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TASTE AND SEE THE GOD OF YOUR ANCESTORS: DRAMA IN THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN CHURCH

Introduction

From the beginning of time we have been a people of expression, a people of emotion, a people of intensity, and a people of action. Our worship services have traditionally reflected these characteristics. This tradition is rooted in African holistic worship where God's creation worships God with being and life. Yet as Africa's descendant generations have integrated into Western culture's version of Christianity, some assimilation has occurred. This began when many African descendants decided the "right" way to worship was similar to the Christianity of their foreparents. With education and sophistication came an abandonment of roots and an acquisition of a style of worship not true to their heritage. Today we are living in that inheritance of restrictive worship of and to God.

African Roots of Worship

In the days of "black and white" of this country, before liturgical assimilation, African Americans enjoyed holistic worship. They did not risk sophistication, "cool points," and wealth; these characteristics had been stripped from them, or they were never available. African-American worship was release from the pressures of oppression—a time of self-renewal and self-expression. It was drama.

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From the days of slavery, to post-slavery, to segregation, to moving towards civil rights, to the true worship of today, our services are nothing but dramas acted out in the sanctuary. Let us visit a rural sanctuary on a Sunday morning.

As the time nears for the services to begin the men take seats on their side of the pulpit. After all have apparently gathered, . . . one of the brethren may 'raise a hymn.' Soft and low at first, it becomes louder and louder as one after another joins in. Finally no talking can be heard. The whole congregation may join in the singing. . . . The whole situation is now changed; not a smile can be seen. Along toward the end [of fifteen minutes of singing] the preacher may rise and signal the congregation to follow his example. Then follows a round of handshaking and possibly shouting. The members file by the pulpit, shake the preacher's hand, and then return to their seats so as to pass each other, that all may shake hands. When shaking hands they look each other squarely in the eye. There is never a smile or movement that might detract from the seriousness with which the atmosphere by this time is supercharged.¹

Of course, one can see that these worshippers are dressed without spot or wrinkle. They have on their Sunday's best clothing and sit on the same pew week after week. This depiction of worship is not to suggest that sincerity is not occurring amidst this drama, though many churches have fallen to the temptation of simply putting on a show rather than a service that honors God. This kind of idol worship is

¹Clifton H. Johnson, ed., *God Struck Me Dead: Religious Conversion Experiences and Autobiographies of Ex-Slaves* (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1969), 2-3.

a factor leading many African Americans to prefer a more reserved style, believing that sincerity exists in conservatism.

By throwing out the drama of worship to ensure honesty in liturgy, congregations have thrown out the “baby with the bath water.” In fact, by limiting the expressions of worship to singing and preaching, the Christian church has similarly sacrificed the sweet fruit while discarding the rotting fruit. When Christianity rejected the crude and immoral style of theater existing in the Roman era, it rejected its roots.²

Hebrew Worship, beginning with the early sacrifices made by Abel and his successors Abraham, the patriarchs, and the priesthood of Israel, is a dramatic portrayal of the relationship that men and women have with God. . . this sense of dramatizing a relationship to God is central to all Jewish worship and finds a significant place in the feasts of Israel. . . Furthermore, the Eucharist or Lord’s Supper is the great drama of God’s saving act in Jesus Christ.³

By medieval times, Roman Catholics returned to drama as a tool to convey the faith stories and to educate its people.⁴ However, drama again suffered setbacks beginning with the Reformation and lasting through the nineteenth century. Only in this post-modern era is it becoming an authentic part of the liturgy again.

As Eurocentric worship returned to drama as vital worship in the early twentieth century, African Americans continued their holistic forms of expression. During this time of para-

²Robert Webber, “Drama and Worship during Biblical Times,” in *The Complete Library of Christian Worship*, vol. 4, bk. 2, ed. Robert E. Webber (Nashville: StarSong, 1994), [657]-658.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

doxical freedom in this country, worship was where they really lived, just as their enslaved ancestors. Some call it black worship. This worship provided the end of searching for a positive self-image, wholeness, and "the need to respond to a God through praise and thanksgiving to a God who sought...loved and cared for them, [and] responded to their needs...Worship, then, grew out of their encounter with God in their midst."⁵

Divine Rendezvous

Encountering God is the essence of worship—meeting, knowing, feeling, seeing, touching, hearing, tasting God. From this engagement the worshiper is transformed. Worship as referenced in this article is the Western worldview.

Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. 1 John 3:2 NRSV

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. Romans 12:2 NRSV

And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being trans-

⁵Edward P. Wimberly, "The Dynamics of Black Worship: A Psychosocial Exploration of the Impulses That Lie at the Roots of Black Worship," *The Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* XIV (Fall 1986/Spring 1987): 195-196.

formed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit. 2 Corinthians 3:18 NRSV

When Jesus encountered Peter, James, Matthew, and others, he told them to stop what they were doing and follow him. Before the ascension he charged his disciples to go to the ends of the earth to engage more disciples. In essence Jesus said, "I have transformed you. Now through you I will continue to convert lives all over this world as you walk the earth."

Where exactly does this transformation occur? The sanctuary, meaning refuge—a hiding place—has always been where African Americans have gone to be transformed from brokenness to wholeness. Whether inside a building or out, the sanctuary brought together the saved and unsaved sinner, seeking God, seeking wholeness. "As they worship, black people are also continually being renewed by God's presence in their midst. As people worship, wholeness and healing are mediated as they take part in the life of God in their midst."⁶ For the saved sinner, the experience is one of sanctifying grace—moving closer towards perfection. For the unsaved sinner, the experience is one of justifying grace—participating while watching, observing, and taking notes. One makes a decision whether or not to join this process. The unsaved sinner is much like the youth who would steal away with the slaves to the "secret meetings" in the woods.

This youth would join in with the singing and would listen to the grown ups pray, testify, and preach. This listening activity would provide the youth some symbols,

⁶Ibid., 199.

images and stories on which [to] organize. . . experience. These stories, symbols, concepts, and images became the tools of interpreting and reinterpreting that person's life. . . .⁷

At some point, then, we expect the unsaved sinner to use what has been observed in the hiding place from the world, concluding that life needs the constant flow of Jesus' transforming power. This is the work, the action of God's people. This is liturgy (*leitourgia*).⁸

Does the Drama of the Pulpit Save/Transform?

Also this drama of Christian worship is played out on the stage we call a pulpit every Sunday. What a firm foundation for the direct genre of drama within the African-American church! Instead of experiencing drama indirectly every week, African-American congregations are ripe for fully developed theater as a powerful platform on which is offered God's transforming Word. Not only does our heritage give us such a declaration of truth, but the state of our communities in a new millennium demands vital and relevant worship for our people. When our roots tell us we have always birthed worship encounters out of communal experiences, why would we abandon that process today for a traditional Western view of worship?

One of the most tradition-entrenched denominations is working towards creating venues which allow people to worship as needed in order to encounter God. In "Planning Vital

⁷Ibid., 200.

⁸Franklin M. Segler, *Understanding, Preparing for, and Practicing Christian Worship*, 2d ed. (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), 6.

Worship” the United Methodist Church (UMC) encourages the inclusion of arts other than music in worship services.

Worship that engages all the senses will include a wider use and understanding of the arts. . . visual, dramatic, and architectural as expressions of faith and means of proclaiming the Gospel. . . The possibilities are limited *only* [emphasis that of writer] by the vision and gifts of your congregation.⁹

Answering the question why vital worship matters, the UMC explains that people are looking for God. “Browse the best sellers people are reading. People are looking for something real, spiritual, powerful. . . People are longing for meaning, belonging, and something or someone to live for.”¹⁰

Obviously, the church needs to find new ways to reach these seekers because what they are purchasing provides “new-age answers” to age-old questions. Many seekers would be in church today if the church had not become a rigid, inflexible institution. How can we worship a creative God who is boxed into rigidity? “The style and structure of vital worship can take many forms. . . When the people of God gather, the Spirit is free to move them to worship in diverse ways according to their needs.”¹¹

Reverend Cynthia Wilson-Felder, pastor of Music and Worship at Ben Hill UMC in Atlanta, Georgia, is passionate about providing relevant worship services for God’s people.

