

FROM TUNING FORKS TO WORSHIP BANDS



In the 1950's when I attended church with my widowed mother, brother, and sister, the only instrument in the morning meeting was a tuning fork. This was the open brethren (not the exclusives) who considered that music was a distraction from the worship of God. Someone would choose a hymn and the custodian of the tuning fork would tap it on a table in front of him, put it to his ear and fix the starting note which he would quietly hum. We would then sing a cappella (Italian for "in the manner of the church" or "in the manner of the chapel") No one would have dared to arrogate to themselves the thought that their function, let alone their ability was to bring the congregation into the presence of God. We were simple enough to believe that there was only one mediator between God and man. From time to time we would be accompanied by an old pedal organ, the pedals of which made more noise than the notes which emanated from the instrument. Sometimes we would be accompanied by a piano, but never was music a priority. It was unthinkable that it would be a performance or some kind of presentation to the congregation. It was the responsibility of each attendee to ensure that he or she had come in the right frame of mind to worship God from a full heart.

Music I love

Please don't misunderstand me, I love music and grew up loving it. My father, who died when I was four years old, was an accomplished pianist and music teacher. He played piano at the various Christian rallies and Conferences of those days. I have no recollection of my father, but people who knew him would often comment how much they enjoyed being in a meeting when he provided the accompaniment, and how they loved to hear him play. My mother and my sister also played the piano, and I took up a number of instruments, though I managed to avoid all the hard work of learning, playing as I did by ear. To this day I regret not having learned to read music.

No, my problem is not with music per se, far from it. In those churches where I have been involved in leadership, we have used a number of different types of instruments, groups and choirs, and I have encouraged them. We have sung the old hymns and the new songs (subject to some serious theological sieving in relation to some of the latter).

My problem

The contemporary Christian music style of worship has infiltrated churches throughout the world. Those who raise any questions or show concern (normally over 60) are often dismissed as some kind of latter day Pharisees. The argument put to the Pharisees by the proponents is that these matters are merely generational or matters of taste. My assertion however is whilst taste and age may be factors, there is far more to the debate. My problem is with the present style of some worship in the modern church context.

New definitions of worship

The church, it seems, is replete with new definitions of worship. What shall we make of the term “creative worship” for example? This was a term foreign to me until recently when I was in a meeting where someone had been appointed to lead “creative worship”. The following is a quote from a website purporting to advise pastors on the matter.

“We allocate money, time, and staff to things that are important to us. How does your investment in worship reflect your value of worship? If you are going to create a specially prepared nourishing environment to grow the culture, then you have at least to point the way to sources of nourishment in order for the colony to thrive and flourish.

Budget for worship in dollars and time. Is your worship team adequately funded? Do they have time to be creative? Creative people must have time and resources to think and dream without pencil pushers looking over their shoulders. At the same time, creative people need administrative support and loving discipline to keep them focussed on schedule and on budget.

Provide products and services that will help develop the personal worship lives of your congregation. Sponsor worship concerts and conferences at your church. Recommend books, music, and small groups studies that will help people understand and experience worship in a deeper way

Culture is built on historic and memorable moments. Find songs that will capture the memory of those moments for your congregation. Theme songs for sermon series can serve this purpose.

It does make you wonder how the church of Jesus Christ has managed to worship for so long without such “expertise” Could we have imagined, even a few years ago, that it was necessary for the church to “**invest in worship**” and “**budget for worship**” or to create “**a specially prepared nourishing environment**”

Aesthetic worship

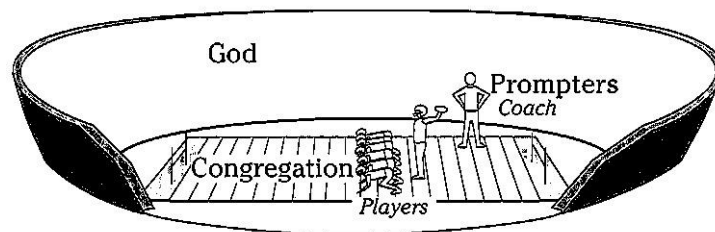
Let's define “aesthetic” so we are singing from the same hymn sheet (sorry). The word is defined as “**concerned with beauty or the appreciation of beauty**” In contrast to worship “in spirit and in truth” of necessity a matter of the heart (John 4:23-24) aesthetic worship involves the idea that things that are beautiful, artistic, or skilfully executed are offered as an expression of worship. The notion is that we worship, not just with thoughts from our minds and hearts, but also with the creative skill of our minds and hands. Here is the assumption. God is looking down and enjoying the skill or beauty we place before Him. Does God need or call for this physical dimension in our worship? The argument has raged for centuries. Is God bowled over acting as an aesthete when skilful hands play a piano or a guitar, or when an accomplished choir sings, or a dance group performs? Is He impressed by the presentation performance, or is His heart set on the thoughts and words of those individuals.

