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IN FAVOR

Politicians, actors, and preachers are often said to have “charisma.” Nobody seems to be able to quite define this ineffable quality; they just know it when they see it. Charisma just seems to be some mysterious force that a person is born with that enables them to be liked by everybody. Several people in scripture are said to have “found favor” in the eyes of other people. “And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man.” (Luke 2:52) The word translated “favour” in this verse is the Greek word from which we derive the term charisma.

The story of Esther relies on her finding favor in the king’s eyes. It is her charisma that makes her a queen, seemingly against her own best efforts. At the risk of her life, she plays the charisma card in order to get the king to come to a banquet she has prepared. At that banquet she relies on her charisma to ask the king to save her people. It is because of the charisma Esther possessed that the holiday of Purim is celebrated even to this day.

Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld points out that Esther and her uncle, Mordechai, actually do not do much in the story. Mostly they have events act upon them. In spite of this, or perhaps because of this, they obtain the favor of the people around them, and (although he is never mentioned in the story) of God.

The trait of favor / charm seems to function on an unknowable plane influenced by G-d alone. Such a person possesses a certain charm which cannot be measured with our physical senses -- but the beholder gets a sense there is something special about this person, something he can't quite put his finger on. Such a person naturally becomes popular and admired. The media just likes him, no rhyme or reason to it, and no one really knows why. (<http://www.torah.org/learning/pirkei-avos/chapter6-648b.html>)

If this favor operates on a plane influenced solely by God, then perhaps it is so indescribable to most people because most people do not know the God who influences it. Esther found favor with the king, the Israelites found favor with the Egyptians just before the exodus, Miriam (Mary) found favor with God and bore his Son, all because they chose to allow God to work in them. Jesus found favor with men because he found favor with God.

Is this charisma, this favor, limited to only a few people? Does someone have to be destined for greatness to possess it? Hardly. Charisma is available to everyone, if they will but come to God on his terms. Charisma is offered to all, because the word sometimes translated “favor” is more often, from the Greek, translated “grace.” Esther, Israel, Miriam, Jesus, Peter, Paul, Tom, Dick, and Harry. All are recipients of the grace of God. It is that grace in God’s people that causes them to have favor in the sight of men. People don’t know why they like Christians. It is really because God is living in those Christians. “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.” (Matt 5:16)

It is this same word that is sometimes used for the prayer before or after a meal. (Many Christians say grace before the meal; Jews always say grace after the meal.) This is the phrase Paul sometimes used: Thanks be to God. Literally this is “to God, grace.” So not only are we blessed because of the favor/grace of God; we can grant him a measure of favor is well.

Esther approached the king, saying, “If I have found favor in your sight.” In her mind there never was a question of “if.” She knew she had found favor in the king’s sight because she had favor in God’s sight. It was not “if” in the sense of maybe I have and maybe I haven’t. It was “if” in the sense of “since.” When we follow God, and do what he wills us to do and be whom he wills us to be, we can come before the King of kings and say “Since I have found favor in your sight.” Those who choose not to follow must say, “If only I have found favor in your sight.” God’s favor is of such value that those two statements make a world of difference.

Purim begins at sunset on March 19 in 2011.

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LIKE NEVER BEFORE

This week on my drive home from the assembly of the church, I saw a billboard on I-40 with the headline, “Church like never before.” Perhaps there is a valid reason for such a theme. Many churches seem to encourage routine, even rote, worship in which there is little feeling. Many people are tired of just sitting in an assembly and being preached to. So it is understandable that some might be looking for something different. But does that mean they should be looking for something totally new? Instead, should people not be looking for what made the early church grow? Is like never before any better than like God intended in the first place?

God has never wanted mere routine in worship. “To do justice and judgment is more acceptable to the LORD than sacrifice.” (Prov 21:3) Nevertheless, he also wants sacrifice. God has never demanded something new in place of what he has asked. I can understand the desire to make worship more than what some experience. What I have a problem with is the idea that something unique is better than what God wants. So what does God want in worship? How did the early church act when they were growing at the greatest pace in history?

Teaching

In most churches today, the majority of the assembly is taken up by the sermon. And most of the time that consists of one man standing before the crowd and

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delivering a one-way communication to the rest of the people. Other than an occasional “amen” or “hallelujah,” nobody has any input. Is it any wonder that many people lose interest in the assembly? They have no investment in it.

