

Submerging in Worship

1. Communal

Worship that is platform led is, by its very nature, elitist. It reinforces the very dualism between clergy and laity that exiles have rejected. It is designed by a small team of 'experts' and conducted by those with the particular talent necessary to pull it off; that is, chiefly musical talent. In fact, in much church parlance today worship *is* music. Ask someone what the worship in their church is like and they'll simply describe its musical style. Exiles yearn for a worship experience that acknowledges the contributions of all, not just the talented. This isn't to say that some people aren't peculiarly gifted to bring teaching or song-leading, but it's to recognise that we can learn through multiple experiences, not just monologues and we can adore God in multiple ways, not just singing.

There should be an ability for anybody to contribute at any level, including the design stage. And the gathering itself should acknowledge the important contributions of many by allowing people access to make that contribution. Steve Collins is one of the most respected voices in the UK on the changing shape of worship. He says,

Each part of the worship is seen as a gift from the person or persons creating it to God and to the rest of the worshippers, so there is a high level of openness to new contributions. This also requires a trust that people will play their part with care and appropriateness, a trust which seldom proves misplaced. ¹

This communal aspect of worship will ensure that any leadership is not separated from the congregation in any way, or the congregation reduced to an audience with the experts appearing from backstage like performers. Ideally the space should be arranged so that there is no specific 'front', and the focus of activity may move from one part of the space to another, or may be in many places at once. Again, Steve Collins,

Direction proceeds by invitation, with no obligation to take part or to all do the same thing at the same time. The elements of the service are usually all built carefully around a theme, so teaching occurs through everything that happens, rather than being concentrated in a sermon given by a single authoritative voice. There is room for discussion and sharing, in small groups or with the whole congregation. ²

Paul's directions to the Corinthians regarding worship have often been taken completely out of the context into which they were written. Everything Paul says to them on this subject, particularly in 1 Corinthians 11-14, implies that the worship gathering occurred around food and in a communal, egalitarian spirit. It's true that the Corinthians were abusing this arrangement and Paul rebukes them for these abuses, but his counsel makes much more sense when seen in its original context, rather than in the context of our platform-led service today.

He begins by sketching a situation where some in this congregation riven by factions arrive early and eat all the food and drink all the wine, while others are left with nothing (11:21). His directions for how to conduct the remembrance feast (11:23-26) are couched in his understanding that the 'service' will be conducted around tables, on lounges and cushions, with enough food to satisfy everyone. We regularly hear these words quoted by ministers in communion services with everyone sitting in pews, facing the front. Then we distribute small portions of bread and thimble-fulls of juice. And yet Paul was outraged that some Corinthians were leaving their gatherings hungry! His later injunction that people examine themselves before eating (11:29) seems to be referring to an examination of their contribution to such factionalism and greed. It probably has less to do with personal piety and more to do with

¹ <http://www.alternativeworship.org/index.html>

² Ibid.

communal responsibility. If judgement was to come it was because of their selfish and discriminatory practices that allowed some all the access and others no access at all:

So then, my friends, *when you come together to eat*, wait for each other. If anyone is hungry he should eat at home so that when you meet together it may not result in judgement. (1Cor.11:33) Italics added

Reinforcing further that worship is to be communal, not elitist, Paul then launches into his well-known teaching about spiritual gifts and his favourite image of the church-as-body made up of many different parts all contributing to the whole (1 Cor. 12). No doubt this teaching is applicable beyond the community feast, but bear in mind it is included in a discussion about the Corinthians' worship life. Messages of wisdom and knowledge (12:8), gifts of healing (12:9), prophecy, discernment, tongues and their interpretation (12:10) are all mentioned in the context of the remembrance meal and form the bridge to Paul's teaching about the church as a body. In other words, the remembrance feast and the communal worship time were to allow for the expression of multiple giftings from many people. It is no small matter that in the midst of this discussion Paul includes his beautiful ode to love in Chapter 13. We often quote it in weddings about the romantic sexual love between a man and a woman, but Paul intended it to describe the tone and tenor of a worship gathering. With some prophesying, others speaking in tongues, others still expressing great faith or great works of service, Paul declares that patient, kind, selfless, truthful, perseverant, protective love should characterise their gatherings.

As we've already noted community is a place of honesty, commitment and support, where people grow in intimacy and trust through their shared commitment to serve others. Many exiles have banded together because of their shared dissatisfaction with the culture of mainstream worship. But as they began to work together, serving each other and those beyond themselves, creating worship and exploring theology, they draw together as intimate communities. This is much less possible in the mainstream church where a few experts plan, design and conduct worship services and 90% of us simply turn up like a good audience.

2. Contextual

There is much talk about 'relevant' worship these days. It often refers to the need to play music that matches the playlists on popular radio stations or to prepare sermons based around contemporary social or personal issues. But contextual worship is more than this. It is worship that emerges from the rhythms of the culture or subculture that the community has felt sent to serve.

