**Key Quotes- Chapter 4, “Gathered in the Spirit”**

**Our Common Worship**

Christian philosopher Seren Kierkegaard developed an analogy called “the theater of worship”, which invites us to see public worship as a kind of theater performance and asks us to identify the stage, actors, and audience. Based on our experience of worship, most of us would probably locate the stage in the church and see worship leaders as the actors performing for a congregational audience. But Kierkegaard asks us to see the sanctuary as a stage on which the entire congregation acts, prompted by ministers and musicians. The audience is God!

The word liturgy comes from the Greek leitourgia, which simply means the service or work of the people. Worship is the work of all the faithful who gather to praise, honor, and glorify God. Have you ever thought about what kind of service to God a “worship service” is? Acts of service to one another have a sacrificial character. We serve God when worship expresses a spirit of sacrifice: first a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, then a complete self-offering—a willingness to listen for God’s Word and to give ourselves wholly to God’s designs in the world. We offer our will, strength, and gifts in gratitude for who God is and what God has done for us.

Worship ushers us into the presence of the living God and demands the attention, receptivity, and response of our whole being. It asks us to disengage from the nose-length focus of daily life and see below the surface to life’s source. We can then reengage the realities of the world from a deeper and clearer perspective.


**Worship from the Heart**

True worship from the heart, then, means responding to God’s glory and love with our entire being. After all, when Pirit touches spirt, we are moved-in both feelings and commitments. Too many worshiping communities encourage only half-hearted worship. In churches that tend toward reason and order, many member yearn to express more fully the intuitive and feeling side of faith. In churches where the intellect is less valued than emotional experiences of faith, many people are hungry for serious study and responsible action. Historically speaking, with the exception of music, many Protestant churches of European background tended to neglect the body and its senses in worship, while churches with African and Hispanic roots were more likely to include the whole body in worship celebrations. Part of the gift of our increasingly multicultural society is the opportunity to learn various styles of worship from one another and to appreciate the gifts of each tradition.

The Need to Gather

For many people, private worship is more attractive than public ownership. Envisioning faith as a private affair reflects the individualism of our culture. Many ask why corporate worship should be so important when they can meditate on God in nature with far less distraction or why they should bother to get dressed up and go to church when they can listen to an inspiring message on radio, TV or online. But the reasons for gathering are many and important.

Even our most personal disciplines need to be supported, broadened, clarified, and sometimes corrected in the light of corporate theology and practice. Otherwise, we become susceptible to privatized visions of spiritual truth. Moreover, we need the prayers of other individuals just as much as they need our prayers…. We delude ourselves if we imagine we can live the spiritual life in total isolation from Christian community, for it is impossible to be Christian in solitary splendor. To be Christian is to be joined to the body of Christ. The central and visible way in which the church expresses this reality is by gathering in the Spirit to receive and respond to God’s living word.

Finally, worship in community means that we can present a united front “against the cosmic powers of this present darkness” (Eph. 6:12). Biblical scholar Walter Wink argues eloquently that the powers and principalities of this world are corporate in nature. It takes a communal witness of light, truth, and peace to overcome the corporate power of darkness, deception, and destruction in this world. Of course, there are members of the body who are committed to the importance of common worship but are physically unable to come. Online worship may be a blessing to such persons. But even more important are the ways their fellow members bring community to them in their particular circumstances.

Worship as a Problem

Unfortunately, many people find corporate worship a source of frustration rather than fulfillment. Our actual experience on Sunday morning may embody few of the realities I have described, even if we believe in them. We may feel that we are neither actors nor audience before God but passive (and not always happy) recipient of the limited worship forms of particular churches and their leaders. Or perhaps we come seeking a lively community of faith and find people who seem bored, preoccupied, uninterested in visitors, or eager to escape from Christian fellowship for Sunday brunch and afternoon golf.