Even the best preacher cannot always hold the attention of everyone in the audience. We don’t know when Paul began speaking in one Trojan assembly, but we do know he preached until midnight. (Acts 20:7) Further, we are told that the room was stuffy, and as a result a young man fell three stories and died. Most preachers today only worry about the members falling asleep, not falling dead. After Paul brought the young man back to life, he continued preaching until morning. So there is

biblical precedent for long sermons. But there is also biblical precedent for falling asleep during the sermon.

The story is told that one man went to hear Alexander Campbell preach, in the early 1800s. Mr. Campbell was a dynamic speaker in an era of dynamic, and long-winded, speakers. It was even said that had he been born in the United States instead of Scotland, he could have been elected President. On this occasion, the man who had traveled a long distance on the American frontier to hear Mr. Campbell complained at the shortness of the sermon. When his neighbor in the crowd told him to look at his watch, he realized he had been listening for three hours, and it had only seemed like a half hour. (Would that people complained today that a half-hour sermon was way too short.) Yet even Alexander Campbell probably had people fall asleep in some of his sermons.

It seems, though, that the long sermon may have been the exception rather than the rule in the first century. Paul indicates in 1 Corinthians 14 that the assembly may have included a number of short educational or inspirational talks, rather than one sermon. What we know today may have grown out of the development of a professional clergy decades or centuries after the church began. Perhaps Paul’s sermon in Troy was a rare exception, because he was only to be there a short while.

Rather than church like never before, perhaps we should go back to church like it was in the beginning. If a number of men presented shorter lessons, maybe more people would learn better in the context of the assembly.

Prayer

Next to the sermon, the public prayers are often the most dreaded aspect of worship. Perhaps that is because people don’t pray, themselves. Perhaps it is because in some churches prayer has become little more than meaningless repetition.

In Tibet, some people write their prayers on a piece of paper and attach it to a prayer wheel. Every time the wheel turns, their prayer is supposed to go to the gods. While many will hold the wheel on a stick in their hands, and keep it turning, others came up with the idea of letting the wind turn the wheel. That way their prayers would go to the gods whether they were even present or not. Sometimes that is how public prayer can become. In some churches the prayers are repeated, with no originality, from week to week. Everyone says “the Lord’s Prayer” so often that they don’t even realize what they are saying.

In Jewish assemblies, much of the time is taken up repeating the *seder*, the order of worship including prayer written hundreds of years ago. Nevertheless, every Jewish person is encouraged to add his own prayers to the

repeated ones. The rabbis teach that a prayer that is merely repeated without the heart's involvement goes no higher than the ceiling. But Jesus taught the same thing. In contrasting the proud Pharisee who told God everything he did for God with the tax collector who merely prayed, "Be merciful to me, a sinner," it was the latter prayer that he said was effective. (Lk 18:9-14)

Perhaps our prayers should be "church like never before;" at least if that means like we have never prayed before. If our prayers have always been empty repetitions, or if we let our minds wander as someone prays an honest prayer, then we should pray like never before. We should, however, pray like others who have gone before, who speak with God rather than just praying *to* God.

Public scripture reading

The Jewish people have a holiday known as *Simchat Torah*, which roughly translates as the Joy of God's Law. Nor is the joy of hearing the word of God limited to one day a year. Every week a portion of scripture is read in the synagogue assembly. It is an honor to be granted to read a portion of the scripture.

In some churches today, the public reading of scripture is limited to what is read in the sermon. And in some churches that means that scripture is never read publicly. Paul told Timothy to "give attention" to the public reading of scripture. (1 Tim 4:13) If we have joy in hearing and reading the word of God, publicly and privately, then we will have church as God intended, which for some might be like never before.

The Lord's Supper

Over the past forty years there have been debates in the churches of Christ about whether we should sing during the Lord's Supper. A significant portion of each week's assembly (for this group believes in weekly observance, at a minimum) is spent in silence, waiting for others to receive the bread and fruit of the vine. During that time some meditate, and others merely nap. A few people have thought that it would be good, therefore, to fill that empty time with something more productive. Others believe that concentrating on the death of Jesus is quite productive in itself. Because of centuries of tradition, we really do not know how the early church celebrated the Lord's Supper. Was it silent meditation? Was it a social time of teaching and conversation? We don't know.

