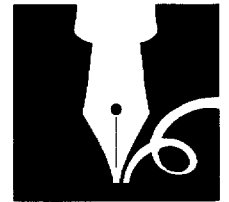


Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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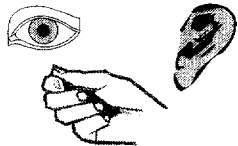
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What's missing?

Awe. Delight. Truthfulness. Hope. Those are the four essential qualities of true Christian worship, says Don E. Saliers in his book *Worship Come to Its Senses* (Abingdon, 1996). He finds these qualities missing from a lot of our churches' worship services. He believes we need to restore them.

AWE
DELIGHT
HOPE
TRUTH

Saliers, a professor at Emory University's Candler School of Theology, a United Methodist seminary, finds awe, delight, truthfulness, and hope to be basic in the human experience of God. He also



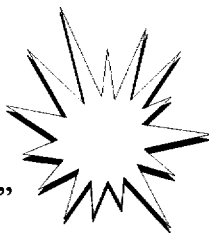
finds that our physical senses are crucial to recovering them. Let's look at what he says about these four important qualities.

Domesticated worship

Much of our worship in contemporary American churches, both Protestant and Roman Catholic, Saliers feels, is domesticated. It's tame, and that's not what he feels worship should be.

He describes a service he attended. "There had certainly been a sense of friendly welcome," he says, "and the informal singing of favorite hymns and songs had reminded me of my own childhood experience of the Sunday School assembly. The children's 'moment' had been lively, focusing on how taking care of our pets can symbolize God's love. The choir had sung a rousing arrangement of 'Standing on the Promises,' and the sermon had been punctuated with helpful insights on dealing with stress." Still, it left him wanting something more or different.

Worship like this, Saliers finds, "is pleasant, even user-friendly, but something is missing at the heart of our practices as well as our theology." What's missing? In his view, it's the awe that recognizing God's presence inspires.



Looking for God's presence

"Rather than express awe, let alone those negative feelings, fear and trembling, as we come into the presence of God ... we focus totally on ourselves, and arrogantly issue an imperative to God. Use this hour, because we're busy later; just send us a bill, as any therapist world, and we'll zip off a check in the mail."



That's the impression much of today's worship gives to Kathleen Norris, author of *Amazing Grace* (Penguin Putnam, 1998), and she's dismayed by it. "The mystery of worship," she reminds us, "which is God's presence and our response to it, does not work that way."

Many who stay away from worship services apparently do so because they haven't experienced God's presence when they've attended. They're missing what Norris calls "the mystery of worship." Are they missing it for the reasons Norris cites? Is that why they stay away?

A time to disconnect?

Some who still faithfully attend aren't finding God's presence either. One of these wrote me in response to a recent *Connections*. "I am writing you at 10:00 on Sunday morning," he explains. "My wife and I have just returned from the early service at our church. I had read your piece on worship earlier this morning."



"The worship service we just attended," he continues, "did nothing to connect me with God. There was excellent music, lots of audience participation in the form of unison creeds and prayers, a sermon, and a sparse congregation." The sparseness evidently meant this attender wasn't alone in his reaction. Unlike the absentees he's still hanging on, but it's despite what he finds in worship, not because of it. "I have grown used to letting this be a time for me to disconnect," he writes, "to seek God through silent prayer, hoping that the service will not interrupt me too much."



When that's how our worship services affect even the most loyal churchgoers, something's wrong. Something very important is missing from our worship services, and we urgently need to identify and recover it. Maybe it's the qualities this issue of *Connections* discusses, maybe not. In future issues I'll present some different views on the subject.

Real awe comes from encountering God

Don Saliers suspects we've devalued the word "awe." We may call a video game or a sports figure "awesome," he notices, but that use of the word doesn't seem to have any connection with real awe. What scripture refers to as awesome, Saliers observes, isn't just what we happen to find interesting or what engages our attention. Awe comes from becoming aware of God's presence and action.



Let all the earth fear the Lord; let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of [God]. For [God] spoke, and it came to be . . .

—Psalm 33:8-9

Encounters with God are still awesome, and we still experience them. They bring wonder and amazement. But to recover and deepen our sense of awe, Saliers believes, we must make deliberate, clear connections between what happens in worship and what we experience in life. "Unless we bring to the speaking, the singing, the praying, and the meal our sense of life and death," he warns, our worship will remain "churchy" and unexciting.

Saliers mentions several experiences that inspire awe,

- Realizing the grandeur and intricacy of the natural world
- Seeing the contrast between the vastness of the universe, which science's discoveries keep making more apparent, and the limits of our own perspectives

The heavens are telling the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims [God's] handiwork.

—Psalm 19:1



- Experiencing death and the mystery of our mortality
- Seeing newborn life
- Recognizing the healing of bodies, minds, or broken relationships.

Calling attention to what reveals God

The sense of God's presence that comes through experiences like these, Saliers reminds us, is "the sense so missing for many of us—the sense of being at the very place where God has chosen to be revealed." In Saliers' opinion we could restore awe to our worship services by calling attention to such experiences.



God's presence was brought powerfully to the attention of worshipers in a recent Sunday-morning service in my congregation, by having special attention given to the newborn lives in our midst. On a January Sunday, all babies born in 1998 were with their parents in a reserved front section of the sanctuary. Each family came to the altar for recognition as its baby's name and birth date were announced. We'd heard these babies' births announced and had seen some of their baptisms during the year, but seeing all these less-than-a-year-old babies at once was awe-inspiring. So was seeing their parents' and siblings' beaming faces, reminding us what important parts of the church these families are.



