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*Burning Our Lamps with
Borrowed Oil*
*The Liturgical Use of the Psalms
and the Life of Faith*

Rolf Jacobson

A friend of mine grew up as a pastor's kid in the old Lutheran Free Church. For those who may not be acquainted with the Lutheran Free Church, it was a tradition characterized by intense personal piety and tended to avoid rote prayers and liturgies. She tells the story of a time when an old evangelist paid a visit to her home. As they were sitting down to eat dinner, her father began the meal with a prayer. He bowed his head, and began to recite a psalm. I suspect it was Ps 145:15-16: "The eyes of all look to you, O Lord, and you give them their food in due season. You open your hand, satisfying the desire of every living thing." As he was in the midst of praying this psalm, the visiting evangelist interrupted the prayer: "We thank you God," he intoned, "that we do not have to burn our lamps with borrowed oil."

We thank you God that we do not have to burn our lamps with borrowed oil. With this pejorative slam, the evangelist dismissed liturgical and prayer uses of the psalms. With all due respect, I am arguing here that there is something salutary, there is something irreplaceable to be gained when we use the psalms liturgically. Indeed, precisely because some of us arrive at worship burned out, with no oil of our own remaining in our reservoirs, we need to burn our lamps with borrowed oil. And in the psalms such oil is to be found in plenty.

Speaking Another's Words

I wish to take as my departure points for this essay two simple observations. The first observation is that in liturgical traditions that use the Revised Common Lectionary, the Psalter is the only book of Scripture that on an almost weekly basis is placed in the mouths of worshipers. Every week there are four appointed readings: one from an Old Testament book (except during the Easter season when the first reading is taken from Acts), one from a psalm, one from an Epistle, and one from a Gospel. In most congregations that use the Revised Common Lectionary, the Old Testament, Epistle and Gospel readings are read to the congregation, but the psalm is either read *responsively* by the congregation, or sung *responsively* by the congregation. This practice creates an odd dynamic—the congregation burns their lamps with borrowed oil as they speak the words of ancient psalmists, as if they were their own words.

This leads to a second observation. Because many of the psalms are in the first person singular or first person plural, when we place the words of the psalms in worshipers' mouths, we create a situation in which one subject, one self, one "I," speaks the emotionally and spiritually charged words of another subject, another self, another "I." But from this results an interesting thing: The emotions and thoughts of the first self might not be at all consistent with the words of the other self that it is now speaking. Let me offer several examples of the inconsistency I am imagining:

1. Imagine that a woman arrives for worship the day after her husband died. She is feeling abandoned, alone, and frightened. The appointed psalm is the twenty-third, so she finds herself saying: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want . . . Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I shall fear no evil."

2. Imagine that a college sophomore is home over break and his parents drag him out of bed to worship. He doesn't believe in God; he is sitting there thinking what a lark this entire affair is. But the appointed psalm is 14, and he finds himself saying, "Fools say in their hearts, 'There is no God.'"

3. One more example. Imagine that on Saturday evening a young couple gets engaged. They don't walk into church the next morning, they float in, their toes barely touching the steps as they climb the stairs, sharing their joy with the worshiping community. The entire world is their oyster, but the psalm appointed for the day is Psalm 130. And so the two young folks who are higher than a kite emotionally find themselves saying, "Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice . . . my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning."

These three examples suffice to illustrate the phenomenon I am getting at. Because many congregations use the psalms as *liturgy*, this odd event occurs where a person speaks words in worship that are at jarring odds with his or her own emotions. It is this disjunction, this disconnect, between the words of the psalms and the emotions, thoughts, and beliefs of the individual worshiper that I will investigate in the remainder of this essay.

Let me state my thesis clearly. Either pastors, liturgists, and theologians must learn to make fruitful use of this disjunction between the emotions of the psalms and the emotions of the worshipers, or we will simply reinforce for people that worship is meaningless. Think again of the example of the sophomore atheist who is being forced to recite that “fools say in their hearts, ‘There is no God.’” The imaginary young man might simply find the irony of his recitation ludicrous, and it might just drive him to become more cynical. But I believe that the tension between the words that we place in worshipers mouths and the internal emotional state of the worshipers can be put to creative pastoral and theological use. And I believe that the theory of cognitive dissonance can help us explore this gap and put it to fruitful use.

