



THE INSTITUTE FOR
WORSHIP STUDIES

*Entering His
Courts With Praise -*
A Study Of The Role Of
Music And The Arts
In Worship

(4) - Dramatic Acts In Worship

Written By
Ken Gehrels
Pastor, Calvin Christian Reformed Church
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada
Adapted from material prepared by
Robert Webber
Institute For Worship Studies

Someone once said, "*When you are trying to teach, if at all possible - point.*" They were referring to the power of the visual to impact people, driving home truths that words alone simply can't convey. Teachers make use of this statement all the time. Walk into any classroom and you will be impacted visually - various objects and displays that the students have been working on; activities in which they are involved; controlled movement around the room as they explore and discover.

When you are trying to teach, if at all possible - point.

Human beings had to figure that out as they went about the business of discovering effective methods of teaching, of conveying truth.

The Creator of the human race has always known this - after all, He wove us together, body and soul, heart and mind, hand and head. And so religious instruction among the people of God has always included a healthy dose of pointing;

the visual and the symbolic are seen again and again in biblical teaching and religious activity - including the activity of worship.

A few weeks ago we talked about the power of the visual. We discovered what the Bible has to say about the use of art and symbolism. We wrestled a bit with how to interpret that in the light of human activity through the ages - often idolatrous activity. And we eventually came to see the place of a painting, a piece of furniture, an architectural plan, or an item of clothing in the formal event of worship.

Those of you that weren't able to be with us can find the material on Calvin's web site.

There is still one area about the visual that I want to explore. It relates to active visual symbolism - involving the movement of the human body, either by the individual or the entire community, in celebrating the worth of our Lord -

- in the act of worship.

For while seeing something helps to drive it home in a deeper way than words alone can do, **participation** takes it one step further, yet.

You can hear about something.

You can see something.

But when you **do** it - then it really sinks in!

The Bible is filled with examples of symbolic worship movement - dramatic acts that drove home the faith message in very graphic ways.

Hebrew worship, beginning with the early sacrifices made by Abel and his successors - Abraham, the patriarchs, and the priesthood of Israel - is a dramatic portrayal of the relationship that men and women have with God.

The sacrifices of the Old Testament follow a common pattern that constitutes a powerful four-part drama. First, the worshipers went through an extensive preparation and personal cleansing. Then there was a ritual of preparing an animal for slaughter. Third, in a ceremonial rite the animal was offered as a gift to God, who is the giver of all gifts. Fourth, the animal was butchered and certain parts were burned on the altar. Fifth, both priest and people often shared a great feast together with God as they ate the animal that had been offered.

In this dramatic action of sacrifice the stuff of everyday life - which came from God - was offered back to God, and was then returned by God to the people for the feast in which God shared.

People were involved.

People moved.

People worked.

And people remembered.

It was action with a purpose; action that portrayed a specific message.

You could call it drama - that's really what it was.

And such dramatic action is found all through Old Testament worship.

The Sabbath is a dramatic remembrance of God's creative act.

Passover - a reenactment of the exodus.

The Feast of Weeks (*Shavuoth*) - a celebration of the harvest.

The Feast Of Trumpets (*Rosh Hashanah*) - a drama of the New Year.

The Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*) - a drama of returning to God.

The Feast of Booths (*Sukkoth*) - remembering the journey through the desert

Again and again the believing community portrayed through intentional action the story of how God had met them, guided them, cared for them, redeemed them.

Let's read the account of this from Scripture -

Leviticus 23: 33 - 43

Oh, they didn't **have** to do it this way.

It could have been possible to simply have the father of the home rise on certain occasions and recite the story of God's mighty actions. Or the people could have gathered to hear the priest tell it - though even the act of gathering has a certain dramatic quality to it.

But the Creator of heaven and earth was not satisfied with faith actions that were verbal only. He commanded that the other senses which He had created be involved in the worship acts of celebration and confession and praise and lament.

Just as He commanded that our life of response be more than merely verbal; that our response through the entire week be one of heart and soul and mind and strength – of **all** the person.

In the New Testament the same theme is found - though less elaborate and described in less detail. The two most obvious dramatic acts are the Lord's Supper and Holy Baptism.

The Supper acts out the drama of redemption with movement of taking, blessing, breaking, and giving of cup and bread. There is action that points to the most important event in history, the event in which a new creation was birthed, the event that marks the beginning of the steady march of creation toward becoming the new heavens and the new earth.

The activity around baptism also carries important drama - the child born and so entering a believing family and via that family entering the family of Christ, or a new believer entering the family of Christ through coming to faith

that person is brought before the congregation; water is applied; words are spoken back and forth; the community moves forward and embraces the new member of Christ's body. In some congregations this drama is acted out at the entrance to the sanctuary of the Church - symbolizing in vivid, 3-D fashion that the baptismal candidate is entering the holy family of Christ.