Perhaps we seem unable to penetrate the circles of people who seem to be at the heart of the church’s life. We may find ourselves unaccepted for a variety of reasons, including various forms of brokenness in our personal lives. Perhaps we come to hear a word of life in the scriptures but find ourselves instead subjected to passages rendered meaningless, dull, or
exaggerated by the manner in which they are read. There may be little silence for the word we do hear to sink in and get assimilated. Perhaps we come to receive edification in the preaching and are dished a heavy dose of ideology, the preacher’s personal views, or endless anecdotes strung together and passed off as a sermon. Maybe the preacher speaks down to us, harangues us, or fails to connect the sermon to our daily experiences in life.

Perhaps we come with an eagerness to sing the great hymns of our faith, hymns we may have known by heart from childhood. Instead, we find a new hymnal with tunes that seem unsingable or familiar tunes with unfamiliar words that leave us confused and dissatisfied. Other sources of dissatisfaction abound. How then are we to become lively actors in the drama of human worship before God? How can we be better attuned to God in spite of the foibles of worship leaders, the frailties of worshiping communities, and the inadequacies of our own feelings and judgements?


Worship as Promise: Practices for Deepening Our Worship

Worship need not be completely determined by the limitations of human leaders or communities. There are things we can do to help enliven our experience of common worship. We may have little power to change the external forms, but we can certainly change our way of entering into worship. We can take responsibility for our own experience in three important ways: by preparing in advance for the Sunday service; by engaging worship itself with a different quality of awareness; and by taking the initiative to speak with worship planners and leaders about how we experience worship.

Preparation

The single most important thing we can do to change our experience of public worship is to revitalize our practice of personal worship. In earlier times, the weekly prayers of the gathered community were nurtured by the daily prayers of faithful families and individuals, just as a river is fed by smaller streams. These days, I suspect daily prayer in families is rare, while individual prayer is likely sporadic and weighted toward intercession. I doubt that the majority of church members engage daily with such opportunities. Small wonder, then, if public worship feels spiritually dry.

When we begin to steep ourselves in scripture on a regular basis, we hear the Sunday scripture readings differently. Our own daily prayer becomes tilled soil for receiving the seed of God’s Word in the liturgy. Christians have always known that public worship—particularly the celebration of the sacraments—requires inward preparation. It was at one time common practice to examine oneself through prayer and confession before participating in the Sunday
service. If we spend half an hour assessing our lives before God, either Saturday evening or early Sunday morning, we will discover natural bridges between our personal prayer and common worship. We will find unexpected connections between our life experience and the words of the liturgy, and we will deepen our receptivity to the grace of Word and Sacrament.


**During Worship**

Many find it helpful to arrive for worship ten minutes early in order to distance themselves from last-minute rushing and prepare themselves to worship God from the heart. This is a good time for both worship leaders and worshipers to pray, asking the Spirit to be actively present and known by the gathered community and for the faithfulness and integrity of the church in its worship and mission.

Once the service has begun, you can do several things to heighten your awareness of God’s presence. First, be prepared to hear God speak to you personally and to the whole gathering. Recognize that God can catch our attention through any part of the service, not only in the ways we expect. Pay attention to the meaning of the words in printed prayers and affirmations as you speak them. You don’t have to let the congregational drone of unison reading dull your mind!

If certain parts of the service do not speak to you, stay focused inwardly on the parts that do. Ponder in your heart those phrases or insights that communicate the presence and grace of God to you. Let yourself respond inwardly to the gifts you are given in the time of worship. But remember that what speaks to you may not make you comfortable. God often communicates grace through challenge!

Claim for yourself the freedom to respond to God in worship with the fullness of your being. If tears are a natural part of your response to God’s grace, or a way of communicating your need to God, let yourself cry. Instead of allowing the inhibitions of others to control you, offer the example of your freedom to others. We need permission to feel and to move in our worship life. The Spirit is free to speak to us in an infinite number of ways. If you do not find God’s Word where you expect to, keep your ears open for the unexpected!

Beyond Service

Although you may not be in a position to make direct decisions about how worship is planned and led, you can make your hopes and desires known to those who are. Don’t be afraid to talk with your pastor [or deacons] about your experience of common worship.

If you feel a need for more silent reflection time in the service, say so. You can suggest when quiet reflection would be most helpful. Your suggestions need not be in the form of complaint, which may elicit defensiveness on the part of decision makers. They can rather be expressed as changes you yearn for that would enrich your experience of worship.