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Guess Who's Coming to Worship? Worship and Evangelism

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The way most congregations of the mainline churches treat strangers in public worship reminds me of the liberal couple in the Hepburn and Tracy movie, "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?" They profess a commitment to welcome strangers but are shocked when strangers actually show up expecting hospitality.

In the movie, Tracy plays the editor of a newspaper that under his guidance has taken very liberal stands on racism. He and his wife, played by Hepburn, have identified themselves with the civil rights movement. They are in all respects the ideal liberal couple. All this is fine, until their daughter brings home to dinner a young, black man, played by Sidney Poitier, whom she wants to marry. They are shocked. What they thought they were for is something else when it comes home to dinner.

Like the liberal editor and his wife, too many congregations of mainline churches profess that they welcome strangers but are inhospitable when the stranger comes to worship. They know that worship is the single most important ingredient in why people join and remain active members in a congregation. They realize that they need to welcome strangers, so they try to be a warm, open family. Some of them believe they have achieved this model, but few do achieve it.

Many congregations' service folders often have a word of welcome; their ministers reiterate that welcome sometime during the service. They may even ask guests to wear special identification tags and introduce themselves in the service. Despite this warm and open familial self-image and their well-intended offers of welcome, they remain inhospitable. They are both accidentally and intentionally inhospitable.

Precisely because they think of themselves as family, they do not focus on hospitality to the stranger. The same service bulletin that welcomes the stranger may give the stranger no indication when to sit or stand, or who the worship leaders are. The bulletin is made with the family in mind and is as much a hindrance as a help in welcoming the stranger. Until the congregation understands itself in a more public sense, it will continue to exclude. Until it

understands better the linkage between public worship and evangelism, it will continue to experience the persistent erosion of attendance at worship and smaller numbers of active members.

The key to turning this situation around lies in the congregation's attitude toward the stranger. This is especially true of the attitude of those who plan and lead worship. As long as the stranger is an anomaly in the imaginations of those who plan and participate in worship, their worship will continue to exclude and their membership diminish.

Realizing the essential importance of the stranger begins in the imagination. Those who plan and lead worship need to reserve a place for the stranger in their imaginations. The imagination is the human ability to connect the abstract with the concrete. This connection takes place through images. When worship planners and leaders include the stranger in their imaginations, the gospel has free course and the congregation is regenerated by Word and Sacrament.

I. WHY THE STRANGER BELONGS

The stranger belongs in the planning and practice of public worship in every congregation for many good reasons. In this article I explore three.

The first reason is simply a matter of understanding the public character of public worship. If we understand what public worship is, then we will see that strangers belong in its planning and practice. Clarity about what constitutes a public also corrects attempts to turn Christian worship into private affairs.

The second reason follows directly from the biblical witness regarding the gospel and the status of the stranger in public worship. From this biblical witness certain basic theological principles follow. The God whom we worship created all things and is the host in our public worship; all are welcome in the house of this God. Furthermore, God is often present through the presence of a stranger. God both commands and attaches a promise to hospitality to the stranger.

The third reason follows from human need. In our society, most people seek to bridge the public and private dimensions of their lives. Through public worship these persons can participate through ritual in a shared, public expression of profound values. These rituals allow them to integrate their public and private lives without exposing themselves to a shaming situation.

II. IMAGINING WORSHIP AS PUBLIC

The first reason the stranger belongs in public worship follows from what a public is. According to social psychologist Richard Sennett, “the interaction of strangers through a common set of actions constitutes a public.”¹ Where there is no space for strangers, there is no public. It follows that if worship is to be public, then strangers are characteristic of, not incidental to it.²

¹Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man: On the Social Psychology of Capitalism* (New York: Random House, 1978) 3.

²*Ibid.*, 48.

Sennett uses “stranger” in two senses. One group of strangers, like Sidney Poitier in the movie, is clearly made up of outsiders. They may dress and speak differently; they may be of a different class or race. These strangers, the outsiders, are obviously marked as different.

Most people gathered in public worship in the church, however, are not such obvious outsiders. They remain, however, outside the intimate group that tends to make up the leadership in most congregations. This second group of strangers fit between the intimate and the outsider. They are the inside strangers who are the majority gathered on Sunday morning. If they desire to participate meaningfully in public worship, they face many, though not all, the obstacles the

outside strangers face. These obstacles are the result of our deformed sense of public space, public psychology, and our public myth.