Dramatic acts in worship -

We make use of them within our congregation.

Can you think of some of them?

- the elder escorting the pastor to the front before service, and then shaking hands at the end.

That is a dramatic ritual.

Symbolizing what, by the way?

- the pastor raises a hand in holy greeting in the name of the Triune God at the beginning of the service; and then again with a divine blessing before God's people go into a week of service worship.

- recently we have begun to walk with a newly-baptised baby through the congregation as a drama of introduction.

- there is the activity of passing the peace.
what are we saying by that?

- in our evening worship we get out of pew and come forward for Communion.

- Profession of faith - what dramatic acts are involved?
- what about the ordination of officebearers?

- one of you shared some time ago how, in a Reformed congregation which you attended, the elder of service carried the scriptures to the front and laid them on the pulpit in ceremonial fashion.

- in other congregations the sacraments for Holy Communion are brought into the sanctuary in a processional, often behind a cross.

Sometimes these dramatic actions involve just a few people, with the rest of the worshipping community watching (think of officebearers laying hands on newly ordained elders or deacons); and sometimes the entire community is actively involved (in the post-service greeting of a profession of faith candidate).

Human movement in symbolic fashion - it as always been, and always will be an integral part of worship. Woe be to the worship committee, liturgist or pastor who neglects to pay careful attention to it. They will be depriving the worshipping community of something that God Himself desires them to experience.

It ought come as no surprise, then, that worship historians can point us to larger dramatic elements that the Church has experienced through the ages. Though not many records exist for the first centuries, we do have accounts of larger dramatic events, beginning in the 10th century - the *Quem Quertas* ("whom seek ye?") which was a full-scale drama done in Holy Week about the death and resurrection of Christ. Later records show dramatic depiction of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on a donkey, and the washing of the disciples' feet.

In time dramatic presentations around the message of Advent, Christmas and Epiphany also made their way into the worship experience of the Church. As time went on, the dramas became more elaborate and moved outside of the worship service.

Miracle plays told the story of legends, miracles and the martyrdom of saints.

Mystery plays told the story of redemption, from the fall of Lucifer to the Last Judgement – eventually becoming a series of plays presented over the course of a week.

Morality plays emphasized, in sermon-like fashion, human choices and the consequences in relation to virtues and vices.

During the Reformation Era such dramatic activity, along with so much of Medieval Christianity, was viewed with great suspicion by Protestant leaders and rejected. What little dramatic movement they did keep was minimalist in nature. Reflecting the nature of the Enlightenment era in which they lived, they proclaimed that knowing God happened through the reading of the Word and preaching - the verbal acts of worship. All else was incidental.

The particular community in which I grew up reflected that to some degree. It was not uncommon to hear people say,

"Let's get the preliminaries out of the way so that we can get to the sermon - that's why we came."

Pastors or others who sought to be deliberate about movement and action were sometimes labelled and discounted as *"show off."*

In recent decades there has been more attention paid to dramatic movement and action in worship. Processional entrances are beginning to appear in evangelical traditions - recapturing the richness of the Old Testament pilgrim ascending into Jerusalem to worship. More care is being paid to how scripture is read - dramatic training is being provided. Preachers are now trained with the use of video so that their movements and expressions assist in the communication of the gospel rather than detract from it.

And some churches are making room for careful reintroduction of smaller dramas within a worship service, or even taking over an entire service during one of the high seasons of the Christian calendar.

Which is why we are seeing:

Festival music dramas - productions such as the *Singing Christmas Tree*, or *Hell's Flames*, *Heaven's Gates* appear at Christmas and Easter.

Readers' Theatre - attempts to present a Scripture text in living form.

Chancel Drama - where a group will act out a Scripture passage rather than read it.

Storytelling - where, in narrative form, a person will give a first person account of an event from the Bible.

Slice Of Life - where the introduction of the sermon is presented in dramatic form; posing a question or tension from life to which the pastor then provides an answer from the Word of God.

Sometimes these activities involve the entire congregation.

And sometimes, like other dramatic actions I mentioned, most of the congregation is involved through observation, while a few persons engage in the actions.

However it happens, it all comes down to this -

When you are trying to teach, if at all possible - point.

Hearing

Seeing

Doing

Dramatic worshipful action.

There is most certainly a place for it in the life of the worshipping community of God's people.

As there is for another whole area of dramatic action - and that is dance.

The most famous example of dance involved the king of Israel.

Let's read it together.

2 Samuel 6: 12-15.

Worship dance. That's what it is.

Can you think of other examples?

There is Miriam, Moses' sister, leading a dance of worship and celebration at the edge of the Red Sea after Pharaoh is drowned and Israel spared - Exodus 15:20.

