

Author: Paul F. Bosch [pbosch@golden.net]
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BOOKLESS IN TORONTO: PART 2

I want to add a little more interpretation to my description last month ([Essay 82](#)) of the “bookless” Eucharist at our recent Toronto Worship Conference “Breaking Bread...Breaking Boundaries” (BBBB). Last month, a description. This month, a commentary.

Granting my own proprietary interest in the event as one of its designers, six elements stand out for me as worthy of some elaboration. Here they are.

1) First, our Renewal of Baptismal Vows in that magnificent separate south-transept Baptistery at the Church of the Holy Trinity was for me richly satisfying. Quite apart from its “bookless” character, to have people gather, at least on occasion, at the beginning of worship in a separate space devoted to Baptism still seems to me to be approaching almost an architectural ideal.



Hence, I'd want to design any new church building with a place specially set apart for Baptisms. I'd want to reconfigure or remodel any existing church building so as to provide such a space – at the very least, as at Holy Trinity, a Baptistery separate from the nave, even if only in a transept, even if only in the west end of a nave. Indeed, one of the workshops at BBBB featured a presentation, with video, of worship in just such a church: separate Baptismal space, separate space for the Word, separate space for the Meal.

Yes, people must move, from one space to another, to participate fully in worship in such circumstances. When your worship involves bodily movement, you harvest two splendid rewards. First, you allow your body, along with mind and heart, to commit itself to prayer. It's high time. African Christians know this; they worship with their bodies. We in the West have no notion of how restrictive pews can be to vital worship... And second, bodily movement invites kids into the event. Children want to move, need to move. Ask a parent. Pews prevent that.

2) Next: That bookless Service: No books. Not for worshippers, not for worship leaders. I've noted before how books too can compromise living worship. PowerPoint projection would be even worse. It's the tyranny of texts I'm decrying here. We shouldn't have to depend on printed texts – on reading, on literacy! – to worship well. See [Essay 76](#) above. My advice: Every Christian congregation should schedule a bookless service at least once a year.

It's not all that difficult. Bookless congregational singing can feature the kind of call-and-response music we used at BBBB. The lovely Taize and Iona *ostinatos* (*ostinati*?) are already beloved favourites in many parishes. But you need a gifted leader for such singing, with at least enthusiasm for the project if not experience.

And worship leadership in a bookless setting will take a certain reckless courage – and a sense of knowing you're forgiven when you screw up, as you most certainly will. Bishops were chosen in the early church precisely because, among other gifts, they could pray spontaneously and *ex corde*. And it's not that difficult, when leaders know the traditional form, the traditional shape of a rite, and the forms and shapes of the prayers within a rite. Look for more on this in a subsequent Essay.

3) Our altar at BBBB was on the peoples' level, the Eucharistic action right in their midst. I can hardly conceive of vital worship without this egalitarianism. The two-room spaces of ninety-nine percent of our Western Christian churches are enormously debilitating. No wonder lay people expect their pastors to live out the Christian life on their behalf – perhaps so they don't have to! – when every Sunday they see their leaders up there with God, in their elevated chancels, while they themselves (the laity) languish down here in this pit, this nave, beyond participation with the Holy. Disastrous!



The ambo or lectern or pulpit is of course another story. Yes, our ambo too at BBBB was set at peoples' level, flanked with torches. Our numbers did not exceed 150 worshippers, and sight-lines in Holy Trinity's enormous spaces were by no means critical. But the ambo in our architecture is the place for reading and preaching: "presentational" moments in our worship, to be sure. I'd allow an elevated ambo, for just that reason. The Place of the Word can rightly be elevated.

But the Meal? That's not presentational, but participatory. And participation means action. And Eucharist is action. All at peoples' level, please. All the action at peoples' level. From beginning (Offertory) to end (Benediction) at peoples' level.

And note: It's not the same if we retain that two-room space, and invite people to join their clergy up those steps into the chancel, into the clergy's space, at the moment of the people's communing in Bread and Cup. The entire action of the Meal belongs among the people.

The signal you're sending is significant. And the aged and infirm have the devil's own time with those chancel steps.

4) Honouring the molecules (See Essays [75](#) and [77](#)): I like to think that's what we were doing at BBBB's Friday evening Holy Communion when we provided a real shell, from the seashore, and a real twig, from my neighbour's front yard cedar, for the *asperses*. When we provided a splendid binder for the scripture readings, with cover design of cross and leaves, in green, the colour of the Day. When we celebrated communion together with a real loaf, homebaked with a splendid cross and mandala imprint. When we brought that bread forward at the Offertory in a wicker basket. A splendid handwoven basket of wicker, native to Ontario. (Not bamboo, that is, native to Southeast Asia. I'd save the bamboo for a Eucharist in Southeast Asia.) Hey, I even like that crazy but lovely leafy green chasuble I wore.



Another way of describing these signs and actions: They spoke of "primary experience". Nothing "plastic" or inauthentic or tacky. Nothing at a second or third remove from the prime. Still another way of describing them, Martin Luther's own: We were "enlarging the sign", attempting to allow the witness of "the molecules" themselves to speak with fullest force.

5) The power of drama. The authority of that dramatization of the Gospel surprised even me, and I put it together. I wouldn't argue for that kind of witness at every occasion for worship. But for special festivities the testimony of drama – or dance or choral or instrumental anthem – can speak to another part of your head, or your heart. Drama, dance, music: these are gymnasiums for the imagination.



And it's relatively easy to do what we did: Coach costumed actors to mime the action as a Lector reads the narrative from Scripture. No speeches for actors to memorize, only action.

In another situation I might have presented our dramatization in contemporary 21st Century clothing. But for BBBB I felt it more effective to attempt a cross between period ("Biblical") costume and vestments. Hence our basic "Biblical" costume, like the gestures and postures of the actors, recalled ritual more than realism, and couldn't have been simpler: bare feet, a white alb (in some cases elaborated with caftan or burqa or peasant cap or hat) and, for each, a home-made white Jewish prayer shawl (a *thallis*) with long hand-knotted fringes. More on the *thallis* in a subsequent Essay.

I took pains, further, to provide a wide variety of textures in the fabrics chosen for each garment. For "Jesus", his Disciples, the Blind Man, and the peasant Parents and Neighbours, artless and earthy textures, well-worn; for the pharisees, sensual and sophisticated brocades and velours. And everywhere deep fluttering fringes and dangling

tassels. Part of the power of the presentation was its visual and tactile richness. Honouring the molecules again?

It would normally be my preference, incidentally – although for several reasons we did not pursue that preference at BBBB – that actors in the drama take seats with worshippers before and after their service, to signal that they're worshippers too.

6) Finally, that applause at the announcement of the Gospel, and that grand corporate *orans* during the Lord's Prayer. Once again, our motive was to give opportunity – to give permission! – for the body to take up its own role in worship, to encourage the committing of the body, along with head and heart, to the praise of the Word. See 1) above.

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