

Column

Elizabeth Carpenter, press secretary to Lady Bird Johnson, tells the story of President Johnson reviewing a speech one of his writers had prepared for him. As he scanned it, he marked through a line attributing a quote to Aristotle. In its place, he inserted, "As my old daddy used to say."

The homespun President from the West Texas hill country obviously believed his father's words carried greater weight with ordinary Americans than ones by an ancient Greek philosopher. No doubt he was right.

Like President Johnson we should honour and pass on wisdom from our parents. This week I was reminded of something my father used to say. When someone would say that he didn't get anything out of church, he would say dryly: "You get about as much out of something as you put into it."

I doubt he got his wisdom from Aristotle or any other great philosopher. It came, I suspect, from observation and common sense. Whatever its origin, it is true.

What might we put into public worship to the end we get more out of it? Here are a few thoughts.

First, there is expectation. Before even arriving at service, there should be an expectation that something is going to happen, that the living God, by the power of His Holy Spirit, is going to show up . . . that the faithful will be strengthened while the indifferent and unbelieving will be brought to faith and commitment.

Secondly, there is witness. By being in the Lord's house on the Lord's day, I am nailing my colours to the mast, declaring Jesus as the true King and myself as His loyal subject. In so doing, I am sending a message to my neighbours. I am announcing Jesus, crucified and risen.

Thirdly, there is preparation. Both prior to and after arriving at service, there should be prayer for ourselves and others. We should ask that our minds and hearts may be open to God's Word. There should likewise be prayer for those conducting the service, especially the preacher. Also, if possible, the appointed scripture lessons should be previewed and thought through.

Fourthly, there is participation. Don't sit there like a bump on a log! Christian worship has more in common with sport players on the field than with concert goers at a symphony. It is something the minister and people do together. To that end, sing the hymns lustily; say the "amens" at the end of prayers with conviction (by which you are signing on to what is being requested); stand at attention and speak forcefully if a creed or declaration of faith is said.

Finally, participation includes engaging with the words of the preacher. Instead of thinking about what you are going to have for lunch, look for one or more points you can apply to your life once you leave the church and re-enter your mission field.

Worship is vital for the Christian in the way food is for the body. Going without it makes one weak. By putting much into it we can expect to get much out of it.

ALMIGHTY God, who pourest out on all who desire it, the spirit of grace and of supplication; Deliver us, when we draw nigh to thee, from coldness of heart and wanderings of mind, that with steadfast thoughts and kindled affections, we may worship thee in spirit and in truth; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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