the use of litany familiar to a congregation are not dramatically effective simply because they are well known or are repeated often. Their effectiveness will depend on the *way* they are repeated. Perhaps nothing in a service needs more rethinking in terms of its dramatic value than does the credal recitation or the congregational prayer such as the Lord's Prayer. Unless dramatic effect can be brought into the speaking of the Lord's Prayer, it is likely to be completely meaningless. Dramatic effectiveness is lost by speed. If the Lord's Prayer is spoken rapidly there is likely to be little opportunity for reflection on the meaning of its words so that it is almost certain to seem unimportant. In a prayer every phrase should be fraught with meaning, considered seriously, and not be ruined by meaningless repetition. To speak the Lord's Prayer dramatically means that each phrase of it is considered seriously and with genuine understanding. Sermons built upon various phrases of the Lord's prayer will, of course, heighten its meaning and will serve to promote the educational process that should be continuously going on in the church. The repetition of the Lord's Prayer should be one of the high moments in a service of worship. That it is usually meaningless at the present time is a commentary on the quality of dramatic worship.

A creed for the present-day Protestant Christian is equally perplexing. Yet the building of a creed is certainly a profoundly religious experience. It should also be an educational experience. Once it is arrived at or accepted from older creeds, it should be thought through carefully. It may be constantly open to revision in its wording so that it can be continuously fresh and relevant. Again, the speaking of it, if it is to be said, is extremely important. Both in the Lord's Prayer and a credal statement, as well as in litanies, it may oftentimes be necessary for the worship leader to speak the lines, allowing pauses in which the congregation can absorb the meaning. The fact that a person says a word does not mean that he participates. It might be better for the worship leader to speak the Lord's Prayer directly with genuine feeling, letting the congregation participate silently than it would be for the congregation to repeat the prayer without meaning in the glib way in which it is so often done.

A prayer can be theatrical or it can be dramatic. If it is a lot of words spoken to gain effect or to flatter the capacity of the leader to coin nice phrases, it is of little value. The dramatically effective congregational prayer is one that is spoken out of the needs of the people and it is said with sincerity and felicity in phrasing that comes out of the understanding of the reading of prayers that have been spoken by effective pray-ers. The success of the pulpit prayer is measured by the praying congregation. When the congregation prays with the minister the prayer is successful and it is dramatically effective.

Inherent in a dramatic experience is the sharing process. A play that is dramatically effective becomes one in which the audience gives itself to the subject of the play, becomes one with it and participates actively in the conflict through the crisis. It is always a shared experience. If it is genuine, it remains as an experience both for the player and the audience. To become one with kings, to walk with great saints, to struggle with problems is the privilege of an audience that shares a dramatically effective experience in the theatre.

The same process must of necessity take place in the church in group worship. Unless the worship group becomes one with the participants in the leadership of the worship, and unless there is a total shared experience, there is likely to be little dramatic effectiveness. Each person out of the mood and each person who does not succeed in becoming one with the total experience is a distraction no matter whether that person is the leader himself, or the person sitting in the pew.

Music in Worship

Music is not an adjunct to worship—it is a means through which one worships. The so-called mood music at the beginning of the service like music in other parts of the service should not be the occasion for the display of pyrotechnics. It should be something that is played out of genuine feeling of appreciation. That it should be good music goes without saying and that it need not be lugubrious or funereal is of course obvious. Like the worship leader, the organist must be a worshipping participant. He must feel the mood, enter into the experience and have the privilege of helping direct it. For this reason, therefore, the music that bridges and ties together the various parts of the service, forming almost a continuous structure, may be the foundation unifying all the service. Growing out of it but never separate from it should come the spoken as well as the silent meditative parts of the service. There is no place for prima donnas either in the pulpit or in the choir. Special numbers are a tragic holdover from the concert hall and are likely to be distractions rather than contributions to a total worship experience. A solo can be expertly and technically effective and at the same time be a genuine part of the worship provided the artist is a part of the experience himself. The choir as well as the soloists must be worshipping participants. When a soloist stands out from the group and when he centres attention upon himself and the worshipper is distracted from the setting to the individual, the dramatic unity of the service is likely to be jeopardized. The organist, the choir leader and the choir as well as the worship leader, who may be the minister or his associates, all play a

part in the total dramatic unity. One is as important as the other if there is to be an organic whole.

Group singing can be dramatic or theatrical, or it can be merely meaningless activity. If it is singing that arises from the true spirit of worship and gives utterance to thanksgiving or to petition or to an affirmation of faith, it can be an integral part of the service and heighten the worship to give effectiveness to the whole experience.

