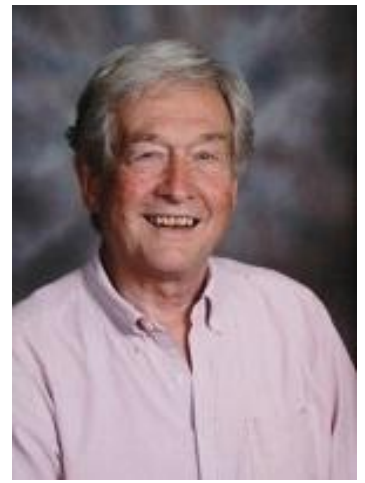


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GOSPEL ACCLAMATIONS

- 1 Anyone who has attended a play at the Shakespeare Festival Theatre in Stratford, Ontario, will remember the exhilarating experience of hearing and observing the Festival Fanfare five minutes before the beginning of the performance, and again, to signal the end of the Intermission, at the beginning of Act Two.
- 2 Four or even five musicians ascend an outdoor balcony, in fine weather, and announce the beginning of the performance: Four brass players, in livery, with field trumpets, banners hanging from their extended instruments, are accompanied by a snare drum player, also in livery, who begins or ends each brief Fanfare with a splendid, authoritative snare drum roll-off. The experience is, well, breath-taking. Exhilarating.
- 3 The musicians repeat the Fanfare indoors, in the Festival's magnificent thrust-stage theatre, in the hallway at Aisle Seven or Eight, so no one can fail to get the point: The performance is about to begin, or about to resume. The Fanfares are often specially composed, at Stratford, for each specific theatre season.
- 4 Now, I ask myself, why are our so-called Gospel Acclamations in Christian worship so lack-lustre, in contrast? So half-hearted? So perfunctory? So utterly without exhilaration?
- 5 When the Gospel is read in our service of Holy Communion, our worship books provide a pair of what are called Gospel Acclamations, presumably to acclaim what is read. One Acclamation precedes the reading; one follows the reading. There are no Acclamations provided for the First Reading (from Hebrew scripture), or the Second Reading (from one of the Epistles of the early Jesus Movement). But at the reading of the Gospel – the record of Jesus' life and ministry – according to ancient tradition, the gathered assembly is invited, in its rubrics, to do two things.
- 6 First, to stand. Standing in Western societies is a mark of respect. One stands in the presence of the Queen, for example. Gentlemen are expected to stand when introduced to a stranger or visitor. Of course the handicapped are excused from these niceties of etiquette. There will be no expectation for anyone to stand who is confined to a wheelchair. But the rest of us – only temporarily able bodied, after all! – will stand.
- 7 Second, our worship books invite the assembly to utter a verbal Acclamation as well. One Acclamation before the reading: "Glory to you, O Lord." One Acclamation after the reading: "Praise to you, O Christ." Earlier worship books actually set these Acclamations to music, and invited the assembly to sing them.

8 Now, how about enlivening, embellishing, those Acclamations? First: Add applause. The way contemporary people show appreciation or acclaim these days is by applauding. What would our worship be like if, every Sunday, we actually burst into sustained applause, along with our spoken words of acclamation?

9 Congregations might also be encouraged to mimic the hard of hearing in their version of applause: raising the hands and wiggling the fingers. Deaf performers and their audiences cannot hear the sound of hands clapping, of course. So the deaf have developed their own convention, their own visual equivalent: those raised hands and wiggling fingers. It's marvellous to watch!

10 Or this: Add children with noise-makers to the spoken and applauded Acclamations. I'd distribute – have distributed! – simple noise-makers to the kids present under the age of, say, ten. Tambourines, rattles, ratchets, dime-store handbells, finger cymbals, bracelets of jingle bells, claves. I'd ask – have asked! – the grownups present to oversee the kids in their use of these. "Only at the Gospel Acclamations, kids. Only when we sing. Never during speaking, or hearing, or silence."

11 You'd be surprised – perhaps you wouldn't! – how festive the hymns and Acclamations can sound when the children can join in with their noise-makers. It's specially festive and exhilarating to know that kids unable yet to read can nevertheless join in with their distinctive praise.

12 Perhaps you'd want to save 10 and 11 above for really festive Days or Seasons: Christmas and its season, Easter and its season, the Day of Pentecost. I'd put away – have put away! – the kids' noise-makers during Advent and Lent and the "green" seasons, Post-Epiphany and Post-Pentecost.

13 Or this: Add a snare drum roll-off at the Acclamations. Other drums might provide a suitable roll-off, but a snare drum roll-off is specially compelling and authoritative and festive.

14 I've described in an earlier Essay the splendid send off my daughter's congregation gave me at the conclusion of my three-month interim pastorate at her parish. The very creative Music Minister used a snare drum – Is it also called a trap drum? – to accompany all hymns on that day! Along with the organ. The music that day was festive to the point of rapturous!

15 Or this: Add a four or six note brass fanfare at the moment of the Acclamations. I've written such a simple fanfare, both four note and six note, and I'm no musician: do-mi-mi-fa, or do-mi-mi-fa-ti-do. You would need to find competent musicians: trumpet, horn, even saxophone. Alternatively, maybe the organ's trumpet stop would work.

16 Once again, I'd save both 13 and 15 above for really festive occasions; I wouldn't recommend their use every Sunday. But on Christmas or Easter: Wow!

17 I wouldn't shy, however, from encouraging 8 and 9 above as part of every Sunday worship. And when they're used, I'd use all of them simultaneously with the worship book's suggested spoken words, noted in 7 above.

18 And yes, I've used all of these ideas in my own parish settings, to exhilarating effect. Of course, my parish, for most of my professional life, has been on campus. Perhaps you can get away with such unusual worship embellishments in campus ministries, but not in more traditional parish settings.

19 Pity.