

# C 15 When God Speaks Through You

## How Faith Convictions Shape Preaching and Mission

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Reflecting on how people position themselves in relation to others provides important clues to how a congregation understands itself as a faith community and an expression of the church. Human behavior communicates meaning. Carefully observing and interpreting how people relate during an event as central to a congregation's life as worship provides insights into the character of their common life. People's interactions reveal how they order their world. Whether the nature of a congregation's common life is explicitly declared in a mission statement and consciously nurtured by its leaders, or unconsciously expressed in the way the congregation worships together, the kind of faith community a congregation is has important implications for its mission.

Everyone in a congregation rarely chooses their seats for the same reason, although some worshipers may appear to have made the same choice.

As people become conscious of why they sit where they do and how they act in worship, they may alter their behavior, particularly if they are embarrassed by what they are doing. Moreover, Christian worship is designed, in part, to alter people's behavior by bringing it more in step with the congregation's understanding of discipleship and Christian living. People may behave a certain way in church precisely because they are in church.

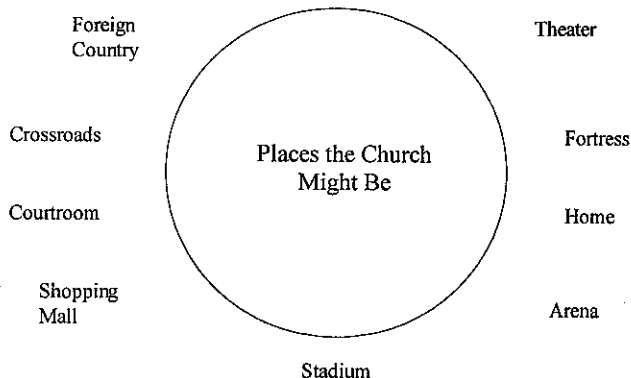


Figure 6.1

We need to be careful how we interpret others' behavior.

### Foreign Country

- Coming to church was like crossing the border into a foreign country. "Go from your country . . . to the land that I will show you."
- Sits in the balcony, on the border of this foreign country, and watches members of the congregation in order to learn their language and customs; observes people during the sermon to see how they are reacting to what Pastor is saying, to compare their reactions to the sermon with his own.
- Watches to see how members of the congregation welcome and treat those who cross the border into their country.

### Shopping Mall

- No one sits in the balcony because the border is right in front of the stage.
- The business of Sunday morning is to welcome visitors and meet their needs. The image of the church is Jesus' Parable of the Great Dinner, in which the master sent slaves into the roads and lanes to compel people to come in, so that the master's house may be filled.
- Going to church is as comfortable as going to the mall. Newcomers will not sit on the edges, because they feel welcome and comfortable in every seat in the house.
- Buildings look like malls, with a coffee bar, book store, and professionally staffed child care center. Traditional Christian symbols are removed from the worship space, which resembles an auditorium. Parking lot attendants both help people find a place to park and greet them with a smile. Ushers

and greeters welcome people in ways that make them feel safe and help them to relax and open up. The host and hostess at coffee fellowship guarantee that visitors have someone to talk with. Signs tell people the locations of rest rooms, nursery, and Sunday school. Rovers in worship spot visitors, sit with, and assist them.

- Congregations often become a "specialty store" by identifying a "target audience."

### Fortress

- The psalmist declares, "The LORD is my rock, my fortress, my stronghold." Some Christians and congregations so cherish this image of God that they want the church to be a fortress as well. Often, these congregations preserve their sense of safety and stability by resisting any sort of change.
- People sit in "their" pew, where they have always sat, even when the congregation is tiny and the worship space is cavernous.
- The worship service is "as we've always done it," which means that it has not changed for as long as anyone can remember; worship often includes peculiar practices that the congregation assumes are normal and even universal.
- Preserving peace and stability are the congregation's priorities, even if that means putting up with idiosyncratic behavior. In order to maintain the harmony of their fortress, members fall into line behind whatever needs to happen.
- The members of the congregation look for preaching to reinforce their group identity and contribute to their peace and stability.
- When it comes to visitors, these congregations appear to post guards at the border. Greeters are replaced by doorkeepers, whose unspoken job is to ascertain who visitors are, why they are there, what they want, and what, if anything, they can offer the congregation. Often, the congregation is suspicious of visitors who are different from themselves.

