

One Perspective: Being the Church at Oklahoma Baptist University

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Anomaly has characterized most of my life to date, and my teenage rebellion was no exception: one of my major crises was that I had had enough of those backwood Southern Baptists and was determined to become a Lutheran. This desire probably had nothing to do with my growing appreciation of Germanic things, but instead stemmed from an envy of liturgical structure and a love of the festive aura that surrounds so much of high-church worship. Not only did they have the best organist in town, they processed in every Sunday, and no one had to announce the hymns! I've come full circle in some ways, though, and, albeit sometimes reluctantly, come to appreciate my Baptist heritage and to realize thankfully that we Baptists come in all sorts of shapes and sizes. I enter this dialogue on worship not as a theologian but as an amateur musician, a Germanist, a Baptist!, and do so hesitantly, for it is, indeed, a minefield, where emotional and intellectual flare-ups can surface often unexpectedly. Please realize that I realize that mine is but one perspective in this on-going, exigent dialogue. Inherent to my essay is thinking about how a liberal arts education can open new perspectives on worship. Part of my discussion today will center on how we as teachers foster our own and our students' grappling with worship as individuals and the other part deals with our community's corporate response in worship.

One of my favorite poems is what turns out to be essentially a short catechism by the German baroque poet, Andreas Gryphius. My rough translation of "About the night of my birth" loses the original's poetic beauty, but would go something like this: "The earth lay covered with

darkness and night/As the world received me/the splendor of the bright lights/ The golden adornment of the stars surrounded the plains of heaven / Why? Just so I should gaze at heaven.@

The poem speaks to so many of us in those reflective moments when we question why we=re here and what we=re about. It speaks too, I think, to the heart of what worship is. Gryphius and, by extension, the reader contemplates the heavens, where God, the expansive Spirit, dwarfs us, even as He comforts us.

Every other year I look forward to teaching a course called AGerman for Travel and Cross-Cultural Ministry.@ Watching and helping students as they struggle to translate their faith story into another language is one of those great pedagogical moments that go far in motivating us teachers. Words and their meanings and in turn all the nuances of translation come together in a prominent way for students as they grapple with this intensely personal story. Seeing, for example, the obvious connection of the German word for Asalvation@ [*das Heil, die Erlösung*] with the word Ahealing@ sheds new understanding on the former. Equipping students with a vocabulary of faith in another language enhances their own experiences at this formative age and leads them along the path of a more mature understanding of what worship can mean for us as individuals.

Another experience in the language classroom, though, gets to the core of my difficulty with our community. My naivete still glistened as I walked into class that Monday before Thanksgiving, thinking I had the perfect warm-up activity. I had my intermediates read ANun danket alle Gott,@ looked up with anticipation, but waited in vain for that AA-ha@ moment in their faces. AYou know B that=s ANow Thank We All Our God@ B I even sang a few bars in English B even though one or two tried to encourage me, mostly blank stares met my enthusiasm. My day was darkened! In her now classic discussion of worship, Evelyn Underhill

asserts emphatically: AProfoundly historical, [worship] accepts, carries along, and transforms to its own purpose the devotional language and methods of antiquity: and no one will understand it who does not keep this fact in mind@ (61). It dawned on me, that that=s what I need to convey to my students. So, in some ways, we are faced with the urgent, remedial task these days of filling in the cultural and spiritual heritage gaps that insidiously keep our students from truly knowing who they are as modern-day saints.

But, admittedly, I interrupted Underhill; she goes on to say: AYet on the other hand it possesses an inherent freshness and power of adaptation, which again and again accepts new embodiments for its worship of unchanging Truth@ (61). And this statement moves us into the realm of corporate worship. I want to be alert to fresh moves of the Spirit; I want to be receptive to new ways of understanding. But often these days, I find myself in between bouts of humility and heated indignation. I am not alone among faculty in my resistance to Aexperiencing@ our weekly campus-wide Chapel. Although there=s been a recent start to move back to a middle ground, the pendulum at our school had swayed all the way over to allow just about complete student control in planning our Chapel worship times. More than once, I entered not the Asanctuary,@ but the Aauditorium@ and wanted to run the other way. House-lights darkened, guitars, power points, and shout-outs stirred feelings of alienation that made me feel more like an intruder into the community than a member.

But, in many ways, the faculty and administration are to blame, I think. Underhill reminds us that, AThe character of worship is always decided by the worshipper=s conception of God and his relation to God: that is to say, whatever its ritual expression may be, it always has a theological basis@ (60). In relinquishing control of the worship planning, we failed in our pedagogical commitments to our students. Throughout the educational process, we are about the

business of opening and widening our students' minds and certainly this includes the spiritual realm. We shirk our duty to our students when we even in our own humility and our own limited conceptions of God fail to lead them.

Undoubtedly one salient problem in our worship services is a community that dwindles down to individual, intensely private responses where hands go up and eyes close. I think that one way to counteract this reduction is to regain some sense of however loose of liturgy.

Underhill notes: "If human worship is to be other than a series of solitary undertakings, some such [ritual] device is plainly essential to it" (32). Later she comments: "For ritual always acts as a conservative force. It is the very home of tradition; one of the chief means by which the historical character of worship is preserved and carried forward, and permanence given to the devotional discoveries of men" (35). Certainly Underhill is not naive and recognizes some of the perils inherent with ritual excesses, but we Baptists are hardly threatened with those at this point in time. It is interesting to note here that the worship crisis of the 1950's, as noted by Ilion T. Jones, was almost the reverse of today, namely liturgy was seeping into the evangelical church with a hasty, almost blind acceptance" (7).

