

Author: Paul F. Bosch [paulbosch31@gmail.com]

Series: Worship Workbench

Issue: Essay 263 + June 2021

Copyright: © 2021 Paul F. Bosch.

This document may be freely reproduced for non-commercial purposes with credit to the author and mention of < www.worship.ca > as the source.



LEADING LITURGY, FOLLOWING FREUD

1 Some months ago I took part in an amateur production in my parish church of George Bernard Shaw's *Don Juan in Hell*, in which I played the role of the Commander. Our director was brilliant: a congregational member, like the rest of us, and an amateur, but enormously skilled and experienced. And a Professor of Psychology at our local University.

2 He made the point, over the course of our several rehearsals, that each actor on stage possesses what he called (following Freud?) an observing ego, a critical ego, that's constantly about the business of evaluating, from moment to moment, what's going on on stage. Especially where you as actor are concerned.

3 As a public performer, he was arguing, you've got to assume responsibility for a ceaseless self-critical examination of what you're doing. For what you're doing relative to the other players on stage. For what you're doing, from moment to moment, to advance the momentum and meaning of the performance of the play.

4 That seemed like marvelous good sense to me, in theatre, and in life. To stay in tune at all times with your own observing ego. And I see it all relating to the leadership of Christian worship.

5 In his seminal little essay *Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing*, Danish Lutheran theologian Soren Kierkegaard makes a striking observation. He says most Christians come to worship with a defective perception of what's going on there. He says in worship, most Christians perceive themselves as an audience, seated here in the nave, expecting to be inspired – or even entertained – by their worship leaders there on stage, in the chancel: Pastor, Servers, Choir. And in this mis-apprehension, God is in the prompter's box, making certain the performers are staying on script and on cue

6 But that's a disastrous perception of what worship is all about, says SK – and most traditional church architecture contributes to the disaster, to the mis-perception. It's precisely the other way around. Actually, he maintains, every worshipper should think of herself, of himself, as one of the actors "on stage". It's the worship leaders – Presider, Assistants, Acolytes, Choir – who are in the prompter's box, whispering cues. And it's God who's in the audience, as critic and judge, writing the Final Review. (It's God on stage as well, as one of the Chief Actors in the drama of Christian worship, but our analogy begins to disintegrate when we confess as much!)

7 And every worshipper who walks in the door should feel invited “on stage”. You may not want to accept the invitation. You may prefer to sit in the last row and observe – or even judge. But you should feel invited “on stage”, as one of the participants. Christian worship is radically participatory. To use a favourite metaphor, I’d say Christian worship is never presentational – as if worship leaders were performers up there in the chancel, presenting something to me that I don’t possess. Christian worship is radically participatory, precisely not presentational.

8 I’ll buy Kierkegaard’s point. I’d further argue that, when it comes to Sunday morning’s worship, that mis-perception is the single most common and most destructive attitude among our parishioners. And among our clergy!

9 Yes, every worshipper should feel invited to participate, in Christian worship, should feel invited “on stage”. The worship leaders? They’re the prompters to the people’s praise. To change the metaphor: They’re the cheer-leaders to the team on the field: the people themselves.

10 That said, there’s a special sense in which worship leaders – the Presider, the Choir, the Servers and Acolytes – each bear a unique responsibility. The fact is, although everybody at worship is an actor on stage, worship leaders are more so. If you’re a worship leader, you can expect to be looked at, more than most people in the pew. You can expect to be scrutinized from moment to moment during worship.

11 So it’s good practice for worship leaders to assume they’re being watched, at least by some pairs of eyes, at every moment of the hour, or hour-and-a-half, that constitutes Christian worship in your parish. It’s simply one of the burdens you must learn to bear as worship leader.

12 Further, following the counsel of that Freudian director of amateur theatrics I cite earlier, it’s good advice to keep your observing ego at constant attention. You must always be asking yourself, at any given moment of your service in the chancel, “What does this look like out front? What is my deportment as worship leader signaling about what is happening at this moment in worship? Am I, in this moment, a sufficiently transparent vessel to the meaning of this moment?”

13 Such an on-going inner dialogue is essential to the graceful – Lovely word! Think about it! – conduct of Christian worship. Presider, Deacon, Server, Acolyte, Choir member: Each leader of the congregation’s praise should be constantly about the business of self-criticism, self-examination, simple self-awareness. Or else you are not fulfilling your mandate.

14 Much more could be said about the arts of liturgical presidency. And it’s more art than science. Sure, there’s a certain amount of science in graceful ceremonial leadership. You’ve got to know some facts, some laws, some rules that go along with human ritualizing. You’re a mechanic, after all. So I’d expect you to be at least as familiar with your task, and the tools of that task, as the mechanic who works on your car in the garage. As familiar, and as fond.

15 I'd like to see in you some evidence that you know what you're doing. And that you enjoy doing it. That you count it a privilege to be able to lead the people of God in their prayers. To be a vessel for that praise, that Good News.

16 But liturgical leadership is also an art. That suggests practice. I'd count myself among those who believe the arts belong to everyone.

17 Anyone can learn to sing, anyone can learn to draw or paint, everyone's an artist. And everyone can improve their skills in these fields. You may never get to be a Mozart or a Rembrandt. But with practice, your God-given gifts can be nurtured and improved and developed and enhanced. All it takes is practice.

18 And an observing ego.

+ + +