### Courtroom

- Sits to look at the cross and stained glass windows while listening to sermons about sin and how Jesus died for us.
- The prophet Isaiah saw the Lord sitting on a high and lofty throne, attended by six-winged seraphs. These people know themselves to be "of unclean lips" and, look around during the sermon and see that everyone else knows it to, about them and about themselves. The congregation is "a people of unclean lips."
- Pastor is a witness in this courtroom, testifying about them and about himself, and God is the judge. God does not find them innocent. God pardons them for Jesus' sake.
- Sometimes, the members of the congregation are not the accused. They are the jury. On those occasions, the sermon is a trial between the claims of the Gospel and the other claims that so fill our lives and the world. Visitors, in particular, are jurors.
- Visitors judge the congregation according to its stated beliefs.
- When the sermon is a trial between competing claims, the congregation is marked by struggle and divergent opinions. Worship sometimes feels as though opposing values and even lives are at stake.
- Sometimes the sermon provides an occasion to observe others in worship, including the pastor, to see how well their lives and actions correspond to the word of God, particularly as that word is spoken from the pulpit.

### Theater

- For people who pick their seat in church as they pick their seat at the theater, the sermon is a kind of performance. Rather than looking at each other, people pay attention to what is happening up front.
- They want preaching, worship, and music that is aesthetically pleasing, as well as meaningful.
- While members of the congregation may occasionally respond to the sermon

together, for example by laughing at a joke, most often they remain quiet, so as not to disturb those sitting around them.

- Some congregations reinforce this theater experience by dimming the lights in the nave, so that members of the congregation cannot see each other, and shining a spotlight on the preacher.
- When the congregation functions like an audience at the theater, people experience the sermon individually, although with others who share the same space.
- For people who participate in sermons as they do a play or movie, preaching can only build up the community indirectly. In worship, preaching can inspire the congregation to act together. Just as a play or concert can cause an audience to rise together and give a standing ovation, so a sermon can lead a congregation to join their voices in song and their hearts in prayer. While people may have experienced the sermon individually, they respond as part of the audience. After the worship service is over, the congregation often talks about the sermon in the same manner that an audience discusses a play or movie after they have seen it. This conversation occurs at the coffee fellowship after worship and at other times and places during the week when members of the congregation get together. Sermons build up the congregation when they give people something to think about and discuss and when they provide an emotional experience, such as a moving story, that people can reflect upon and share.

### Home

- Jesus says, "Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."
- The members of the congregation worship together, pray for each other, and care for one another when they are sick or in trouble. They also laugh together, study the Bible together, share potluck suppers, and volunteer together in their community. Members see each other at the store and at school activities. They visit in one another's homes. Some of them really are family.

- Where people sit in worship is not as important as who they are sitting with. The congregation is a family with whom they share a common life. Preaching builds up the family when it speaks to this common life.
- As a family, the congregation feels interconnected, like the body of Christ. Members realize that, some weeks, the sermon will address them directly. The message will relate to them personally, and the form of the sermon will be one they appreciate. Other weeks, the sermon's form and message will relate directly to other members of the family. In fact, people often think of and glance over at those members as they listen to sermons. The congregation does not use a standard form of worship. Rather, the congregation has found a form and style that work for the family. While not everyone appreciates everything in the service, everyone finds something to appreciate in the service, and knows someone who really appreciates the things they don't. The congregation is content to take turns having sermons directly relate to them, because they know that every sermon relates to someone in the family and rejoice that people they deeply care about are receiving the Gospel. These days, Connie just wishes that her turn would come a bit more often.
- People who consider the church their home sometimes assume that everyone in the family--and even the whole world--shares their values. As in many families, certain things are left unspoken, certain subjects are taboo, and some realities are left unaddressed.
- The congregation often takes great pride in its physical home; when a need or expense arises, someone always takes care of it.

### Arena

- Recalling the story of Jacob wrestling with an angel, the church is the arena where we wrestle with God. God wrestles with us as we listen to the sermon. God pins us down and changes who we are. And God doesn't yield. Unseen but unceasing, God reshapes our lives. Some weeks, the struggle is

agonizing, even crippling, but God frees us from ourselves. Wounded, less self-confident, we emerge whole.