I am reminded here of Huldrych Zwingli and the tension between the private and the public in his Swiss reformation. For Zwingli, "true worship was internal rather than external, individual rather than communal" (Garside 36). Zwingli saw essentially two competing forms of worship in his day; Charles Garside summarizes: "One is a matter exclusively of external forms involving '>clamor before men='; the other is a matter exclusively of internal content involving '>spirit and truth=' (40). Yet, despite this appreciation and preference given to what Zwingli called "pious, private prayer," corporate worship or "the common prayer that all Christians do

together@ remained integral to Zwingli=s theology of the Church. (Garside 51) He did, however, get rid of the other public display, namely music B perhaps we should follow suit here and burn the guitars like the Swiss did the organs in their day? Joking aside, I can understand his point of view, and we should all heed his warning about music becoming a distraction to true worship, but it nevertheless saddens me to see a composer like himself discard something as important as music from something as important as worship.

Here again we have opportunities to engage our students in thinking about worship by having them grapple with historical personalities. Is music merely a distraction? Or we think about Bonhoeffer and his prescriptions for the public and the private for the Finkenwalde seminary in *Life Together*. Should we sing only in unison? Are our current worship wars merely about style? Calvin Stapert quotes Johann Adolph Scheibe=s 1737 observation of J.S. Bach: AThis great man would be the admiration of whole nations if he had more amenity, if he did not take away the natural element in his pieces by giving them a turgid and confused style, and if he did not darken their beauty by an excess of art@ (47). Or to translate this to our circumstances: Could we stodgy faculty win the admiration of great numbers of our students if we were but more amenable to their affinities, and didn=t insist on grandiloquent expressions of yesteryear? Surely our response calls for more depth.

Underhill can help us as we think about corporate worship; she notes: A[...] the worshipping life of the Christian, whilst profoundly personal, is essentially that of a person who is also a member of a group@ (83). It is precisely this Agroup@ that our students need help in defining. What a small view of the Church and how negligent we would be to leave them to a simple group of like-minded peers! We need to be preservers of a grand historical vision that can remind our students of their minute, but crucial membership in the universal, eternal communion

of the saints. Underhill comments further: "Social action reinforces our unstable fervour." Bonhoeffer puts it this way: "Therefore, the Christian needs another Christian who speaks God's Word to him. [...] He needs his brother solely because of Jesus Christ. The Christ in his own heart is weaker than the Christ in the word of his brother; his own heart is uncertain, his brother's is sure" (23). Common worship when it is at its best can strengthen and encourage us as we come together to sing praises and speak the Word as the body of Christ. One of the objectives of corporate worship, according to T. B. McDormand, is "the unification of the group into a fellowship seeking after God with singlehearted purpose and sanctified zeal" (5). So, rather than just some rote, weekly activity, Chapel has the potential to be a powerful unifier in our collegiate community that can fire our purpose and zeal. Ideally, Chapel needs to be about all the disciplines, all the students, faculty, and administrators coming together to celebrate our common life in Christ.

I agree wholeheartedly with Marva Dawn that much of our problems with worship these days boils down to our difficulty of being the church. She comments, "Frequently I find myself saying, in answer to questions at conferences, 'Do you see, once again, that the root problem is the lack of genuine community in our churches?'" (9). We go to church, Dawn reminds young people, "so that we learn how to be Church" (256). Dawn stresses the fact that church is not somewhere we go on Sunday mornings, but something that characterizes our very being each moment of the day. If that is true, and I believe she's right, we, as a Christian university, as a learning community, must take seriously our "other" role as a community of faith. In a perfect setting, we would not have two separate communities — one learning, the other spiritual — but in some ways, that is what we tend to have right now at OBU. But discussions of integrating faith

and learning are almost ubiquitous now, and most faculty seriously try to marry the two areas. Just this summer we have also thought along these lines in terms of vocation as we investigated our callings as faculty members. We are called as whole persons, not ones divided according to hours in a day.

But the faculty is simply one side of this issue, of course. Our students, too, tend to separate the learning from the spiritual, and even at times, I think, make the division more adamantly than we do. And that makes Agenuine community@ all the more difficult. If we let it, our weekly Chapel can also be a unifier in this sense as we explore the notion of vocation across the community and seek wholeness in our lives. It goes back to Dawn=s idea of Alearning to be the church@ even as we worship.

Certainly this discussion of Chapel and corporate worship is integral to the Christian academy, but I like how Dawn stresses that the root of most of our difficulties lies in the question of community. When we concentrate on our differences and questions of style, we get bogged down. In his book on worship, *Beyond the Shadows*, T.C. Smith warns us: AIf our lives are overlaid with trivialities in our Christian commitment, one day we shall discover that the love of Christ, the kernel of life, is no longer there. Trifles and trivialities are nothing more than sideshow attractions@ (104). I want this love of Christ to spur me on in my role as an educator helping individual students in their own spiritual walks as well as in my role of faculty member in our larger, collegiate community. I long for that day when we allow Christ=s love to truly unify our community, and I think that renewing our worship will hasten the day.

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