Cognitive Dissonance and the Psalms as Liturgy

Cognitive dissonance theory holds that the thoughts of individuals need to be consistent and harmonious.¹ When a person holds two or more inconsistent thoughts, that person experiences a cognitive dissonance. For example, a person thinks, “I hate driving” but that person has a daily work commute of one hour. The person will try to resolve the uncomfortable cognitive dissonance, and some of the ways of doing so are:

1. **Changing Attitude:** The most common way to resolve a cognitive dissonance is for a person to change attitudes. In my example the person might decide, “I like [or don’t mind] driving.”
2. **Adding New Thoughts:** A second way to resolve a cognitive dissonance is for a person to add a thought or cognition: “I hate driving, but I am willing to drive to support my family.”
3. **Changing Behavior:** A person can also resolve a cognitive dissonance by changing behaviors—get a new job, car pool, take public transportation, arrange to work out of the home, get up earlier to shorten commute time, and so on.

I believe that cognitive dissonance theory is helpful in thinking about liturgical use of the Psalms, because cognitive dissonance does not only happen naturally, cognitive dissonance can be intentionally introduced into a subject in order to effect a change in behavior, a change in attitude, or to force the addition of a new thought. It seems to me that the introduction of a cognitive dissonance is exactly how “the power of positive thinking” people affect their changes. Financial self-help guru Suzie Orman tells people to stand in front of a mirror and daily tell themselves, “I deserve to make \$80,000.” The point is that this new attitude is, of course, at dissonance with the life circumstances of the person, so it is hoped that the person will change her behavior to live up to the new attitude. Analogously, the liturgical use of the Psalms can be employed to introduce new cognitions, new attitudes, and new behaviors into worshipers.

The Liturgical Use of the Psalms and the Life of Faith

One of the tyrannies of our individualistic, western society is the near deification of our emotions. The self-help television shows and the insipid personal therapy culture constantly berate us to “get in touch with your feelings,” and “own your emotions.” I was once even told by a friend that “feelings are never wrong.” And at the time, I believed her! Feelings are never wrong? Of course they are—hatred, envy, lust, despite, jealousy, insecurity, greed, greed, greed!—of course feelings can be wrong. But in our society, emotions have been elevated to such an infallible height that the individual is often left in bondage to his or her own emotions.

But this individual comes to worship, and in worship, this individual can be led to recite the psalms. In this fashion we can use this recitation as an opportunity to introduce a cognitive dissonance into the individual. Thus to the person who is buried under a mountain of sadness, the dissonant cognition can be introduced: “I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart” (Ps 111:1). To the person who feels in control of their life, the dissonant cognition can be introduced: “Be gracious to me, O God, for people trample on me” (Ps 56:1). The words clash with the effect. However, the resolution of the dissonance may in fact alter the effect.

In the space I have left, I wish to explore two dimensions of the theological possibilities of what I have been describing. I will interact with Walter Brueggemann’s well-known theological typology for appropriating the psalms as he laid it out in his article, “Psalms and the Life of

Faith: A Suggested Typology of Function.”² As is well known, Brueggemann drew on the work of Paul Ricoeur and proposed that there are psalms of *orientation*, psalms of *disorientation*, and psalms of *reorientation*. I wish stress a point that Brueggemann made in his article: Brueggemann’s theological typology of function was never meant to replace or ignore the form-critical categories of praise, lament, or thanksgiving. Brueggemann has been misread by some as offering a rival typology to the form-critical categories. But as Brueggemann wrote:

Our consideration of *function* must of course be based on the best judgments we have about *form* and *setting in life*. The present discussion assumes and fully values both the method and the gains of form-critical study. It provides neither a criticism nor a displacement of form-critical work.³

Precisely because Brueggemann’s typology is a hermeneutical appropriation of the psalm texts, I have found it ideal to help think through the possibility of using the psalms liturgically to introduce cognitive dissonances into the worshipping congregants.

Introducing Cognitions of Disorientation to the Oriented

Drawing on the thought of Paul Ricoeur, Brueggemann proposed that “the sequence of *orientation-disorientation-reorientation* is a helpful way to understand the use and function of the Psalms.”⁴ Orientation is the (artificial?) starting point for this sequence. That is, orientation marks a state of stability and comfort from which the subject begins and to which the subject desires to return. Brueggemann assigns certain creation psalms, wisdom psalms, descriptive praise psalms, and psalms of ascent to this state. These include Psalms 1, 37, 105, 19, 127, 128, 131, 133, and 145. Brueggemann describes orientation as the “mind-set and worldview of those who enjoy a serene location . . . characterized by orderliness, goodness, and reliability of life.”⁵ In this state, good is rewarded and evil is punished. Creation functions in an orderly manner, chaos is not a threat. Those who fear the Lord are not persecuted by the wicked. The economy is good; husbands don’t leave wives; children are not born with birth defects; those who work hard enjoy promotion regardless of their race, gender, or social status. And, most importantly, God is utterly and unquestionably reliable and present.

