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POSTURE, POSITION, and GESTURE

- 1 A quiz: What's the most eloquent and persuasive and universal voice for proclamation and praise in Christian worship?
- 2 A pipe organ? Very impressive. A personal favourite. But not my choice for the most eloquent and persuasive voice....
- 3 A rock band, with drumset and guitars and ear-blasting electronic amplification? Not my choice either....
- 4 How about a 50 voice choir, singing in SATB harmonies? Nope....
- 5 Then this: The human voice: An eloquent preacher, expounding a Bible text? Best of all, so far, but with its own limitations....
- 6 I'd choose: The human body. I'd choose the human body over the human voice for one reason only. A human voice is speaking in a human language. And not everyone may know or comprehend the language spoken. The human body, in contrast, speaks with its own "body language" that's almost universally understood and appropriated.
- 7 Let's consider, then, the human body and its "voice" in Christian worship. Its POSTURE. Its POSITION relative to other worshippers and to worship leaders. And its GESTURES.
- 8 Aside: Of course, it need not be said that the handicapped and those confined to wheelchairs are exempt from almost all that follows below. However, two additional observations must be made.
- 9 Observation A: Christian congregations must never shrink from including the handicapped in roles of worship leadership, to the limit of their abilities and under the constraints of their circumstances. The handicapped also are Members of the Body of Christ, their bodies also temples of the Holy Spirit – just like the rest of us (temporarily!) able-bodied. An assembly without any handicapped members is an impoverished assembly, indeed, less than catholic. And we should expect to see them in roles of leadership.

10 Observation B: Handicapped Christians themselves might profitably spend some time and imagination in considering how they might nevertheless honour the arguments I'm making below – if they can endorse them! – in spite of the constraints of their circumstances.

11 First then, POSTURE. I am appalled by the everyday posture of many pastors and worship leaders. Slouchers, most of them. What terrible advertisements for our Resurrection faith!

12 (And yes, I'd make the same judgement about the postures of the people in the pews. Most North Americans are terrible slouchers.)

13 I regularly attend arthritis exercises in our local *Swimplex*, and I'm appalled there as well. The patrons, for the most part, walk and move – carry themselves – as if they're Roman galley slaves. Bent over. Hunched back. A shambling gait. And the life guards, both male and female, are hardly better. Sleek, beautiful bodies, many of them, but stooped and slouching. Didn't their mothers nag them to stand up straight when they were kids?

14 I never tire of reminding anyone who'll listen that we are royalty in Christ. We are made in the image of God. That *imago dei* should be visible in our appearance. In our deportment. In how we carry ourselves.

15 And further: We are children of the Resurrection. Both the Greek word for Resurrection – *anastatia* – and the German word for Resurrection – *Auferstehung* – testify to Christ's post-Resurrection appearances: Christ is literally "standing erect again". So Jesus' followers are betraying their own message when they slouch.

16 And not simply worship leaders. Christian people generally. And not just in worship. In everyday life as well.

17 So: Heads up. Gut pulled in. Shoulders squared. You don't want to look stiff or tightly wound. You want to look relaxed and confident, but not slovenly. Stand erect as if a cord from the top of your chest were holding you upright, like a puppet.

18 If you want to see fine posture, look at a child. Even a toddler. Little kids naturally have almost perfect posture. It's only when we become teens that we develop that sullen slouch.

19 My simple message here: Remember your royal heritage. Remember that your very body is a walking advertisement for the Gospel.

20 Or not.

21 There are three basic postures – plus a graceful neutral – that worship leaders ought to know and use. None of these postures will be self-evident or naturally intuitive. You have to learn them. And practice them. In front of a mirror, if necessary!

22 The Welcome Posture is the first. You assume this posture when you're welcoming worshippers to worship – any time when your words are welcoming, like "The Lord be with you". You stand erect, and extend your hands towards the assembly, about waist high, as you would when you're greeting guests into your home.

23 The Prayer Posture is second. It's the familiar *orans* (Latin for "praying") posture of traditional Jewish practice. Worship leaders employ this posture whenever you lead public prayer. Stand erect, raise arms and hands to shoulder height, palms open and up, head raised (not lowered!), and eyes open (yes!) and fixed on Infinity – out there somewhere! It's a lovely, eloquent posture that is gaining wide ecumenical acceptance among worship leaders world wide.

24 Third: The Blessing Posture would normally be used by the ordained only, in catholic tradition. It includes standing erect, reaching out your hands towards the assembly, palms open but facing down. It's as if you're trying to lay your open hands on the head of everyone present, and failing that, you simply reach out towards all present in an evocative gesture of gracious promise.

