

God brings us out to a spacious place

The transforming role of praise and confession in worship

Marlene Kropf, Associate Professor of Spiritual Formation and Worship, Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary

A worshiper enters the sanctuary on Sunday morning. Tired and stressed, she admits to herself, “For two cents I’d have stayed home this morning, read the newspaper, and enjoyed a good cup of coffee. Why in the world did I come?”

The force of habit, however, is great. The worshiper picks up a bulletin, makes her way to a familiar seat, prays for those preparing to lead the service, and then waits in silence.

There’s nothing unusual about the service. The worship leader gathers the congregation into God’s presence. They sing an opening hymn. A prayer is offered, inviting the Spirit to move in their midst.

The worshiper hears a young adult read a psalm, which is interspersed with a refrain spoken by the people: “I will praise the Lord as long as I live.” And then the congregation sings several songs of praise, the last of which is a sturdy setting of Psalm 100: “All people that on earth do dwell, sing to the Lord with cheerful voice....”

During the prayer of confession, the leader acknowledges that the praise of God is not always a priority in the congregation’s life. Sometimes their adoration is anemic, weak, half-hearted. Distracted by daily tasks, troubled relationships, and worries about the future, they forget the God who is worthy of praise.

In the spacious silence of personal prayer, the worshiper recognizes that during the past week she too has lost sight of who God is. Immersed in her own concerns, she has not recognized God’s hand reaching out to guide or sustain her. “Have mercy,” she prays. “I belong to you. I want to love and serve you with my whole heart.” As God’s cleansing grace flows freely during the song of assurance, the worshiper’s world shifts back into focus. Creature and creator are reunited in a loving embrace.

A perceptible surge of energy flows through the congregation. Alert and attentive, they wait expectantly for the proclamation of God's Word. Simple, truthful words are offered, and worshipers hear God speaking to them personally, as well as to the entire body. As they respond to the good news, they are restored, made whole, and renewed for their return to daily life.

What magic has happened? What alchemy has transformed sluggish, reluctant Sunday morning worshipers into loving, attentive, receptive disciples? The mystery of the divine-human encounter at the center of worship is, of course, the catalyst. We cannot meet the true and living God and remain unchanged. When Moses returned from his regular encounter with God in the tent of meeting, his face shone with reflected light (Exod. 33: 7–11; 34:33–35). In the same way, the act of opening ourselves to God's love and grace sets in motion a dynamic transformation by which ordinary worshipers are changed "from one degree of glory into another" (2 Cor. 3:18).

Although all the elements of worship (singing, praying, giving, preaching, etc.) play important roles in transformation, two ordinary, even routine, acts have special significance for ongoing conversion. Praise and confession are essential actions of worship in which Christians are brought face-to-face with God. In praise, we recognize and name who God is; in confession, we recognize and name who we are. The resulting clarity creates a fertile context for the ongoing transformation of God's people and the redemption of the world.

How does praise transform?

The praise of God is the purpose for which human beings are created. In Walter Brueggemann's words, praise is our "duty and delight."¹ Yet praise is not an action that originates with human beings. Ancient Israel understood that worship and praise are a response to a God who acts first. With images of intimacy and abundance, the prophet Isaiah describes God's lavish gestures of grace and persistent desire for relationship:

*I give water in the wilderness,
rivers in the desert,
to give drink to my chosen people,*

*the people whom I formed for myself
so that they might declare my praise. (Isa. 43:20–21)*

As the initiator in the divine-human drama, God moves us to seek God's face. In the beginning of the *Confessions*, Augustine wrote: "You move us to delight in praising you—for you have formed us for yourself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in you."