Our churches could also call attention to God's awe-inspiring actions by regularly including testimony given by lay and clergy members and occasional guest speakers. Lay members could do this as part of a very brief time of recognizing a different one of our ministries each Sunday during worship. One Sunday, a hospital visitor could tell how rewarding his visits had been because they showed him God's healing power at work. Another Sunday, a food-pantry volunteer could tell how she had seen God in her contact with the pantry's clients. In sermons, clergy could tell more often how they've seen God at work in their own lives and in others'.



Great music well performed can also inspire awe during worship. So can the display of magnificent views of the natural world. The secret of recovering a sense of awe in worship, Saliers observes, is mainly in using non-verbal languages—gesture, music, visual images, and interaction with other attenders.



God's presence is all around, all the time

What's most important, in Saliers' view, is for worship planners to pay deliberate and constant attention to the need to speak in these languages during worship, in order to make God's awe-inspiring presence apparent to attenders. God's presence is all around us all the time, and seeing it is awe-inspiring. Seeing it inspires us to worship. Clear

evidence of God's presence is often what's missing from dull worship services. Worship services that help us see God aren't dull.

Duty and routine can hide the delight

"In our concern to do what is expected, and in our routine habits," Don Saliers points out, "we settle for our duty. Thus we miss one of the most essential features of vital worship: sheer delight—delight in God, in one another, and in the very means by which common life is graced. Obligation, custom, and 'the way we've always done it' obscure the delight."



Does this mean we should forget about duty? Saliers certainly doesn't think so. "The marriage of duty and delight," he assures us, "lies at the heart of biblical worship. We are to praise and bless God even when we don't feel like it, only to discover, in doing so, that God is our first love and the well-spring of all enjoyment."

A doorway to delight

Saliers sees praise and thanksgiving as central to Christian worship, and he sees scripture as the ideal medium for expressing praise. "Worship is starved," he finds, "when there is no accompanying Scripture study, and so little Scripture is read, sung, and prayed in our common assemblies." Our basic vocation as God's people, he believes, is to stand in the midst of life and to remember God in praise, blessing, and thanksgiving, and doing this is also "the doorway to delight."



Preparing our minds and hearts for worship helps us enter this doorway, Saliers finds. "When invited to someone's special dinner party," he asks, "do we not prepare in some special way? If we take it for granted or show up late with our minds and hearts elsewhere, the dinner and conversation will not be engaging." Of course, if a worship service doesn't clearly reveal God's



How precious is your steadfast love, O God! All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings. They feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your delights. For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light.

—Psalm 36:7-9

presence and relate to real life, we shouldn't be surprised if attenders' minds and hearts go elsewhere.

The court of truth

"Why do worship services not ring true to people," Saliers asks, "some of whom attend Sunday upon Sunday?"

**A truthful witness saves lives . . .
—Proverbs 14:25**

Sometimes, he finds, it is because attenders don't see in our worship any acknowledgment of what real life in the real world is like.

If our worship is to be alive, it must deal with several aspects of truth. To begin with, Saliers emphasizes, "if we are to hear the Word and receive the life God offers we must also come to terms with the truth about ourselves." In addition, we must encounter the truth about our world and about how other human beings live.

Most important, Saliers assures us, we must see the truth embodied in a real-life community. Words about the truth aren't enough. However, going beyond words is scary. "Truthfulness is risky for us who wish to remain polite with God and nice to one another," Saliers warns. "It does not make things easier to live in a culture where forgetfulness and deception have become a way of life."



Truth and truthfulness, Saliers hastens to add, aren't just honesty. They also require what he calls "mutual respect and a sense of timeliness for speaking about matters and praying in the whole congregation about them. Christian worship is not and cannot be the same as a no-holds-barred therapy session." The key, according to Saliers, is keeping Jesus as our model. Jesus spoke with compassion but also with disarming directness.

To restore truth to our worship, Saliers, suggests, we need to restore lament. "We have very few occasions," he reminds us, "that allow us to express honestly and deeply our pain and our anguish."



We need to express our grief as well as our joy during worship. Saliers finds that opportunities to cry out to God are missing in much current Christian liturgy. This lack keeps us from seeing a connection between the church's liturgy and our lives.

Hope that isn't just optimism

Finally, Saliers suggests, we need to restore hope to our worship. Christian hope, he reminds us, isn't politeness and it isn't naive optimism. It is a recognition of God. Surprisingly, it is part of crying out in lament. Crying out to someone, Saliers points out, is evidence that we have some hope of being heard. "Christian hope," then, in

[God] has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead . . .
—1 Peter 1:3

Saliers' view, "is not simply our garden-variety wishes and wants dressed up in religious language. Mere wishful thinking or sentimental moods induced by music and prayer will not do." Christian hope is trusting in God because of what we know about God's past and present action.



How could you help your church's worship services to include more awe, delight, truth, and hope? Maybe if more of us pray, think, and talk about how to accomplish this, some much-needed changes will happen.

Barbara

Coming in *Connections* . . .

- What does having a personal relationship with Jesus really mean? How do pictures of Jesus help or hurt?
- Electronic media have brought a bigger change than the printing press. The Methodist Church and other mainline churches led in using print to spread the gospel and change the world, yet few are using electronic media. We need to make some big changes in a hurry.
- More on worship, with some views that differ from those quoted in recent *Connections*. Can traditional worship styles survive? Why should we use others? What does ritual do? How do our words matter?



- Thriving churches and dying churches—what makes the difference?

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