We do know that Paul considered it to be a time for the church to be one family. He condemned the Corinthian church for making it a drunken feast for some while neglecting others. (1 Cor 11) Whatever it was like "before," the remembrance of the death of Jesus can be an important time of teaching. After all, it developed from the most important time of teaching in the Jewish calendar. Perhaps we should worry less about whether to be silent in this time, and worry more about teaching our children each week what it is all about.

Contribution

Some people list the contribution as part of the worship in the assembly. Some are not convinced it was a regular part of the assembly, but only on special occasions. When I was a deacon of the congregation on an aircraft carrier, we only took a contribution one Sunday, and that was because we needed some written materials not otherwise available. We had no expenses, so we needed no treasury.

If the contribution is to be considered part of the assembly of the church, then maybe this is the one area where it needs to be church like never before. But even then, that might be wrong. Acts 4 gives the examples of people who sold their property to contribute to the needs

When scripture reading is limited to the sermon, sometimes scripture is never read publicly.

of the church. So, again, it might actually be a case of like at the beginning, rather than like never before.

Singing

I don't know what the billboard meant by "church like never before," but in my experience, most churches mean that the singing has become boring, so they need to make church into entertainment rather than worship. It is more important to make worship an "experience" for the members and guests than it is a time to give God the glory due him.

Over time, churches grew away from congregational singing, and developed professional choruses. Today those choruses have turned into rock bands. Churches compete over who has the best "worship leader" (meaning front man for the band). Church like never before has come to mean "we have the best concert." Even the music has become "look at me" rather than directing the mind toward God.

God likes music. He wants his people to sing. But in that singing he wants them to teach one another, and to praise him. (Eph 5:19; Col 3:16) The emphasis is not on entertainment; nor is it on the ones singing. The emphasis is on the congregation, and on God.

Church—that is, the assembly of the church—should be interesting. It should be engaging. It should involve the whole of each member of the congregation. In that sense, perhaps some might want church like they have never experienced it. But it should be like God intended from the beginning, rather than "like never before."

GIVING YOUR LIFE

You hear it on religious radio programming, and sometimes in conversations. Somebody relates an incident and says, "And right then I gave my life to Jesus." Without doubting the sincerity of these people, when I hear that I immediately think of several questions.

One such question is, "You say you gave your life to Jesus, but did you really?" That may sound a bit harsh, but it is a valid question. What exactly does giving your life mean? Obviously, it does not mean that one has given his life in the sense of dying physically on another's behalf. Therefore, most people would take it to mean giving every aspect of life to the Lord. Therein is the basis for the question. If you are giving everything of your life to Jesus, then why hold back anything? Most people who use this phrase are from a tradition that holds that all that one needs to do to be saved is to believe, and maybe say a prayer. My question, then, is, why would one who gives his life to Jesus hold back obedience? Why not follow the whole will of God, including (among other things) immersion in water for the forgiveness of sins? The typical answer is that these people believe in baptism, but that it is something that can follow later, and sometimes much later, than salvation. But is that what God says? "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ *unto* the remission of sins." (Acts 2:38, emphasis added) "Arise, and be immersed, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord." (Acts 22:16) If immersion is how one receives forgiveness of sins then giving oneself to Christ without immersion is equivalent to surrendering everything to him except your sins. If you hold back surrendering your sins to God, can you really say you have given all of your life to him?

Another important question is, did he accept your gift? People are often offering me free gifts. The offers come in e-mails, snail mail, or by phone. Most of the time I reject these gifts. Sometimes friends or co-workers offer me food. Usually I accept, but sometimes (especially if it is cheesecake) I reject the gift. Just because we have given our lives to Jesus does not mean he accepted the gift.

Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity. (Matt 7:21-23)

Why would Jesus reject the gift of our life? It is not because it is not something he wants (like me and cheesecake). The reason he gives is that the giver is not doing the will of God. This relates to my first question. If we don't give in the way God demands, or if we give just to demand our lives back, then he may reject the gift.

Maybe the most important question is, so what? The scripture speaks of Jesus giving us life, but never of us giving our life to him. It is not as important to say that I have given my life to Jesus as it is to say that I have accepted Jesus into my life. Is Jesus in me? Have I clothed myself in him? "But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ." (Romans 13:14) And how do we fulfill Paul's admonition? "For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ." (Gal 3:26-27)

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