Yet praise is also a choice we make. While God is always wooing us into relationship, we must choose whether to open ourselves to the lover of our souls. If we respond to the divine

In praise, we recognize and name who God is; in confession, we recognize and name who we are. The resulting clarity creates a fertile context for the ongoing transformation of God's people and the redemption of the world.

grace, our eyes are opened to see who God is. In that moment, the fragmented pieces of our lives begin to cohere around a center, we regain focus and perspective, and our hearts are filled with gratitude and peace. Out of that reorientation, we offer praise and thanksgiving to God, our creator, redeemer, and sustainer.²

For praise in worship to become a powerful agent of transformation, however, we will need two things: more time for praise and a redefinition of praise. Praise that does its work of restoring our relationship with God demands more time than the

perfunctory two hymns of praise sung near the beginning of worship. When we consider the demands and stresses of people's lives (which they bring with them to worship), we realize that we need more time to let the words and songs of praise fill our hearts, minds, and bodies and begin to do their work. It also takes time to recreate the community each Sunday. If I could suggest one thing to transform Mennonite worship, it would be that we devote at least fifteen or twenty minutes to the act of praise (well-chosen songs as well as words from the psalms) immediately after the gathering actions each week. If that means lengthening the service, it would be time well spent.

For praise to transform us may also require a fundamental redefinition of praise. More than upbeat words or happy songs, praise is fundamentally a recognition of who God is, a declaration

of God's greatness, and an offering of adoration and loyalty to God. Praise is not a conditional response offered only when we have had a good week or a trouble-free life; praise is our duty and

More than upbeat words or happy songs, praise is fundamentally a recognition of who God is, a declaration of God's greatness, and an offering of adoration and loyalty to God. ...Praise is our duty and delight in the midst of whatever comes.

delight in the midst of whatever comes—heartache, sorrow, peace, or joy.³

The songs and poems of Israel are our best tutor in this more expansive practice of praise. The psalms do not describe some never-never land where life is blissful and people are always true to their ideals; rather they are concerned with the struggles and sufferings of real life where God meets people and people are transformed in such an encounter. Thus a psalm of lament, such as Psalm 13, 79, or 143, is just as much an act of praise as more jubilant psalms, such as Psalm 65, 100, or 148. Not the particulars of our lives but God's identity as covenant-maker,

steadfast companion, and giver of mercy is the foundation of our faith and praise. In the act of recalling and proclaiming God's deeds, we remake our world, regain perspective, and rediscover a solid, more trustworthy foundation for living.

How does confession transform?

When we enter God's courts with praise, another amazing transformation occurs. Having gained renewed clarity about who God is, we also see ourselves in a new light. Human beings typically fall into two categories with regard to self-awareness. Some of us "think of ourselves more highly than we ought to think" (Rom. 12:3); others can only see abject unworthiness—"all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth" (Isa. 64:6). Neither extreme is an adequate identity for a child of God. Yet only the act of praise makes it possible for us to claim our true identity.

Again, the songs and prayers of Israel can tutor us. The psalms do not hesitate to tell the truth about reality, even when failure and brokenness are evident. Psalm 130 cries out, "If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand?" (v. 3). Israel's poets have no doubt about the depths of human depravity, the human potential for sin. What is significant, however, is that the

sinner need not slink away in shame. Instead of hiding the truth about sin, the psalmist persists in claiming a place before God and waits confidently for mercy.

How does the worshiper find such courage? The answer rests in the comprehensive vision of the God whom Israel praises. This God is both holy and forgiving. Psalm 130 goes on to proclaim, “But with you there is forgiveness” (v. 4). Just as the psalmist harbors no illusions about human shortcomings, so the psalm leaves no doubts about God’s abundant mercy. Patrick Miller explains: “The character of God is neither bent against us, nor neutral in God’s justice and righteousness, but is bent toward us in grace and mercy.”⁴ God is on our side.

Confession is a simple act of truth-telling. Without fear or groveling, and trusting our creator and redeemer, we speak what God already knows. We name who we are—our faults, limitations, perfidy, incompleteness, sin. In so doing, we enter the spacious territory of mercy where grace flows freely and we are cleansed and restored.