And those who form incarnational communities to witness into subcultures soon find that their worship needs to be rethought, not only to be accessible to those they wish to reach, but also to the people they have now become.

In the UK in the 1990s there developed a new movement called alternative worship. Most, if not all, of the chief proponents of this movement were exiles from the mainstream church which they came to believe was unable to provide an environment for the expression of an authentic postmodern spirituality. For many of them the UK club scene was a much more openly spiritual environment, reflecting the importance of dance music, clubs and raves for adults under 40, especially in the UK where club culture has been predominant since the late 1980s. Clubs and raves created a multimedia and multisensory environment that could carry tremendous spiritual and emotional impact for English young adults. Club culture also has an intense, if often superficial, sense of togetherness and an unfocussed but genuine concern for spirituality. The early proponents of alternative worship began to create Christian worship gatherings that approximated this same energy. That's not to say they launched church services with frenetic music and dancing. The model they borrowed from club culture was the 'chill-out' room – a space with a quiet, soothing ambience for resting in away from the deafening heat of the dancefloor. Chill-out rooms showed what a church in the emerging culture might be like - a reflective, relaxing place to think or talk quietly, visually and sonically rich but gentle, a relief from noise and activity.

Today, British alternative worship has been exported around the world via the work of guys like Steve Collins, Paul Roberts, Jonny Baker and Mark Pierson.³ But its origins were to be found in an attempt to fashion worship in a way that substantively paralleled the culture from which it was emerging.

In the US a similar movement has occurred where warm, ambient coffee houses with wireless Internet connection, free newspapers and magazines, comfortable couches and easy chairs have increasingly dominated the young adult market, particularly in university towns. Chilled out music, an unrushed atmosphere and good coffee has created a zone where young people relax, recharge, recreate and meet others. As a result 'cafe churches' have sought to replicate that unhurried and friendly atmosphere, where discussions take place over good food and drink in comfort. People come and go as they please, there is no formal beginning or end to proceedings apart from opening and closing times. There can be background music, art on the walls, maybe even a live act - but not one that kills all conversation. So-called emerging churches particularly on the west coast have used this sub-culture to great effect, allowing art-based prayer stations, discussion groups and free-form gatherings.

Contextualising worship will involve more than choosing to play pop music in church instead of classical hymns. It will involve a serious incarnational attempt to enter, know, love and enjoy the culture you have been sent into. Then whatever worship style or venue you use will naturally reflect the lifestyles, rhythms and interests of that culture.

3. Ambient

Gone are the days when a worship service in the West simply needed a band, a platform and enough seating for the congregation. People today, particularly young people, are multisensory in their engagement with their world and highly sensitive to the ambience of a particular environment. Restaurants, coffee shops, shopping malls and even workplaces have taken seriously the impact for good and ill that a certain ambience can have. This is not a trivial matter of interior decoration. To take the ambience of a worship space seriously is to take seriously that God can be worshipped with all our senses. Some of the areas we need to consider include:

- a) *Visual arts* – The image has great power in Western culture today. Attuned as we are by television and film, we are greatly stimulated by pictures, perhaps at least as much as by words. This takes the emerging church back to its roots where such imagery as stained glass windows, icons, illustrated books and sculpture was used to convey truth and rouse the believers to worship. The use of projectors, TV stacks, art installations, art-based experiences (painting your prayers etc.), as well as the inclusion of ambient style imagery (usually called visual wallpaper) aren't luxuries, but essentials in creating worshipful environments for exiles.
- b) *Rediscovered Christian traditions* – Along with the newly realised power of the image also comes the rediscovery of the interactive experience as a basis for worship and learning. Says Steve Collins, "In particular, the shift of our society towards an image-based culture, where the visual is the central means of communication, causes us to look again at how the Church communicated through imagery and ritual in the past. And our ecological anxiety causes us to look again at Celtic understandings of the

³ Steve Collins from the Grace service in London and Paul Roberts from Resonance in Bristol manage the website www.alternativeworship.org, the standard exploration of the subject on the Net. Steve also manages an excellent site that collects photographs from a number of alternative worship gatherings around the world (www.smallfire.org). It's an excellent visual introduction to alt worship. Jonny Baker, also from the Grace service has written *Alternative Worship: Resources from and for the Emerging Church* (Baker Books, 2004) which is chock full of ideas, readings, liturgies and poems for use in alt worship services. It includes a very helpful CD ROM. Mark Pierson, formerly of Cityside Church in Auckland has written *The Prodigal Project* (London: SPCK, 2001), which also includes a CD ROM and has recently released *Fractals*, a CD ROM full of ideas for alt worship. It's available from www.proost.co.uk

wholeness of creation and humanity's place in it. Many more recent traditions, especially those which make encounter with God cerebral or rationalistic, have ceased to be relevant and give the impression that Christianity has nothing to offer the world anymore. In a time of great cultural change it becomes necessary to look at the whole of Christian tradition and discern what might be newly valid or ripe for reinterpretation, and what needs to be laid aside for a time."⁴

