

Spiritual Formation in Worship, Part 2 *Conspiring with the Word*

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Introduction: Conspiring with the Word

Conspire: [Middle English *conspiren*, from Latin *cōspīrāre* : *con-*, with + *spīrāre*, to breathe.]

The root meaning of the English word *spirit* is “breath.” You can see that concept in words like *expire*, *respiration*, *aspire to* – all of them have an element of ‘breathing.’ We say that Scripture is _____ or, literally translated in the Bible, _____ - _____ (2 Tim. 3:16, NIV).

Usually we think of “conspiring” as plotting secretly with someone to commit a crime, but its second definition in the dictionary is “to combine, to join together.” Literally, *conspire* means to breathe with. This study is an exercise in *conspiring with the Word*, not as co-equals with God adding our brains and brawn, but as children and apprentices aligning our will with God who is at work in us (Col. 3:1-2).

Exploration and Discussion: Breathing with Scripture

In Part I, we introduced *Practicing the Presence* of Christ in worship with our whole being: heart, mind, and will (Rom. 12:1), fixing our eyes on Jesus (2 Cor. 4:18). Now we explore practicing the Presence in God’s written Word by *praying back* or *breathing with* Scripture. As a spiritual exercise we turn to several well-known passages which may have been robbed of meaning by overfamiliarity, or, on the other hand, are yet an untapped worship resource for us.

I. **Ruth 2:1-4.** How is this verbal exchange between Boaz and his workers reworded in modern “church lingo”?

Quick history: This was actually a common, everyday greeting in biblical times. It was adopted in the early Church at the beginning of worship as a “holy greeting,” simultaneously salutation and prayer (see 2 Thess. 2:16). In the medieval ages its use in service orders multiplied and came to be a signal for the congregation to (quit day-dreaming! and) pay attention to the important worship ritual which followed.



Landscape with Ruth and Boaz by Joseph Koch (1768-1839)

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So what? What does this have to do with practicing the Presence?

- If you use this salutation in your congregation, how “present” in focus and intent are the worship leader and worshippers in this exchange? To put it in poetic terms, does this phrase convey the mystery of Christ with us, in us, and for us? To what extent is it a “toss-away” line, no longer communicating the Word (the presence of Christ) among us? What would a visitor note as s/he observed this small ritual?
- Try this. For centuries a gesture accompanied “The Lord be with you!” – lifting both hands palms-upward toward a person (see “Landscape with Ruth and Boaz”). Have two people greet each other with “The Lord be with you/And also with you.” Make eye contact. Add the gesture, each in turn. Visualize with “the eyes of your heart” Christ enfolding the other person, filling, drenching them with His Spirit.
- If this exchange is *not* used in your worship, at what point and how is the presence of the Lord in worship conveyed to folks in the pews? What would happen if you silently breathed this prayer for every worship leader who stands before the congregation on a Sunday morning? (Try it and see.)

***** Ah-OO-ga – Misconception Alert! *****

This study is not an attempt to force the addition or deletion of “high liturgy” within a congregation. It is helpful, however, to step back sometimes and ask “Why are/aren’t we doing this? Is what we are saying/doing communicating to others what we intend? How does one remove the obstacles of confusion and discomfort with words and rituals, small or large?” Reflecting on these questions, we can help members and visitors better focus on (practice the presence of) Christ the Lord.

II. Rev. 19:1-8. Read the text, then take a guess:

- In Revelation the word “Alleluia” is a variation of the Hebrew word _____
- The English meaning of “Alleluia” is _____
- The book of the Bible containing this word the most number of times is _____

Quick history: Halleluyah is a composite of *Hallelu* and *Yah (Jah)*. It literally translates from Hebrew as “Praise Yah, [you people!]” *Yah* is the shortened form of the name *YaHWeH*. Some scholars believe “*YHWH*” might have been pronounced in ancient times like audible breath – breathing in on the syllable “yah” and out on the syllable “weh” – the name of God was in “virtual reality” the breath of the Spirit. Try it (simply, without labored Darth Vader wheezing). Does it not bring new meaning to the phrase “let everything that has breath praise the LORD” (Psalm 150:6)?

A. So how? How can we breathe with the Spirit more fully in our “Alleluias,” our praises to the Lord?

Read the following passages and then answer: How long does the praise of God last?

- Psalm 52:9
- Rev. 4:8-11
- Rev. 7:15

When we praise God on earth, we are actually joining the eternal Alleluia in Heaven. Praise does not begin with us; we answer and join the Song that has been going on from eternity. Relieved of the burden of making God come down to our worship by our historically correct hymnody or our magnetic up-tempo songs, we respond to God who first calls us. How then can our adoration more deeply engage:

- Heart?
- Will?
- Mind?
- Body? (Read Luke 17:15-16. Imagine you- doing this... under what circumstances?)

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See Isa. 12:1-6 and Eph. 6:10-18. Do you see that praise is declaring the Lord our “strength and song,” one way of “taking up the shield of faith” and “praying in the Spirit” – *conspiring* with God against Satan?

B. *But.* *What about the times we do not feel like praising God, when we are feeling neither joy nor God’s presence? What about those of us whose heart is full of pain or, worse, full of emptiness?*

Habbakuk could relate to this difficulty. He saw first-hand the fall of Israel and felt the silence of God. Skim the entire book, then read aloud the final verses: Hab. 3:17-19. How does this apply to us?

The psalmists, too, sometimes struggled with praising God in trying circumstances. Can you relate to the self-dialog and roller-coaster feelings expressed in Psalm 42? Which voice wins--what’s the resolve? After reading Psalm 42, take 5 minutes to find a psalm with which you can identify that exemplifies a heart/will/mind/body praising the Lord even in life’s trials.



Trinity by Andrei Rublev, (1370-1430)

III. **Num. 6:22-27**: The LORD said to Moses, “Tell Aaron and his sons, ‘This is how you are to bless the Israelites. Say to them:

“The LORD bless you and keep you;

The LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you;

The LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace.”

So they will put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.”

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Quick history: To bless is to “command good.” This is the ultimate blessing, which God bestows upon His people to dwell with them as both the Giver and Sustainer of life. In Scripture, putting God’s name on someone means stamping them with the likeness of God, so that they are claimed by God and become an icon (an image, a likeness – see Gen. 1:26) of God.

Through the eyes of faith, can you see heaven breaking in on Earth and the Lord’s glory streaming out to each worshiper? Note the Trinitarian structure: the Father keeps and protects; Jesus has made grace the basis of our relationship with God; the Spirit brings us *shalom*, a rich Hebrew word that implies putting everything back together in harmony and balance in a healed relationship.

Read John 20:21-22. Put yourself in the story. In light of our studies, answer this:

So **what** does John 20:21-22 have to do with the Benediction and *breathing with* the Word?

Summary

We Rational Age moderns tend to think of Scripture as words that inform us. But by praying back Scriptures used in worship, we pray in line with the will of God - we breathe with the Spirit, the Spirit who prays in us, for us, and with us (Rom. 8:26-27). We are not merely informed, but formed in Christ.

**O Christ, whose Song we have answered, whose breath we have breathed,
we will listen in your Breathing, we will linger in Your Word.**

December 2006. Dr. Borecki is an adjunct professor of worship (NW Leadership Advancement Process), Concordia University, Portland and an LCMS Theological Educators visiting professor of liturgy and worship to Asia. Accompanying Leader’s Guide is also available from the Center for U.S. Missions.