My experience as a pastor was that on any given Sunday, a significant portion of those worshipping in the pews did so from a state of orientation. They were in a state of orientation not because they were

dim-witted, or because they were wicked, but simply because life for them was good at the moment. They had not recently experienced what Ricoeur calls a limit experience, they were not currently in a state of dislocation.

For several reasons, it would be pastorally irresponsible for pastors and worship leaders to abandon their congregants in this state of orientation. First, we know that the state of orientation is not permanent. As one teacher once said, "Because I am a Christian, I know that things are going to get worse." The state of orientation is impermanent; life is finite, and this finitude must come to knock on every door and call on every child of God. Because disorientation is coming, pastors and liturgists should try to equip parishioners against the day it arrives. Second, at any given moment some of our brothers and sisters in the family of God are in a state of disorientation. One of the most goading thorns in the flesh of a sufferer is proximity to those who do not suffer. Think of Job, whose contact with his so-called friends inflamed his wounds and increased his burdens. Think of the suffering lament psalmist, who in suffering, experiences her brothers and sisters as problematic. For the lamenting psalmist, community is not the answer but precisely the problem. The pastor or liturgist owes it to those who are currently in a state of disorientation to disorient the oriented.

One way to do this is to place words of disorientation in the mouth of the congregation by using a lament psalm liturgically. The pastoral goal here would be to introduce a dissonant cognition of disorientation into an oriented person's mind in the hopes that this new thought would eventually be a catalyst that would cause the person to add new cognitions and new attitudes. For example, one of the hallmarks of the state of orientation is the belief set forth in Ps 1:6: "the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish." But what if the liturgy invited the worshiper to speak the first words of Psalm 22: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, cry by day, but you do not answer me." The worshiper now has two dissonant cognitions: (1) The Lord watches over the way of the righteous; but (2) My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Not especially that the first person language—"My God, *my* God," "forsaken me," "I cry by day, but you do not answer me"—invites the worshiper to make this phrase even more intimately her own cognition.

Brueggemann wrote: "The psalms of lament both individual and corporate, are ways of entering linguistically into a new distressful

situation in which the old orientation has collapsed.”⁶ It is specifically the pregnant power of liturgy as a linguistic event to which I wish to draw attention. Because liturgy places words in the mouth of people, liturgy has an added creative capacity and an extra measure of hermeneutical leverage that sermons and lectures and reading do not.⁷ It is easy for the mind to distance itself from the theoretical, abstract words in a sermon in which the pastor may seek to *teach* worshipers about the reality of suffering, but the mind’s defenses will be much more vulnerable when it speaks phrases in the first person. “My God, why have you forsaken me.” Once such words become my own, once they sink into my heart and mind and soul, it will be impossible for these words to coexist peacefully with the stable cognitions of orientation.

Recall that two of the main ways that the human mind resolves cognitive dissonances are to add new cognitions and to change attitudes. In the present example, the pastoral goal might be something of both. Perhaps the person in a happy state of orientation might add the new cognition, “Sometimes the righteous do suffer.” Or a different new cognition might be added, such as: “Perhaps suffering is not a sign of personal failure.” Accompanying these new cognitions there may be a new attitude towards those who suffer. Rather than judging sufferers or fearing them, compassion and love might take seed. Such newly added cognitions or newly changed attitudes could serve the subject well also, in the inevitable event of his own suffering. The day of dislocation calls on us all; perhaps we would be better equipped to face it if we already owned the words of disorientation as our own.

Introducing Cognitions of Orientation to the Disoriented

If orientation is the stable starting point for Brueggemann’s suggested sequence of orientation-disorientation-reorientation, then disorientation is an inevitable stage of instability through which every life must pass. Just as psalms of disorientation can be placed in the mouths of those who are firm in their orientation, psalms of reorientation can be placed liturgically in the mouths of the disoriented in order to introduce new cognitions.