- c) *A new approach to music* – At the moment music is used almost exclusively for the purpose of corporate singing. This seems a terribly limited use of a highly stimulating medium. Listen to the way music features in films or television programs. It forms an underlying soundscape that heightens our perception of the narrative being played out. Likewise, news broadcasters like Fox News and CNN have come to understand the impact of putting a soundtrack behind their stories. Worship for exiles will use music much more broadly than as a platform based pop or rock band. Such a use of the 'worship team' necessarily attracts the focus of the participants' to the stage, forcing them back into the role of audience members. Ambient music can underscore a corporate worship time brilliantly, particularly when the music comes from our own CD racks at home. Our personal music collections, much of which these days has a distinctly spiritual element to it, can also become the soundtrack of our worship life.

4. Ritualised

At *small boat, big sea* we regularly install a labyrinth prayer walk in our gallery space. A labyrinth is a geometrical pattern that has one well defined path leading into the centre and back out again. Unlike a maze, there are no tricks to the pattern, no intersecting paths or dead ends. The most famous, and most often used design, measures over 20 feet in diameter and is modelled after the pattern of inlaid stone built into the floor of Chartres Cathedral in France in the early 1200s. As participants walk the path they encounter a series of worship experiences where they pause, listen to a piece of music and a meditation. They also undertake some symbolic action or ritual. At the centre of the labyrinth is a communion table, with bread and wine, allowing a time for silent reconnection with Christ before beginning the journey back out and past more worship stations.

Labyrinths are an ancient Christian spiritual practice and following the path into and out of the labyrinth becomes a walking meditation and a metaphor for our spiritual journey as individuals and within community. Ours is not the only Christian community using a labyrinth. In fact, they have become enormously popular around the world. One was recently permanently installed in Grace Cathedral in San Francisco. And alt worship maestros like Jonny Baker and Steve Collins installed a temporary labyrinth in St Paul's Cathedral, London, to great acclaim. Their labyrinth then went on a tour around various cathedrals throughout England. People are rediscovering ancient rituals like prayer beads, the *Lectio Divina* form of Bible reading and Celtic worship practices and fusing them with ambient spaces filled with projected visual wallpaper, dance music and chill out zones. And by so doing they are giving the design and conduct of worship back to the congregation itself, allowing ordinary Christians to mix and match practices from a variety of traditions and eras.

5. Spirit-filled

Having demonstrated that worship can be much more than a singalong and a sermon, let me return to the subject of congregational singing. As I've said, I think we emphasise it far too much, almost to the exclusion of anything else. But this doesn't mean that I think it is redundant or unhelpful. Far from it. Congregational singing is *one of* the very legitimate ways Christians have worshipped God throughout our history as a movement. But the current obsession with what's called 'praise and worship' – multiple discontinuous songs strung together – is a relatively new innovation. The history of Christian singing is much richer.

Paul's best known reference to communal singing appears in Colossians 3:16:

⁴ Ibid.

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing *psalms, hymns and spiritual songs* with gratitude in your hearts to God. (Italics added)

So, what exactly did Paul mean by psalms, hymns and spiritual songs? He also uses the same phrase in Ephesians 5:19. We have no early Christian documents dealing with congregational music or singing. There is considerable evidence that the New Testament contains passages that were probably hymns or chants or public confessions of faith,⁵ but the earliest text we have of an extra-biblical Christian hymn is dated around A.D. 200.⁶ Not until about 560 are there substantial descriptions of Christian liturgy and its music, although writers like Ignatius of Antioch (d. 110), Tertullian (d. 220), Clement of Alexandria (d. 212), and Augustine (d. 430) all discuss music practice in their time at some length. What surprises many scholars today is that a great deal of their attention was given to improvisation and charismatic utterance. For example, Tertullian describes how improvised much of their chanted singing was, "Anyone who can, either from holy Scripture or from his own heart, is called into the middle to sing to God."⁷

While biblical scholars have been baffled by the exact meaning of Paul's threefold reference to psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, some authorities on the music of the early Christian period have sought to explain it from a historical-cultural point of view. Musicologist Egon Wellesz holds to the view that the three forms were stylistically differentiated. Based on a study of early Jewish music and later recorded Christian chant, he defines the terms the following way:

- *Psalmody*: the cantillation of the Jewish psalms and of the canticles and doxologies modeled on them.
- *Hymns*: songs of praise of a syllabic type, i.e. each syllable is sung to one or two notes of the melody.
- *Spiritual songs*: Alleluia and other chants of a jubilant or ecstatic character, richly ornamented.⁸

If we take the reference to psalms to mean the singing of Old Testament psalms and the like, and if hymns were sung or chanted versions of Christian doctrine such as Paul includes in Philippians 2:6-11 ("Who being in very nature God..."), what are these spiritual songs? It seems to me that today we still sing psalms and hymns (whether contemporary or classical) but are we missing something that Paul's churches included in corporate worship?