In contemporary America, public spaces, especially in urban settings, are thought to be cold, violent, and dangerous. As a result, we live in a society afraid of strangers. We rush through these spaces encased in bubbles of silence. When we stop someone on the street for directions, we say, “Excuse me,” since we believe we have broken into their sacred, private bubble.

Both in overreaction to the sense of public space as cold and violent and in acquiescence to the intimate society, we imagine public worship in private categories. We sense how fearful we are of public space; however, instead of developing the skills and sense of public myth, space, and psychology that would allow us to enjoy the interaction of strangers, we deny and project.³

We deny that public worship is public space. We project upon it private imagery. We imagine worship to be a private, family affair. We believe that this private, warm, and open family feeling will welcome the stranger. However, it works only for a rare few who wish to make the effort to become part of the intimate group. Those who are willing to make this effort must find a door into the congregation. Since the dominant image is that of family, they must find a person in the family who will sponsor their membership. Often such “family” congregations have only one or two doors.

A primary door to membership in most family congregations is the pastor, who functions as a parental or sibling figure. The pastor visits the stranger and achieves an intimate relationship. The pastor then sponsors the stranger who becomes one of the family. The entire process is a private, one-on-one affair.⁴

The majority of strangers, both outside and inside strangers, opts out. Some may not like the personality of the doors. Some may believe that the pastor is too young to be a parental figure or has the wrong political opinions to function as a best friend or sibling.

In the end the image of the warm, open family excludes most of the strangers. At best it is a very inefficient method of sharing the gospel. It lessens the chance that we will readily be hospitable to the stranger or that we will exercise the skills to enjoy the interaction of strangers. It uncritically accepts the intimate society’s sense of public space, psychology, and myth.

³Richard Palmer, *The Company of Strangers* (New York: Crossroad, 1985) 46-55; Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man*, 222ff.

⁴For an alternative model of pastor as evangelist read Richard Stoll Armstrong, *The Pastor-Evangelist in Worship* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986).

III. GOD AS HOST AND STRANGER

Christian worship is not a private matter. We gather publicly around Word and Sacrament. Here God is the host and we, a company of strangers, depend upon God’s hospitality.

This sense of public worship is not simply the result of Constantinian Christianity or the easy identification of Christ with culture. It follows from the biblical witness in which God commands hospitality to the stranger. God was often present through the presence of the stranger and in the interest of the stranger. God attached a promise to the presence of the stranger.⁵

The Lord appeared in the form of the three strangers to Sarah and Abraham by the oaks of Mamre (Gen 18:1-15). We, the readers, are told by the narrator that the strangers are the Lord, but Abraham and Sarah do not know. Abraham greets the strangers, “My lord, if I have found

favor in your sight, do not pass by your servant.” He begs them to enjoy a meal and refresh themselves. During the meal, one of the strangers informs Abraham, “I will surely return to you in the spring, and Sarah your wife shall have a son.” This promise began with hospitality to God who appeared in the guise of three strangers.

Hospitality to the stranger in Israel’s witness went beyond the home to the temple. Solomon, in his prayer of dedication of the temple remembers the right of foreigners to enter the Lord’s house and be heard (1 Kgs 8:41-43). The temple was the Lord’s house, and Israel, like the foreigner, was dependent upon the Lord’s hospitality. Thus, Israel’s worship was to be hospitable to the stranger because God commanded it.

According to Solomon’s prayer, the openness to the foreigner has an underlying purpose: “in order that all the peoples of the earth may know thy name and fear thee, as do thy people Israel, and that they may know that this house which I have built is called by thy name.” The temple is the Lord’s house, not Solomon’s. The place of the stranger is thereby guaranteed by the Lord’s hospitality. The final purpose of the stranger’s presence in worship is the revelation of God for all the peoples of the earth that they too might worship the Lord.

In the New Testament Jesus and his disciples are often portrayed as strangers seeking hospitality. They need to be continuously hospitable, not only to those outside their group but also to each other, since they are so diverse. Often Jesus, as God present for and through the presence of the stranger, comes to a banquet as a guest but ends up being the host.

