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Julia Roberts' Orthodontist: To Smile or Not to Smile

A Here's yet another early Essay – 60, from September 2002 – that deserves a second hearing. It's been unavailable here since this website was re-designed some years ago.

B I reproduce it here almost un-edited.

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1 "Julia Roberts' orthodontist," I said as I slid off the dentist's chair to rinse. My dentist had just finished filling a cavity. I repeated: "Who was Julia Roberts' orthodontist? She has the most incandescent smile I've ever seen. Enormous mouth with hundreds of straight white teeth. Marvelous! Her smile could light up this city in a power failure."

2 "Orthodontist?" said my dentist. "I don't think she ever had one. Those are her own teeth, the way God made them."

3 "Beautiful!" I mutter. "Extraordinary!"

4 Anyhow, these things are a parable, as you've heard me say before. It set me to asking: Should worship leaders smile when they're leading worship? Yes or no? I see two important principles at work here.

5 First, as worship leader you should strive to be the same person in the chancel that people perceive you to be in other settings. That is, you don't want to be perceived, when leading worship, as a phoney. Nothing is worse than a worship leader with a plastic smile pasted on a face at all times.

6 It may be that you are naturally a smiling person. Then there's no persuasive reason why you should not carry that smile with you into the chancel. You don't have to grin like an ape, as I do (See photo above). But, hey, I grin like an ape almost always. It's simply my temperament; it's in my genes and chromosomes. I walk down the street grinning like an ape to myself, lost in some reverie. I'm grinning like an ape even now, as I write these words.

7 I tried, at one time in my life, to suppress that grin, hearing that it put some people off, specially when they saw it in the chancel. But it didn't work.

8 My grin was offensive to some, especially at the distribution of the bread and cup at Communion. Here I was, grinning what I assumed to be encouragement to them as they approached the Table, whereas their piety had taught them that this is holy stuff, and you don't grin like an ape when you're handling holy stuff. It was a conflict of pieties, as well as a conflict of temperaments.

9 In any case, my very important point: You've got to be the real you, when you lead worship. And you've got to struggle, perhaps, to try to make certain that people – parishioners -- perceive you as the real you when you lead worship. It would be terrible if they perceived you as a phoney.

10 That said, it leads me to my second Important Principle: It nevertheless would be salutary if worshipers could perceive that you enjoy what you have been called to do, as worship leader; that you consider your work a holy privilege. If you're naturally a more sober type than I – Isn't everyone? – you could venture a timid smile now and then, during worship, if only to signal that you cherish the opportunity you've been given, by them, to lead their prayers. To be perceived as unrelievedly sober-sided is hardly to model the joy of the Gospel.

11 Aside: One the most unusual compliments I have ever received came from the chair of our Church Council after a Service that featured some of my favourite hymns, during the singing of which, I suppose, I was grinning like an ape. He said, "We shouldn't be paying you, Paul. You're having too much fun up there."

12 Sure, you want to strive to be the real you, when you lead worship, and not a phoney. By the same token, you want to be perceived as enjoying what you do, as somehow – on your own terms and in your own way – modelling the joy of the Gospel.

13 It might even have the effect of training you to venture a timid smile, now and then, out there in the world, when you're not leading worship.

14 Oh yes... I've learned lately that Julia Roberts did indeed see an orthodontist, when she was a kid, to correct a slight gap between her incisors.

15 Hey, nobody's perfect.

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