If we tend to misunderstand praise as an “upper,” we also tend to misunderstand confession as a “downer.” When the prayers of confession in worship leave us feeling dispirited or morbid or guilty, we haven’t met the true and living God. Just as Jesus spoke

Confession is a simple act of truth-telling. Without fear or groveling, and trusting our creator and redeemer, we speak what God already knows. We name who we are.... In so doing, we enter the spacious territory of mercy where grace flows freely.

with compassion to the adulterous woman, “Neither do I condemn you. Go on your way, and from now on do not sin again” (John 8:11), so our savior invites us to leave our haunts of wretchedness or shame and walk in newness of life.⁵

As a way of connecting the actions of praise and confession in worship, worship leaders may use a simple but helpful planning tool. Identify the particular “face” of God that is the focus of the acts of praise and then shape the prayer of confession in response: Who are we in light of this revelation of God? What do we need from God? To what transformation are we called?⁶ For example,

the face of God chosen as the focus for worship on a particular Sunday might be “our shepherd God.” Music texts that invite us

to meet and praise our shepherd would prepare the way for a prayer of confession in which worshipers consider the ways we wander from our good shepherd's care.

Without words of assurance or a celebration of grace, the act of confession in worship is incomplete. A biblical theology of repentance requires such a response, for when we confess, God is always faithful to cleanse and forgive (1 John 1:9). One of the best ways to accomplish this act of worship is by singing an energetic hymn of grace such as "Wonderful grace of Jesus" or a robust hymn of affirmation such as "There's a wideness in God's mercy." The power of these hymns provides momentum for the process of transformation, filling us with courage and joy as we face the challenges of living faithfully in the world.

What does the spacious place of transformation look like?

When the people of God regularly meet their maker in worship, when they truly claim both the fragility and strength of their humanity, and when they rejoice in God's goodness and power, their faith is fortified and they become living signs of God's reign in the world. The spacious place toward which praise and confession lead the people of God is nothing other than the realm of God, the just and peaceful reign of Christ.

Psalm 146 describes this spacious place in much the same way that Mary, mother of Jesus, describes it in her song:

*The Lord sets the prisoners free;
the Lord opens the eyes of the blind.
The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down;
the Lord loves the righteous.
The Lord watches over the strangers;
the Lord upholds the orphan and widow. (vv. 8–9)*

Praise and confession change us. They transform us into God's people who not only give our ultimate allegiance to God but who live generously, freely, and peaceably as God's agents in a world not yet fully redeemed. Thus praise and confession not only equip us for the ordinary daily challenges of faithfulness but enlarge our vision of the fulfillment of God's gracious reign in the world.

If praise and confession are so powerful, why don't they always work in worship?

Having made these claims for praise and confession as significant elements of transformation in worship, we must also admit that singing a few songs or hymns of praise and offering a prayer of confession may not always bring about the desired change.

Though there can be many reasons for this lack of efficacy, one obvious impediment could be lack of readiness or willingness on the part of worshipers. An even more significant impediment may be the worship leader. Those who lead worship carry enormous responsibility for guiding people into God's presence, into the

Those who lead worship carry enormous responsibility for guiding people into God's presence, into the spacious place of transformation. If worship leaders do not understand their role and do not inhabit it with conviction and grace, they will have difficulty creating a space where the Spirit can move.

spacious place of transformation. If worship leaders do not understand their role and do not inhabit it with conviction and grace, they will have difficulty creating a space where the Spirit can move.

Three images of the worship leader may offer clarity and guidance for this work of transformation: *shaman*, *host*, and *prophet*. In traditional societies, the shaman is a person of spirit, one who has encountered God, who knows the ancient stories and ritual pathways, is trusted by the people, and is equipped to guide others on the path to God.⁷ Sometimes we unwisely entrust the work of worship leading to people who have not yet come to know God deeply enough to guide others into God's presence. Recently a friend complained to me about an ineffective prayer of confession led by a teenager during Lent.

Though there is certainly a time and place for training apprentice worship leaders, the time is probably not Lent, the high season of confession and repentance in which we face our deepest transgressions, move toward the suffering of the cross, and wait in the darkness at the tomb. Few teenagers have gained enough maturity to guide others on such a path.