25 The un-ordained, at moments of blessing, utilize the *orans* posture and change the second person plural in the prayer to a third person plural. Not "you", that is, but rather "us", in effect changing a blessing into a prayer. I'd argue there are good reasons to maintain such ancient distinctions in roles.

26 Neutral is the posture worship leaders assume in moments when you're not serving a specific function in roles of worship leadership. Stand erect, hands gracefully clasped at belt line. No dangling limbs, please. No "fig leaf" posture, please. Remember: You are witnessing to faith in every moment in worship. Your body is "speaking" to all who observe you.

27 POSITION is next. What is your position relative to other worship leaders, and relative to the entire assembly? Your position too will "speak" an eloquent word about what's happening in worship from moment to moment. Whether you're conscious of that message or not.

28 Hence I am becoming almost paranoid about the inadequacy of what I call the "Ike and Mike" position of worship leaders. "Ike and Mike" is when worship leaders stand side by side – a Presiding Minister and her Assisting Minister, for example, taking turns holding an altar book for one another.

29 The "Ike and Mike" position has the single virtue of illustrating a wholesome collegiality between worship leaders. But it restricts a full and graceful *orans* at prayer, for both Ministers. And more important, it fails to illustrate what is happening from moment to moment in worship. The "Mary and Martha" position corrects this inadequacy.

30 So I much prefer a "Mary and Martha" position, with worship leaders swapping roles of leadership throughout the Service, and illustrating that exchange in their very positions relative to each other.

31 In the “Mary and Martha” positions, one minister – palpably, visually, in their very body – waits upon another. Then – depending on what is happening at the moment – they exchange roles of leadership. Martha waits upon Mary, then Mary waits upon Martha. The visual effect is even more striking – more eloquent – if they can actually change place, exchange position, even exchange elevation, on a step or stair.

32 An example, at the Intercessions: Let’s have Mary – the ordained worship leader – waiting upon Martha (the un-ordained) by standing a step below, and holding Martha’s book, while Martha prays from its pages.

33 Or at the Offertory: Let’s have Mary, off to the Table’s North or South side, waiting upon Martha as Martha leads the Offertory Prayer over the gifts, standing at the centre of the Table. Then behold! They exchange positions! Martha retreats to the Table’s North or South side, and Mary takes her place at the centre of the Table for the Thanksgiving at the Table – the Eucharistic Prayer. At the Table’s East side, facing West across it.

34 You see what has happened? The Mary-and-Martha position still signals a wholesome collegiality, just like Ike-and-Mike. But now the very bodies of the worship leaders help to illustrate what is happening from moment to moment in Christian worship.

35 The Intercessions belong to Martha, the un-ordained, not to Mary, the ordained. The Offertory Prayer over the gifts belongs to Martha as well. But the Eucharistic Prayer – the Thanksgiving at the Table – belongs not to Martha, but to Mary, in catholic worship. Simple, elegant, and yet visually persuasive, in my opinion.

36 Finally, GESTURE. The most important gestures in Christian worship I’ve sketched out above in 22 to 26. It remains only to mention the traditional gestures that accompany the Thanksgiving at the Table: lifting the Bread and Cup as the Prayer makes mention of them. Or perhaps a simple gesture indicating their presence on the Table, as verbal mention is made. In any case, the words of the Thanksgiving at the Table – the so-called Eucharistic Prayer – are designative, not imitative. The Bread should not be broken, that is, until the Fraction – after the Prayer, the Great Amen, and the Lord’s Prayer. During the singing of a hymn, or of the Agnus Dei.

37 And importantly, the entire Thanksgiving at the Table constitutes a public Prayer to God. It is neither necessary nor desirable for the assembly to be included in the Presider’s gaze during the lifting of the Bread and Cup. The whole Prayer is meant to be delivered to the Infinite, as *orans*. The people present are simply – but actively and importantly! – listening in, and therefor consciously participating, after the manner of a Jewish *berakah* (public “blessing” or “thanksgiving”).

38 Thus – as almost always and everywhere in Christian corporate worship! – does public prayer become also a form of proclamation. “Sacramental” moments simultaneously mixed with “sacrificial” moments.

39 One final word. Surely facial expression is also part of the full visual vocabulary of worship leadership. A sour, sullen facial expression is as out of place here as a sullen postural slouch. Don't worshippers have a right to expect of their worship leaders an attitude of joy? Of pleasure in their privilege in being able to serve as leaders of public prayer?

40 Remember, folks: Any stage actor will agree: The human body has its own "language". It "speaks". Communicates. Instructs. Teaches. Preaches. Maybe more eloquently than your sermon!

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