Is worship a gift

Is worship a gift, some say yes. Does worship consist in the presentation of a skill or personal gift, surely not? Worship is the privilege of every true believer who may freely call out to God from his/her heart and mind and soul. Any of these may worship in spirit and in truth. That's how it began in Genesis 4:26 “**Then men began to call on the name of the Lord**” No mention there of specially gifted people to assist.

An illustration

Some exponents of modern worship use illustrations to show how God is the audience of a presentation by the worship team. Soren Kierkegaard, a Danish Philosopher and theologian asserts that in corporate worship the people should be the performers of worship, the worship leaders the promoters of worship, and God the audience. He uses the illustration below showing the worship leaders (coaches) prompt the congregation (players) to “perform” worship for God (audience). That seems to me to be so far from biblical worship as to be unworthy of comment.



Emotion

When I was a boy I played the violin. Sometimes I would put on a record of violin music and play along as best I could. Often I would weep because I loved the music and my emotions were stirred. A few years ago my wife and I went to St David’s Hall in Cardiff to hear the Orpheus Male Voice Choir. Both of us began to weep as our emotions were stirred. Now here is the question, can music stir the soul, I am not sure, but I am sure it can stir the emotions which are not the fundament of worship, though emotions may be involved in worship. That is not say that the stirring of emotions when we hear music is wrong, but is it enough when we speak of worship. Isn’t’ worship more than mere emotion, is in not the consequence of intelligent thoughts as we consider the Lord and His work and His cross

“Thee will I love”

Recently I spoke at Devonshire Road Christian Fellowship in Liverpool. The church that meets there is still using a hymn book called “Hymns of eternal truth” (amongst other more recent books). I had not seen the book for some years. A hymn came to

me **“Thee will I love my strength my tower”**. The tears began to fall, but this was not mere emotion, nor a touch of nostalgia. The words rang in my ears, as did the tune, and with all my heart I wanted to sing it out to The Lord and commit myself to Him again. I wanted to sing

***Thee will I love, my Strength, my Tower,
thee will I love, my Joy, my Crown,
thee will I love with all my power,
in all thy works, and thee alone;
thee will I love, till the pure fire
fill my whole soul with pure desire***

Were my emotions stirred? certainly, but much more, I wanted to sing the words, and if there had been no music I would have been content to speak them. The tune had taken its quality from the words and not the other way around. Music is a wonderful gift from the Lord, but it must never rival or drown worship offered in spirit and in truth. Talking of drowning, I have missed many a public prayer or prophecy, as a guitarist has tediously strummed incessantly causing me to wonder if Leonard Ravenhill was correct when he described a guitar as a “backslidden harp” (Joking!)

Advice from John Wesley

John Wesley made this point when he gave advice to hymn singers in 1781

“Above all sing spiritually. Have an eye on God in every word you sing. Aim at pleasing him more than yourself or any other creature. Attend strictly to the sense of what you sing, and see that your heart is not carried away with the sound, but offered to God continually; so shall your singing be such as the Lord will approve of here, and reward when He cometh in the clouds of heaven”

Compare that advice with the following advice given by one worship leader to another. **“I was talking to a worship leader about his worship. He couldn’t put his finger on it, but there was something wrong. It just didn’t sound right. Not contemporary enough or something. Looking at his set list I figured he was trying to do contemporary worship with golden oldies like “He is exalted” and “I love you Lord”**. I was shocked that he was doing current worship hits from

Hillsong. “You’re doing all the current songs what’s wrong” I asked. He just couldn’t articulate the problem.

After I visited his rehearsal I heard the problem: 40 and 50 year olds trying to play music written by 20 year olds with synth patches and guitar effects from the 80’s. They were playing modern songs in an old fashioned way, and it just didn’t sound right. For instance, there was a mid 40’s guitarist who had the cheesiest 80’ chorus and reverb on his guitar. He still thought that he was cool and it was back in the 80’s—it doesn’t work on a modern worship tune.

Welcome to the worship wars. Wars start whenever a person or group feel displaced. Twenty years ago, the traditionalists were at war with the contemporaries, today the 80’s rock musicians are at war with the 20-somethings for the same reason”

Atmosphere

We hear talk about an “atmosphere of worship”. Below is some advice to church leaders on the subject

“Whether you realise it or not, as church leaders, you are responsible for creating the atmosphere for your church. Creating an atmosphere is much like creating a church culture, but with a more focussed approach.