There are the women who danced at the Shiloh feast (Judges 21:21-23).

There are exhortations to dance:

Let them praise his name with dancing (Ps 149:3)

Praise him with tambourine and dancing (Ps 150:4)

Movement was integral to the Hebraic culture, and so was a natural part of worship.

We don't read about it in the New Testament.

But early Christian records speak of it.

Ambrose, in the 4th century, says, "*He who dances as David dances, dances in Grace.*"

Other words from that time included warnings about what was out of bounds because of sensuality or introduction of heathen actions.

Over the centuries the presence of dance ebbed and flowed - favored and then being condemned.

Once the Enlightenment took hold, dance and other forms of physical movement were banned in both Catholic and Protestant circles -

for the same reason as drama was banned -

Exaltation of the mind and the spoken and written word.

Reason was king.

The mind was the proper realm for faith activity.

the physical was suspect.

Which it still is in some circles of Reformed Christianity.

Fact is - the Enlightenment's mentality still has a pretty strong grip on our community's worship sensibilities.

Perhaps you recall the quote I presented in our first unit a few weeks ago, the statement by Abraham Kuyper -

Life without the beauty of art, he said in his fifth Stone Lecture, is an atrophied existence.

("Lectures On Calvinism - Calvinism And Art" p.143)

That may be well and true - but the fact is many who participate in Reformed Worship still hear warning bells and see flashing lights when they encounter worship expressions that involve some form of artistic media.

Which means that sometimes it is rejected out of hand, without any thought as how Scripture may inform the conversation or activity.

At any rate - like drama, the worship renewal movement of recent decades has also led to the re-exploration of worship dance. Also within Reformed circles.

Sometimes through movements as simple as raising one's hands in a posture of prayer or praise.

Or through signing a song.

Or though having a few trained worshippers move through the congregation during the signing of a hymn, or leading a processional into the worship space.

Or sometimes through entire congregations become involved in rhythmic movement of some sort.

And like drama -

when done in a liturgical context, the objective of dance is **worship**

the declaring and celebration of God's worth.

engaging people in His mighty acts through Salvation History.

Therefore -

As with drama, or the preparing of visual art work, or the leading in the art of music – employing dance in worship raises issues that need consideration:

And with that I want to draw our series to a close.....

Issues of -----

Quality -

Worship, especially as a gathered community of God's people, is not something we do "off the cuff" in a nonchalant, haphazard manner. God is not pleased with such an offering - any more than He would be pleased with receiving less than the first fruits of our tithe and offering, or lukewarm love. He spews that out.

And so it is that the Scriptures speak of **skill** in the context of worship.

Exodus 35:10 "All who are skilled among you are to come and make everything the LORD has commanded:

1 Chronicles 15:22 Kenaniah the head Levite was in charge of the singing; that was his responsibility because he was skillful at it.

Psalms 33:3 Sing to him a new song; play skillfully, and shout for joy.

Appropriate timing -

Though it may well have been used at certain times as a pretext for control, worship leaders do well to grapple with the meaning of 1 Cor 14:40 when it calls for everything to be done "*in a fitting and orderly way.*"

God is not a God of disorder, but of peace. 1 Cor 14:33

Intelligibility -

AND - if it makes no sense, or if it is so obscure that most people won't get it, or is bulldozed into the worship setting without appropriate training and sensitivity in introduction..... well.....

St. Paul's instruction applies when he says (1 Cor 14:18-19)

You may be giving thanks well enough, but the other person is not edified. In the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue.....

Devotion -

Colossians 3:17 - *And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord*

Jesus.....

For whose sake are we doing, or not doing, a worship act?

If the preacher becomes enamoured by the quality of her speaking;

If the banner maker starts to fish for complements to the latest work;

If the musician feels let down because no one said "*thank you*" to that piece he practised so hard on all last week;

then perhaps it's time to ask some tough questions.

This is not variety show time.

This is not open season - not anything goes.

Can you think of other qualifiers on elements in the worship event?

Brothers and sisters -

I thank you for your participation.

And I thank those of you who took the time over the past four weeks to engage each other, and me, in dialogue on this important element in Christian life.

We have covered a lot of ground - and yet at the same time have only scratched the surface on the issue of worship ---- and within that context recognizing that worship is not the be-all and end-all of a Christian's obedient response to God, either.

In closing this series, let me say that we at Calvin church are part of a centuries-long history - Old and New Testament era history - of God's people responding to His mighty saving acts through formal worship events.

I am grateful for ways in which we can obediently respond.

And look forward to growing with you in expanding our horizons of liturgical activities —

In obedience to

In devotion before

And to the glory of

the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

One God,

Living and reigning,

Now and forever.

And let all God's people say -

Amen!