On the evening of the resurrection, Jesus joins two disciples walking to a village named Emmaus. We are told, as in the Abraham and Sarah story, that the stranger is the Lord. The disciples do not recognize him. He asks them what’s up, and they are astounded that he has not heard of the big events surrounding Jesus’ death. In the ensuing conversation, Jesus explains the scriptures to them. He shows why it was “necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory” (Luke 24:26). As they enter their home, and sit at their table, he blesses the bread and is revealed to them as the risen Lord.

⁵John Koenig, *New Testament Hospitality: Partnership with Strangers as Promise and Mission* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) is my guide in this section of the article.

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This sense of hospitality to the stranger endured into the early church. Paul, along with other itinerant preachers of his time, depended upon the hospitality of people at synagogue services to share the gospel. When he saw inhospitality in the Corinthian congregation he vigorously attacked their table fellowship habits.

Some members of the Corinthian community excluded others at the Lord’s table. They arrived early and partied hard before the others arrived after working until nightfall. According to New Testament scholar Gerd Theissen, 1 Corinthians suggests a liturgical structure that guaranteed hospitality to all who would participate in the Lord’s Supper.⁶ In short, the beginnings of Christian liturgy around the Lord’s table emphasized hospitality to the stranger.

IV. LITURGY: BRIDGING THE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE

Some in the Corinthian congregation wanted to turn the eucharistic fellowship into a private affair, the Lord’s table into their table. They sought to domesticate what is essentially public. Paul’s suggested liturgy prevented it—as should ours.

Whether intentional or not, Paul's suggested liturgical structure in 1 Corinthians, which guaranteed hospitality to those being marginalized, also recognized an essential characteristic of ritual: it bridges the private and public dimensions of people's lives. This bridging is a common human need.

During my sabbatical we lived in a small farm village outside Tübingen in the Federal Republic of Germany. I sang in the church choir. The same people rehearsed every Monday night, and everyone greeted one another every time with handshakes all around. I was continually amazed at how every encounter of this group brought about the same ritual. I noticed that this pattern was typical of most public interactions, although the younger generation of Germans were becoming more like Americans.

As an American, I at first experienced this handshaking all around as a silly formality, a quaint, stiff ritual. However, after a time I began to realize that, although I was a stranger in this very tightly knit community, this ritual demanded that I be included in the conversation. Through the handshaking I was ritually granted public space.⁷

When we turn our face to a stranger and extend a hand in welcome, we are, through ritual—this physical repetition of a transgenerational sign—opening our private world to the public. The handshake is neither a sign of intimacy nor of belligerence; it is a public sign of good will.

The handshake structures our emotions at the encounter with the stranger, not on the basis of warm, open trust, but through a shared public interaction. It says, although I feel very ambivalent about this encounter—I am afraid and delighted, interested in conquering and worried about being conquered—I extend my hand and structure those ambivalent emotions in a sign of good will.

The effective use of ritual, then, can be an extremely effective way of bridg-

⁶Gerd Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity: Essays on Corinth* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982); see especially, "Social Integration and Sacramental Activity: An Analysis of 1 Corinthians 11:17-34," 145-74.

⁷Raymond Firth, *Symbols: Public and Private* (Cornell University, 1973), esp. 176ff.

ing the private and public dimensions of our lives. It can also structure hospitality to the stranger into our worship. In short, ritual, which according to the intimate society is the enemy of healthy human interaction, is instead a key ingredient to good public worship.⁸

This is not to say that any ritual is appropriate. It is to say that, if we want effective public worship that leads to effective evangelism, the liturgy is potentially a key resource. It all depends on how we deploy our liturgical worship.

If our liturgical worship only heightens the sense of intimate, private space, it is very effective at excluding both inside and outside strangers. However, ritual deployed within a public sense of space, psychology, and myth, includes the stranger as an essential characteristic of worship. It takes seriously the theological principles that follow from the biblical witness. It reaches out to the marginalized and includes them as fellow strangers in this company of strangers gathered around the Lord's table in the Lord's house.

Finally, it is a matter of the imagination. Is it shaped by God's word of command and promise regarding the stranger or by our denial of the possibility of a good and meaningful public life and our projection of the intimate and private onto our Christian worship?

⁸For an excellent discussion of ritual in pastoral care, read Elaine Ramshaw, *Ritual and Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987).