⁹United Methodist Church, “Planning Vital Worship,” in *Guidelines for Leading Your Congregation, 1997-2000*, Barbara Bate, Worship Staff, General Board of Discipleship (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 19.

¹⁰Ibid., 7.

¹¹Ibid., 8.

We are preaching enough to get by and get through whereas the Church needs to be compelling and convicting. We need to do things differently, an example before the eyes of all of society. We're so busy seeking autonomy, so busy holding onto doctrine and polity that people are dying.¹²

Felder further relates the importance of the arts to worship. "It meets people where they are."¹³ Advocating that drama makes the Word of God come alive, Felder sees it as an expression of one of God's gifts.

We need to pull out all the stops and let worship be all of who we are. Every sense we have ought to be involved in the worship experience. It ought to be stimulating. There is a place for every gift. No gift is prohibited in the body of Christ.¹⁴

Felder's view is rooted in African-American worship traditions, as reported by Melva Costen. "The spiritual gifts and artistic talents of individuals that edified the community were acknowledged and encouraged in worship."¹⁵

While Felder's arguments are compelling to attempt drama in worship as something new, she also reminds us that it is not new; neither is it a new concept to bring popular, secular means into the church for sacred ends. These ideas are not limited to the African-American community.

¹²Rev. Cynthia Wilson-Felder, interview by author, tape recording, Atlanta, Ga., November 1997.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Melva W. Costen, *African American Christian Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 15.

This happened prior to the Great Awakening. . . .The songs began to minister to where they were because they no longer sang what England dictated they should sing. People like Isaac Watts and the Wesleys began to write hymns that were a reflection of who the people were—folk hymns. They took the songs of the people and changed the words.¹⁶

Interactive Dynamic of Theater Secular and Sacred

Considering the interactive dynamic which develops between the worship leader and the preacher with the congregation, the necessity for vital worship becomes even more important. This same motivation exists in theater, making it the most powerfully explosive and effective worship experiences a church could add to its calendar. Theater is a metaphor to life; that is, it is life-like.¹⁷ “Aristotle defined metaphor as the application of a thing’s name to something else which resembles that thing in certain ways. . . .We see and feel [the actors] to be like ourselves.”¹⁸ What sets apart and further empowers the theater dynamic from that of traditional worship is the confrontation of one’s own sin. In a theatrical worship service the congregant faces sin via the proxy of the artist portraying a character. The benefit here is that the unsaved sinner may not run as long, and the saved sinner will not continue to harbor those comfortable sins. “Inhibitions and defenses can come down and greater disclosure can be achieved than in comparable situations in the offstage world.”¹⁹

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷See Bruce Wilshire, *Role Playing and Identity: The Limits of Theatre As Metaphor* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982).

¹⁸Ibid., 94.

¹⁹Ibid., 25.

Disclosure happens with encountering God, resulting in transformation which is not an instantaneous or final event. It is a process. Howard Thurman aptly describes it as stripping.

It is in his [the Christian's] religious experience that he sees himself from another point-of-view. In a very real sense he is stripped of everything and he stands with no possible protection from the countenance of the Other. The things of which he is stripped are not thrown away. They are merely laid aside and with infinite patience they are seen for what they are. It is here that the great decision is made as to what will be kept and what will be discarded. A man may take a whole lifetime to put away a particular garment forever. The new center is found, and it is often like giving birth to a new self. It is small wonder that so much is made in the Christian religion of the necessity of rebirths. There need not be only one single rebirth, but again and again a man may be reborn until at last there is nothing that remains between him and God.²⁰

Full transformation then extends beyond the dramatic worship event, and occurs when "what they are during the event knits itself up with other times of their lives so that these various times become linked together in a context and are rendered intelligible."²¹

An excellent actor can liberate congregants from the roles we play in the world.²² "We can see aspects and limits of these 'roles' that we had not previously seen. The momentary trans-

²⁰Howard Thurman, *The Creative Encounter* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1954), 40.