The second image of worship leading, the image of host, identifies the horizontal axis of attention: an intimate knowledge of a particular body of believers. A gracious host understands

their language, identifies with their joys and sorrows, cares deeply for their souls, and seeks out creative ways to prepare the space and shape the service so people can enter in without hindrance. In this mode of worship leading, the hospitable leader creates a safe, inviting place where people can open their hearts and lives to God, offer authentic praise, make bold and honest confession, and receive God's abundant grace.

For those who are comfortable in pastoral roles, the images of shaman and host may seem sufficient. But if worship leaders stop there, they will not have led true biblical worship. Worship that is faithful engages the world; it moves out of the sanctuary into the neediness, pain, and injustice of our world. And so the image of worship leader as prophet is also necessary if transformation is to occur. In this role, the worship leader embodies a deep, abiding trust in God's good purposes, acts courageously to name the truth about the faith community and the world, and faithfully proclaims God's will and way.

When these three images of worship leading interact as complementary parts of a whole, congregations are truly blessed. As leaders find fresh, vigorous language and actions as well as evocative symbols to guide God's people in worship, they create a spacious place for transformation where worshipers meet God face-to-face, where they know and are known, and where the miracle of new life springs forth.⁸

Given such spirited leadership, the next time a worshiper is tempted to stay home on Sunday morning, she will be powerfully drawn to join the community of faith who together proclaim:

*Bless our God, O peoples,
let the sound of God's praise be heard,
who has kept us among the living,
and has not let our feet slip.
...you have brought us out to a spacious place.
(Ps. 66:8–9, 12b)*

Notes

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Israel's Praise: Doxology against Idolatry and Ideology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Pr., 1988), 1. Brueggemann's phrase is a restatement of the answer to the Westminster Catechism's first question, about the "chief end" of humanity: "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever." Interestingly,

Article 6 of *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Scottsdale: Herald Pr., 1995), on the creation and calling of human beings, makes no such claim for humankind, and instead emphasizes the work to which humans are called in the world. Article 5, on creation and divine providence, does state that God alone is worthy of worship and praise.

² For a more complete discussion of the transforming role of praise and confession in worship, see two books by Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing Hse., 1984) and *Israel's Praise*, as well as Bernhard W. Anderson, *Out of the Depths: The Psalms Speak for Us Today* (Philadelphia: Westminster Pr., 1983).

³ For a moving account of the transforming role of praise in the midst of suffering, see Elizabeth O'Connor, *Cry Pain, Cry Hope: Thresholds to Purpose* (Waco: Word Bks., 1987).

⁴ Patrick D. Miller, Jr., *Interpreting the Psalms* (Philadelphia: Fortress Pr., 1986), 141.

⁵ A helpful historical account of the role of confession in worship can be found in Theodore W. Jennings, Jr., *The Liturgy of Liberation: The Confession and Forgiveness of Sins* (Nashville: Abingdon Pr., 1988).

⁶ For more discussion of the idea of the face of God as a planning focus in worship, see "Worship and Ritual," in *Minister's Manual*, ed. John D. Rempel (Newton: Faith & Life Pr., Scottsdale: Herald Pr., 1998).

⁷ Though one could also use the word "priest" for this role, Protestants—and Mennonites in particular—often resist or reject the image of priest. This role may also suffer from over-identification with established religion. The word "shaman" connects more immediately with the dynamic movement of the Holy Spirit, which is the source of transformation.

⁸ Among the most imaginative contemporary worship resources, both songs and written material, are those created and published by the Iona Community in Scotland. Drawing on their Celtic heritage, this community combines the roles of shaman, host, and prophet in remarkable ways. GIA Publications, Inc., is the North American distributor for Iona Community resources; contact GIA at 7404 South Mason Ave., Chicago, IL 60638; www.giamusic.com; (800) 442-1358, (708) 496-3800, Fax: (708) 496-3828.