Earlier I stressed the nature of the psalms of disorientation as linguistic events. I wish to repeat that stress here in my treatment of the psalms of reorientation. As words of reorientation are placed into the mouths and thus entered into the hearts and minds of the disoriented, they do more than simply teach the sufferer a new lesson, they do more than simply give expression to the sufferer’s experience. Rather, the

words of reorientation create a new life for the sufferer, they evoke new horizons. In the words of the New Testament, they raise the dead.

At this point, perhaps I might be allowed to share a personal experience. As a teenager, I was gravely ill with cancer. Both of my legs were amputated, and I underwent a litany of other treatments. In those years, Ps 27:1 became my favorite Bible verse.

“The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?” The verse gave me hope when I had little. The verse gave me confidence when all I had was fear. To be frank, I was very afraid in those years. This verse, which speaks of having no fear, did not *match* my experience. Indeed it was contrary to my experience! But these words transformed my experience; they *created* hope.

When the liturgy places the words of psalms of reorientation⁸ into the mouths of sufferers, it can introduce a new cognition that one hopes might destabilize the experience of the worshiper. Perhaps a worshiper is thinking, “I feel abandoned and alone.” But then the worshiper might find herself speaking the familiar words of Psalm 23: “You are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me.” Or of Psalm 121: “My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.” The two cognitions are dissonant—I am alone and you are with me—and the human mind will seek to resolve this dissonance: either by changing cognitions, adding new cognitions, or changing attitudes.

Conclusion

I have argued in this essay that a theory of cognitive dissonance lends us a hermeneutical tool to help think about the liturgical use of the psalms and the life of faith. In conclusion, I offer four brief observations and caveats:

1. The process I describe does not, of course, apply only to the liturgical use of the psalms, but to the rest of the liturgy as well. It would apply to the confession and absolution, the *kyrie*, the offertory, and so on. But because the language of the Psalter encompasses both the heights and depths of human experience, and because the weekly Psalter is expressly a scriptural lesson, it seems to me that the analysis is especially fruitful for thinking about the liturgical use of the psalms.
2. The type of cognitive dissonance I am envisioning is not likely to occur after a single recitation of a psalm. In fact, I think the opposite.

Most likely, it is only the week-in-and-week-out reading of the psalms that is likely to be able to introduce a dissonant cognition into a person. But that is why we worship weekly, and that is why we have the annual liturgical calendar.

3. The type of analysis I outline here need not be limited to liturgy. I can imagine pastoral care and catechetical applications of this theory.

4. Given the space and time limitations afforded me, what I have offered here is simply an overture and not a thorough analysis.

NOTES: CHAPTER 6

¹ For the purpose of this essay, I am interacting only with an overview of cognitive dissonance theory. For more information on the theory, see the following: E. Aronson and J. Mills, "The Effect of Severity of Initiation on Liking for a Group," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 59 (1959) 177–78 1; L. Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (1959); L. Festinger and J. Carlsmith, "Cognitive Consequences of Forced Compliance," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 58 (1959) 203–10; L. Festinger, H. W. Riecken, and S. Schachter, *When Prophecy Fails: A Social and Psychological Study of a Modern Group that Predicted the Destruction of the World* (1956).

² In *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, Patrick D. Miller, ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) 3–32.

³ *Ibid.*, 3–4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁷ In my understanding of the psalms as linguistic events that can create new realities, and specifically in my understanding of the liturgical use of psalms to introduce new cognitions into the minds of worshipers, I may be going slightly beyond Brueggemann. He focuses on the power of psalms to express present reality: "This creative, evocative function of language is precisely what is at work in the Psalms. The Psalms transmit to us ways of speaking that are appropriate to the extremities of human experience as known concretely in Israel. Or, to use Ricoeur's language, we have 'limit-expressions' (laments, songs of celebration) that match 'limit experiences' (disorientation, reorientation)" [*Ibid.*, 27]. While Brueggemann focuses on "matching" the expression to the experience, I am arguing that an expression that is precisely *contrary* to present experience may be introduced in order to initiate a change in experience. It seems to me that this is faithful to Brueggemann's appropriation of the psalms, but it takes Brueggemann in a slightly different direction.

⁸ Brueggemann (following Westermann) identifies especially psalms of declarative praise as psalms of reorientation. That is, those psalms that speak of having come through some period of dislocation are psalms of reorientation. This distinction seems correct to me.