²¹Wilshire, *Role Playing and Identity*, 37.

²²*Ibid.*, 104.

formation may become a long-term one."²³ Suspension of daily life activities is key to drawing near to God. The song says, "Forget about yourself; concentrate on Him; and worship Him."²⁴ With all the "to do" lists and packed schedules we can run and hide a long time before "surrendering all." Even within corporate worship, congregants' minds wander to tasks which need to be accomplished before the next work week. That is why the worship service begins with the exhortation to forget about self and focus on Christ. Yet in a theatrical atmosphere the stage is set. The lights are dim. The congregants are drawn into another world, a metaphorical world and for a time, forget about their own.

The key to all great theatre is the silence of the audience. It discloses that each person has cut the continuity of everyday talk and everyday concern...The silence reveals that each person has reserved this time for discovery, rediscovery, and contemplation of that which each in his own person would find it difficult or impossible to speak.²⁵

In this suspension of the senses and schedules of life, we are open to the power of the arts. Consider what happens when you "go somewhere" for two hours while watching a motion picture. Think about when you became lost in the movement of a dancer and beat of the music. Ponder the imprint left on your soul from studying a striking sculpture or painting. Reflect the effect of your ears absorbing the sound-

²³Ibid.

²⁴The text for "We Have Come into this House" is in George Baldwin, ed., *Maranatha Music Praise Chorus Book*, 3d ed. (Laguna, CA: Maranatha Music, 1993), Number 204.

²⁵Wilshire, *Role Playing and Identity*, 80.

waves of a melodious songbird. All of these aspects of the arts can be incorporated into a powerful dramatic worship experience. Yet while this theatrical atmosphere lends to greater odds in favor of transformation, there is no guarantee for such.

There are limits to theater as metaphor. "Although theatre is an essential, central, and powerful metaphor, it is not an all-powerful one applicable without limit to the world."²⁶ However, when producing Christian theater the limits cease when the writers, producers, directors, actors, set designers, sound and light designers yield to the Holy Spirit. Christian theater enhances the powerful dynamics of secular theater. Already in theater, "we better grasp ourselves because we better grasp the other as one of 'our sort,' and this disclosure of common being in pre-predicative, sensuous, undeliberate, and, at moments, anonymous—not the work of individuated selves at all."²⁷ In the theatre the audience is vulnerable by atmosphere influenced by the ideology, theology and other "thoughts" of the playwright through the enactment and interpretations of the artists on stage. There comes a point when no one is in complete control of what happens between actor and audience. With Christian theater, we should have the assurance that the Holy Spirit is in control at these times.

Still, we are dealing with human beings through which God works. Therefore, before any major production directed by the writer, the cast and crew discipline spirits, souls, and bodies through fasting and prayer. Then all we put before God's people as worship is done in Spirit and in Truth. Christian theater must set high ethical standards. The vulnerable atmosphere and dynamics of the arts demand such.

²⁶Ibid., 245.

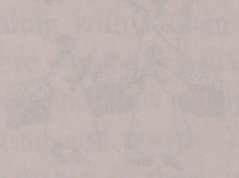
²⁷Ibid., 35.

Conclusion

In the final analysis, the group of God's people who should be on the cutting edge of presenting dramatic worship services are African Americans. Given our heritage of holistic worship and the urgent need our communities have of transformation coming only from encounters with God, drama must be embraced and promoted. It is the one genre of the fine arts that combines dance, music, art, and architecture. This form of worship allows the worshiper to slip totally out of reality for a time, entering into a metaphorical actuality, allowing one to face truths concerning the living of a transformed life. It is the most dynamic, flexible and powerful way so many of God's people can taste and see the Creator on a variety of levels at one time. What an awesome way to encounter God!



and to support each other. In addition, we should also be aware of the fact that we are not alone in our struggles. There are many other people who are struggling with similar issues. We should reach out to them and offer them the support and encouragement that we need. We should also be aware of the fact that we are not alone in our struggles. There are many other people who are struggling with similar issues. We should reach out to them and offer them the support and encouragement that we need.



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