Our hope for our church services is to impact people in a powerful way that will ultimately change the course of their lives toward a relationship with God. But how often do we as church leaders actually think past our message of our worship song or the offering talk and think about how each of these pieces play a part in creating the atmosphere of the service. Many times each of these pieces of the service when added together create confusion and when “everything goes right” and people respond (that a miracle) we think “Wow God showed up today”

Such advice gives a new meaning to the words of Jesus when He said **“For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them”** “Matthew 18:20. Presumably God only “shows up” (how I dislike that expression) when “everything goes right” They

would do well to read the testimony of the conversion of Charles Spurgeon who was saved in a meeting where nothing seemed to be going right.

Sacred or profane

It is vital to make this discernment. Are the entertainments of the world being imported into the church? Profane meaning to treat sacred things with irreverence or disregard whereby they become polluted.

When I was at school we sang traditional/folksongs. One I remember well was called "David the Bard on his bed of death laid" It was about a man who was dying and wanted to sing and bless his soon widow and children. Was it profane because it was not a hymn or chorus, I don't think so. Was the classical violin music I loved as a boy profane, I don't think so? These did not promote an anti-God anti- moral agenda, but can the same be said of the modern entertainment scene which regards sacred things with contempt and irreverence. It promotes the very opposite of the way of Christ, predicated as it is on self, lust, as being the norm. Indeed behind these things are those opposing forces contending, not just for individuals, but for dominion of nations and the cosmos itself. If we borrow from the components of today's popular culture, we move on to dangerous ground, indeed the very ground of our enemy who seeks our destruction and downfall. There are two kingdoms in conflict, and if we enter the territory of the enemy, to adopt its methods, techniques, systems and practices, we do so at our peril.

"Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of The Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life is not of the Father, but is of the world" (1 John 2:15-16)

I noticed this week an article and I quote ***"High street store HMV has linked up with a number of Christian music labels, including Integrity music Europe to provide a dedicated Christian gospel music section in its stores. The move comes after significant success with the genre in recent months. In 2013 the Official Chart Company launched the Gospel chart which is broadcast on Premier Radio on***

Tuesday afternoons. Two of its biggest selling albums have gone on to achieve mainstream success”

It seem to me sad that so called Christian music described as “a genre”, that is a style or category of music, can sit side by side on the shelves of HMV stores with all the other “genre”.

Clichés

No word has become more clichéd in church life than the word “Worship” reduced as it has been to music and singing. Let me give you a definition of “cliché **“an expression, a word, an idea which has become so overused to the point of losing its original meaning or effect even to the point of becoming irritating, especially when at some earlier time it was considered meaningful”**”.

We can all be guilty of using clichés in day to day conversation. E.g. “Basically” “To be fair” “To be honest” “At the end of the day”. These are irritating enough, but when we use clichés in the church that is far more serious.

There is a hermeneutical principle known as *The Principle of First Mention*. This principle teaches that the first mention of a word, or a doctrine, in the Bible, indicates its meaning throughout the rest of Scripture.

The first mention of the word “worship” is to be found in Genesis 22:5 where Abraham says to his young men **“Stay here with the donkey; the lad and I will go yonder and worship, and we will come back to you.”** People had worshipped before the event of this passage, but this is the first time the word “worship” is used.

The word translated “**worship**” means to **“bow down; to prostrate oneself before a superior; to humble oneself before God.”** Abraham uses this word in the midst of the most difficult trial he ever faced. He was about to sacrifice his son Isaac in obedience to the command of God. He had heard God speak clearly and that was the basis of his worship. His worship was in response to revelation.

Our worship is not to be a response to techniques, methods, manipulations, traditions, or customs of men whether old or new. Our worship is a response to all that God is as

He is revealed to us in His Word. Worship takes place when my spirit responds to Gods revelation of Himself. **“God is Spirit and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth”** (John 4:24)

Abraham’s heart must have been so heavy yet in spite of this he responds submissively and in worship he moves forward to carry out the awful task ahead of him. Worship involves submission to the will of God. Worship involves obedience, knowing that God does all things well.

Abrahams worship was expensive, it involved sacrifice and self denial. This worship would cost Abrahams dear son Isaac who represented all of Abrahams hopes for the future. He was ready to worship with a knife in his hand, about to slay his son. David said **“...neither will I offer burnt offerings unto the LORD my God of that which doth cost me nothing,”** 2 Sam. 24:24

Let us yield all we are and all we have to Him and truly worship.

Stephen Williams (2014)