All of these aspects of dramatic worship must be made important to the congregation through the educational process, through classes in worship, through instruction in the church school and through practice in the main worship service. The main service, however, is not the place for innovations and experiments before these innovations and experiments have been tested. The young people's meeting, the church school, family nights and worship interest groups are the places where experimentation should take place. When a technique has been perfected to the place where it is related to and becomes a part of the unity of the service, then it can be brought into the main worship service of the church.

Dramatic Leadership

Obviously the success of any service will depend upon the persons who lead the service—the minister and his associates, the choir, the director, the soloists, the ushers and any others who participate in the activities of the service. Unless there is a common understanding and purpose in this leadership group there is little hope for dramatic effectiveness. This unity can be brought about through conferences, through discussions and through the give and take that must of necessity be brought into the picture if there is to be a real attempt made to worship.

The worship leader, more often than not the minister or his associates, is the pivotal person. If he does not have a sense of the dramatic, if he has no real depth experience and does not understand worship, there can be little hope that the whole service will in any way be dramatically effective. If he leads in prayer it must be because he is praying. If he reads a scripture effectively it must be because he understands the scripture, because he has read it and reread it, and because it has meaning for him which he wishes to translate to the congregation. *If the spirit does not come alive in him, it will not come alive in the congregation.*

This all applies with equal importance to the sermon. It can either be an exhibition, a theatrical stunt, a dull academic recitation, or it can be depth thinking arising out of depth living spoken in terms of present-day life and experience measured by the witness of Jesus and the revelation of God. If it is to be the word become flesh, it must arise out of needs and must in a very genuine sense be deep speaking unto deep. If the sermon is this kind of exchange of experience, and is a real exposition of insight gained through consecration and study, it is certain to be a part of the dramatic unity of the total worship service. The way it is spoken will either be distracting, theatrically annoying, or will evidence sincerity in its dramatic effectiveness. The Protestant pulpit has too often been the place for bombast, for ineffective speaking,

for poor public speaking. Until the preacher is trained in speaking there is equally little chance for dramatic worship.

Dramatic Timing

If a play in the theatre is to carry over into life experiences, its climax does not come at the very last moment. This is illustrated excellently in Shakespeare's tragedies where, for instance, after the death of the leading character, there is likely to be a summary statement about him. In a service of worship there must be time for the experience to begin to find its place in the life patterns of the participants. If the service ends rapidly, if it is disturbed by people going out of the auditorium, if there is not silence and prayer, it is likely to be ruined at its most important moment. The most effective dramatic worship allows the heightened moment at the end of the sermon or prayer to have time to sink into the consciousness of the participants. The benediction and the choral Amen are all distinct attributes to the dramatic worship.

This matter of time and silence is of course an important part of the entire service. Time has always been important in the theatre and the so-called 'timing' of speaking and action is one of the first techniques that is learned by an actor. In the church timing must be a natural, spontaneous thing. It must grow out of feeling and become effective because it has genuine purpose. The speaking of lines effectively may mean that they are broken in the centre by silence or by inflections that give them heightened values. If this is done superficially, it is theatrical. If it is done with feeling, it is dramatic. Timing, therefore, in a service of worship is a matter of feeling the sense of the meeting. If a moment of silence after the prayer is needed, it must not be neglected. This is a matter of testing and judgement and feeling.

Silence is a dangerous thing. For most people silence is distracting. Only after long training can it be used effectively. More and more it is coming into Protestant worship because of the experiences of the Quakers. It should be brought back into worship but it must be used with judgement. It can be so effective that there is no other device comparable to it, or it can be so distracting that it dissipates the entire feeling and allows the mind and emotions to wander. There is no rule for silence. Its use and its values grow out of the feelings one must have and the sense that a leader can gather in knowing how much is necessary. Nothing is more dramatic when rightly used.

Dramatic worship will grow through experience. It may take upon itself techniques that come directly from the need of the moment, but it is likely to be effective only when there is consultation, co-operation and a continuous educational process. Dramatic worship is possible in the smallest church and in the largest congregation. Its success will depend upon how much worship is understood, how sincere is the leadership and how much time and preparation are put upon this integral part of the religious experience. It is the most unique contribution that the church has to make to the needs of people, for it combines the total congregational group experience with the spiritual relationship without which life is indeed poor. Unless non-liturgical Protestantism takes its worship more seriously and develops the opportunity for genuine worship experiences, the church will become more and more merely a social institution and will lose its most important contribution to society.