The Greek phrase for spiritual songs is *odae pneumaticae* or "pneumatic odes" – literally, "songs upon the breath." Some scholars, including Egon Wellesz, consider these "songs upon the breath" to imply improvisation. Improvising on a single word like alleluia was common practice in Near East cultures during the time of Christ and later became formalised in the jubilus of the Catholic mass. The final syllable ('ah') of the word alleluia was prolonged in a kind of wordless improvisation. Both Jerome and Augustine speak of the practice, with Jerome describing it as neither "...words nor syllables nor letters nor speech." Augustine said of it:

It is a certain sound of joy without words . . . it is the expression of a mind poured forth with joy. . . . A man rejoicing after certain words which cannot be understood,

⁵ See Col.1:15-20; Eph.5:14; Phil.2:6-11; 1Tim.3:16

⁶ John S. Andrews, "Hymns," in *The International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. J. D. Douglas Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974, pp.494 ff.

⁷ John Andrews, "Music in the Early Christian Church", in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*,. ed. Stanley Sadie, 1980, vol. 4., pp.363-4.

⁸ Egon Wellesz, "Early Christian Music", *The New Oxford History of Music, Vol. 2*(London: Oxford University Press, 1954, p.2.

bursteth forth into sounds of exultation without words so that it seemeth that he . . . filled with excessive joy cannot express in words the subject of that joy.⁹

What can “words which cannot be understood” refer to? Perhaps Augustine was speaking of simple improvisation or some kind of ecstatic expression. There is evidence that the earliest Christians engaged in some kind of extended chant that was regarded as an ecstatic praise, a pure, wordless jubilation. This seems not to have been some wild, fervent frenzy as seen in some churches today. It appears to have been a very gentle, marvellous expression of connection with God. Nonetheless, it is worth bearing Paul’s warnings in mind:

For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful. So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my mind; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my mind. (1Cor.14:14-15)

The improvisation might continue (in the spirit), but Paul doesn’t lose control of his mind. He is conscious of what he is singing and the expression of the sounds, though spiritually moving, is still intelligible to others. And here Paul is back on familiar ground. For him the remembrance meal and corporate worship time were to be thoroughly communal, not distancing or excluding anyone. He continues,

If you are praising God with your spirit, how can one who finds himself among those who do not understand say ‘Amen’ to your thanksgiving, since he does not know what you are saying? You may be giving thanks well enough, but the other man is not edified. (1Cor.14:16-17)

If indeed spiritual songs were ecstatic utterances or wordless improvisations, during which the worshipper felt caught up in wonder, love and praise, Paul seems anxious that they form a smaller part of the corporate experience, so as not to alienate others. But the fact remains, they are still part of the corporate gathering. They are God-directed, God-glorifying. And though the singing of spiritual songs seems to have blessed the worshipper greatly, that was a by-product of the exercise. Spirit-filled, God-glorifying corporate singing is essential for any community of faith. Instead, today we sing inane nonsense like *Make a Joyful Noise*:

Make a joyful noise, unto the Lord
Make a joyful noise, unto the Lord
Make a noise! (3x)
Make a joyful, joyful, joyful, joyful, joyful
(waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!!) noise.

Sure, it’s fun (apparently), upbeat, and easy for the youth service to remember. Songs like this make the worshipper feel good, but it certainly does not teach or admonish or glorify God at all. In fact, they say absolutely nothing about God’s character at all. Exiles have given up on singing dippy, meaningless songs. They can’t bear those songs that make us the centre of the universe like, “I choose you, God” or “You can be my Lord”. They’re blasphemous, self-seeking, ungodly. And just because they make people feel good doesn’t mean they’re acceptable. Collectives of exiles, living with the liminality of mission, enjoying *communitas*, serving others and eating with each other, need desperately to be sustained by Spirit-filled, God-honouring worship. A few songs and a long sermon won’t do it. A communal, ambient space, centred around a convivial meal-table, reflecting local culture, using ancient and modern rituals and infused with spiritual singing will be a wonderful expression of the overflow of lives lived daily to please our happy, joyful, all-powerful God.

⁹ Migne XXXVII, 1271; Nicene & Post-N, Ser. 1, VIII, 488. Quoted in Gustave Reese, *Music in the Middle Ages*, 64.