

RELEASING WORSHIP - article for Music and Worship Foundation 'Baseline' Jan.08

Having begun this article on the theme of 'releasing worship', I now realise that this would really take a book to do it justice, and considerably more wisdom than I have at my disposal. I'm therefore going to confine myself to a few bullet points focussing mainly on the musical side.

MONDAY TO SATURDAY? - The first point is that one cannot release worship if there's no worship inside! David Watson used to say, 'As much as you worship God in your daily life is as much as you worship God'. This is where the Roman Catholics score because they call their meetings 'liturgy' rather than 'worship', which reinforces the fact that worship is the offering of our whole lives in service to God, not just what we do on Sundays. If we have no testimony to God's activity and presence in our everyday life, what will we have to bring when we meet together?

FACING THE FRONT? - I've noticed over the years that much of the corporate sharing of the gifts of the Spirit and general congregational participation of the early renewal movement has been gradually pulled back to the front. People used to share words and pictures, prophecy, tongues and start songs off from the floor. Where has all that gone? I think in part it's been caused by a 'professionalisation' of leading worship, and the promotion of an unhelpful model through the Christian Music Industry. What we have in many local situations is an imitation of large celebrations. These in turn were modelled on the pop concert, and a concert is not what corporate worship is meant to be. It should be an expression of the Body of Christ. Worship is not a spectator sport, but we have made it so. Microphones and PA's create a barrier with the congregation. Over complicated songs written by solo artists deskill the people. Blocks of singing which leave no space for listening or for other contributions block out the Spirit. Churches tend to specialise in cultures of control and conformity, not least in contemporary worship. This is not helped by models that focus on leaders at the front. Some people breathed a sigh of relief when they got rid of what they considered the tyranny of choir organ up in the chancel. Unfortunately it seems to have been replaced by another - the worship band!

TOO MUCH SINGING? - Music is not the only vehicle for mediating worship, but one might think so. Jonny Baker in an article about preaching, talks about the 'Provocation of Escape'. He borrows the thinking from Edward de Bono which suggests that if you want to think creatively round an area you have begun to take for granted, you need to drop or cancel it. This forces you to use your imagination and find other ways of doing it. What would worship be like *without* music? So much music in whatever style seems to have substituted for worship itself. Have a look at Jonny's Blog on the web for some fresh thinking and an infusion of imagination - something most of us desperately need!
<http://jonnybaker.blogs.com/>

LASTMINUTE.COM? - I wonder if you've come across the worship projection software 'Easy Worship'? I'm sure it's very good, but the idea that worship should be 'easy' is not. David says in 2 Samuel 24:24 'Shall I offer to the Lord that which costs me nothing?' In too many places today the planning of corporate worship has become a last minute and lazy process; so has the preparation of the music. Pressure of time and frenetic life-styles have contributed to the difficulties and made us rely on energy saving devices like computer programmes, and the buying in of various worship packages from outside. They can look

exciting and fresh, but if there's been no creative energy, personal or corporate investment in the process, what ownership will we actually have of it? So much of worship has become a process of filling slots and organising rotas to keep the show on the road, but what for? Is this worship, or a form of spiritual entertainment which serves nobody? For worship to be a truly corporate activity it needs to be designed and prepared corporately. If this can't be done every week, then at least draw together a group of representative people who could focus on a special service from time to time. Worship also needs regular review in order to maintain its relevance and appropriateness. On the musical side, musicians could at least be gathered together once a month to pray, worship themselves, develop a corporate identity, share lives and form a coherent repertoire.

UNHELPFUL REPERTOIRE? - Look at the repertoire you are using for worship. What are the words of the liturgy, the songs and the hymns saying? Are they making connections with the reality of people's lives, or are they creating a disconnection between worship and the rest of life? We bring all of who we are before God in worship, not just the nice or positive bits, and here we could take a lesson from the Psalms. How does the range of emotion and experience in our current repertoire compare with them? Can we express exuberant joy and elation, but also express our confusion or despair? Try finding a song about Third World issues or bereavement in most songbooks and you'll be hard pressed. We have also lost a theology of Church in our song repertoire. 'It's all about *me* Jesus...', to misquote a song! The presence of God is *among* us. Just read the end of Ephesians 2 - we are being 'built together to become a dwelling place in which God lives by his Spirit'. The presence of God is not mediated by the singing of so many songs in a row, and if we just hike up the emotions enough we might just be able to squeeze into his presence... That's' Old Testament.

THE SONG OF THE PEOPLE? - The heart of music in worship is actually the song of the people, not that of the worship band or the choir. But are we really engaging the congregation with our music? I think sometimes we just leave them endlessly playing catch up, because we have never truly met them where they are. Songs are often too complicated for congregational participation. We need to build a repertoire of simple congregational song. Take a leaf out of John Bell's excellent books from the Iona Community on the encouraging of congregational song - '*The Singing Thing*' and '*The Singing Thing Too*' (Wild Goose Publications). He uses the cantor principle of leading by example, teaching a melody with simple hand movements to indicate pitch, and actually embodying what he wants people to do. Anyone who has had a go at doing this will know how thrilling it is to hear a congregation singing unaccompanied, and even in harmony together. It is deeply enriching. People begin to discover themselves as part of the Body of Christ. They join their own individual and unique voice with others to become the one voice of the one Body in a way that few other things can achieve.

There are many other complex factors at work in 'releasing worship', but I hope that some of these comments will at least challenge our thinking at a time when the expression of worship for many is becoming jaded.

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