- People are not in the stands; they're in the center ring. Preaching is nothing other than the congregation wrestling with God. As the Scriptures are read and as they are preached, God speaks to the congregation as God's people, leaving the congregation to struggle with what God's Word of grace means for its life and for the life of the world.
- Preaching builds up the community when the Gospel is proclaimed in a way that forces the congregation to struggle together about the issues confronting them and the world. Sermons help members ask themselves and one another, and to ask God, what God is calling them to do and be in this time and place.
- What goes on in church is a people witnessing to and participating in God's reconciling love for the world. As they struggle together with God, congregations claim those traits of God, their common life, and the work to which God calls them, that they remain steadfast and discern together what God calls them to believe and do in this time and place.
- Since God's will and direction are never completely knowable, a congregation's struggle with God is constant. These congregations seek to be a safe place where visitors can bring their own struggles into God's presence and join in the congregation's ongoing wrestling with God.
- Struggling with God can make going to church feel unsafe and cause some people, both members and visitors, to stay away. The struggle can also get sidetracked by people pushing their own agendas. The challenge for congregations is to struggle with God together rather than wrestling each other.

### Crossroads

- Jesus said, "Then people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God."

- The fullness of God's reign is a great crossroads, where all people from the ends of the earth come together as the body of Christ, united in God's love. At this great crossroads, people of different languages, ethnicities, personality types, educational backgrounds, economic and social locations, and life experiences find more than unity or common ground. They find a synergy; gathered by the Holy Spirit, acting together as the body of Christ, they become something greater than they are apart from Christ and one another.
- The church is a sign, God's token, pledge and promise, of this coming reality. When the congregation gathers for worship, people come from many different places with many different perspectives. Through worship and preaching, the Holy Spirit gathers all those who come to church and forms them as the body of Christ for service in the world. The congregation's worship is itself a crossroads in that it is a prototype and preview of the fullness of the reign of God.
- Visitors are welcomed for the new perspectives they bring, which enrich the congregation.
- People taking a seat keeps them from standing together.
- Preaching at the crossroads builds up the congregation as the body of Christ by providing "the literal speaking and learning center of the church." First and most important, the sermon proclaims the Gospel of Jesus Christ. As part of or a consequence of this Gospel proclamation, the sermon then gives voice to the diverse individuals, groups, and perspectives that are part of the congregation, as well as those individuals, groups, and perspective that, while not physically present, are nonetheless part of the communion of saints. In this way, preaching builds up the congregation as an expression of the coming reign of God by providing an opportunity for all who gather to hear and understand each other, and to encounter the Gospel from people's diverse backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives.

## Stadium

- People come to church to be part of something bigger and better than themselves.
- As the Epistle to the Hebrews suggests, people come to worship so that others can help them to hold on to her confession of hope, to be provoked (and to provoke others) to love and do good deeds, and so that the members of the congregation can encourage each other. People come to worship to be surrounded by that great cloud of witnesses of which the author of Hebrews writes.
- The church is a great stadium. The congregation takes the field surrounded by the saints who faithfully persevered, gloriously triumphed, and now cheer the congregation on to victory. The congregation runs onto the field behind Jesus, who endured the cross, rose from the dead, sits at God's right hand, and is present among the members of the congregation as they worship.
- Interacting with the members of the congregation is the point of worship and preaching. People might sit in the back so that they can see the congregation.
- The liturgy, prayers, hymns and the other parts of the service function like cheers, bands, and the wave do in a real stadium. They transform a mass of individuals into a power with a corporate identity that transcends people's individual identities. In worship, everyone is first and foremost a child of God.
- Preaching celebrates this identity and helps the faith community understand and experience itself as part of the church of all times and places, the communion of saints, Christ's body in the world. The preacher might consciously address the congregation as a single community rather than a gathering of individuals. Sermons might be designed to facilitate interaction through the use of direct questions, invitations to turn to a neighbor, or calls for an audible response. Most important, sermons should do more than proclaim the Gospel. Sermons should themselves be an experience of the grace

and power of the Gospel active in the congregation, and a celebration of faith, praise and thanksgiving for God's love in Jesus Christ that leads the congregation to join in with one voice.

- Worship is an in-breaking and an appetizer of what awaits us when Christ gathers the church of all times and places to himself. As more and more people take to the field, the walls of the stadium get pushed out farther and farther, until worship in church and life in the world are one and the same. In this stadium, the distinction between member and visitor disappears as all are together in God's presence. Then, as the writer of Revelation says, "I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb."

Which place depicted in this chapter best describes how you perceive your congregation as it worships?