

Music

The advertised title of this session is 'Music' but, on seeking to clarify what the course leaders wanted me to do, I discovered that the real subject is 'music in worship'. Of course, that's fine because, as every guitar-strumming worship leader knows, 'music and singing', especially worship songs written since about 1975 (but the newer the better), is what 'worship' is really all about! In fact, in the minds of many contemporary Christians, the two are synonymous. Take this letter from Mr Kevin Molecule to the office of *Songs of Dwellingness Ministries*:

Dear Mr Davey

I am an anointed worship leader in my church ... and I notice that you are responsible for collecting and publishing worship songs, both in your Songs of Dwellingness Books and for the annual Summer Reaping conferences. Anyway, for some time now I have been sharing my anointing with my church in the form of worship songs and my pastor ... suggested I send one to you for possible inclusion in your collections ... For further information these are the lyrics.

Jesus, Jesus, Jesus
We glorify the Lamb was once slain
Jesus, Jesus, Jesus
We enter into the land all over again.
Build a great big throne with our worship,
Help us live in resurrection power;
And you will reign
Like a bride ordained,
For our anointed consummating hour.

(Repeat)

I hope this is of interest to you. Any advice, criticism gratefully received, although you ought to be aware that I have been anointed so any criticism of me will, technically, be criticising God.

With deep humility

Kevin Molecule
Worship Leader

(Page, 2004:i-ii)

It's a caricature, of course, but my guess is that most people, certainly those with a wider experience of the contemporary church in Great Britain, have been to a church where, after the Sunday service has unfolded for 20 minutes or so, the worship leader (often a guitarist) has

invited us to ‘move into a time of worship’. Many people will object that they have already been worshipping for the last 20 minutes, but is even that assumption correct?

In his book, *True Worship*, Vaughan Roberts has an excellent chapter, The Place of Music and Singing (Roberts, 2002:65-84) but before we move to a more detailed introduction to music and singing we need a wider definition of worship, bearing in mind that it is not simply calling something ‘worship’ that makes it ‘worship’ and that in the Bible some ‘worship’ was offered to God that was totally unacceptable to him (Peterson, 1992:17). For our correspondent, Kevin Molecule, and many others like him, ‘worship’ is what happens when people sing ‘worship songs’, particularly when they have some kind of emotional experience singing them. For others, worship is what happens when they share in a particular form of service that they like, whether that service is the sonorous cadences of *The Book of Common Prayer* (1662), a nonconformist hymn-sandwich with generous fillings of Wesley and Watts, or a chandelier-swinging time of Pentecostal praise. Some people are narrow enough to suggest that if you do not worship in their way, you are not worshipping at all. Other people are generous enough to say that even if you do not worship in their way that you are still worshipping but Vaughan Roberts points out that true worship is not something that happens in isolation from the rest of life – ‘I show what I really think about Jesus by the way that I live. To truly worship, I need to change the whole direction of my life’ (Roberts, 2002:7).

There are some things about worship that all Christians will accept. I guess that most Christians would be happy to affirm that ‘true worship is impossible without Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit and the truth’ (Roberts, 2002:13) and that true worship is a response of praise and thanksgiving to the mercy of God (Roberts, 2002:17). In my experience, most Christians would also accept that the reason why Christians gather as believers is to worship God (Roberts, 2002:27). Vaughan Roberts contends that the first two of those statements are correct – firstly, ‘true worship is impossible without Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit and the truth’ and, secondly, ‘true worship is a response of praise and thanksgiving to the mercy of God’ but that the third statement, ‘the reason why Christians gather as believers is to worship God’, though commonly accepted, is *not* correct. So what are we to say of those special times (‘church services’), that often take place in special buildings (‘churches’) that are led by special people (‘clergy’)?

Firstly, in the New Testament, ‘Christian meetings are not said to take place specifically to worship God’ (Roberts, 2002:31). Although, in the Old Testament, worship (particularly sacrifice) was offered at Jerusalem, in a special building (the temple), led by special people (priests),

all that was fulfilled by the worship, or service, of the Lord Jesus, when he offered himself as a perfect sacrifice to his Father. In the new covenant the emphasis is not on our worship on earth, but on Christ’s in heaven. Because of his act of worship, his self-offering, there is no longer any need for holy places, mediating priests, or atoning sacrifices. In that sense, at least, he put an end to religion and we must not try to revive it.

(Roberts, 2002:38)

It is very easy to slip back into the Old Testament ways. Although sometimes they are inordinately burdensome, most of us are grateful for our buildings. Nevertheless, some people will introduce the language of sacred space or sanctuary, even though, since Christ's death, there have been no holy places (Roberts, 2002:38). If you put a table, a piece of very functional furniture at the front, someone somewhere is likely to start calling it an 'altar' (all the more so if by historical heritage or architectural misjudgement it happens to look like one), even though since the death of Christ no further sacrifice (and therefore no altar) is necessary (Roberts, 2002:40) and church leaders wearing any kind of distinctive dress is likely to conjure up the notion of priesthood in the minds of some people, even though 'priest' is not the Bible's word for Christian leaders (Roberts, 2002:40).

According to the New Testament, worship and service are something that we offer to God through the whole of life – and not just for an hour or two on a Sunday. It is our whole faith-response to God and not restricted to the Sunday services (Peterson, 1992:18-19, 286). Nevertheless, the New Testament is realistic and recognises that being a Christian is not always easy and so it is good for us to meet together to encourage one another (Roberts, 2002:44) and to build one another up (Roberts, 2002:45). In short, what we call our 'Sunday services' are primarily to *encourage* and *edify* believers (Peterson, 1992:287). This understanding gives us a whole new perspective on the Sunday service. When you take a friend along to your church on a Sunday if you think in terms of worship, especially an understanding of worship that is found in a particular part of the service, in the form of a particular kind of worship, all you can really ask is 'did you enjoy it?' In fact, let's admit that it's a question that we are not unfamiliar with asking of ourselves. However, if we move the goalposts back to where they really ought to be then we are presented with two different questions – was it encouraging and was it edifying? Did I come out of the service encouraged (perhaps challenged or spurred on) and edified (built up) in my Christian faith? In order for that to happen, 'the ministry of God's Word must be at the heart of our meetings' (Roberts, 2002:46). It is the preaching of the biblical gospel that calls the church into being and 'sleepy churches come alive when God's Word begins to be taught' (Roberts, 2002:54).

It is perfectly clear that New Testament Christians praised God and prayed when they met (Roberts, 2002:60) and Christians are to sing in order to praise God and encourage one another (Roberts, 2002:66). The Bible is full of music and song (Roberts, 2002:65) but 'the very common view that "worship" is essentially a time of singing through which we are drawn close to God has a number of harmful consequences' (Roberts, 2002:68): God's Word is marginalized (Roberts, 2002:69); our assurance is threatened (Roberts, 2002:70), especially if we root our assurance in our feelings instead of the finished work of Christ (Roberts, 2002:70), musicians are exalted (Roberts, 2002:70) and division in the church is increased (Roberts, 2002:71), particularly when an emotional experience is identified with a genuine encounter with God and only a certain kind of music gives a person that experience (Roberts, 2002:71). Particular music styles are then associated with an authentic encounter with God and consequently there is very little tolerance because it is so very important that a particular kind of music is played.

Most of us know what it is to experience ‘worship wars’ (Dawn 1995) in our local congregations. You can blame my namesake, Bill Haley of *Rock around the Clock* fame, for this if you like. Recently, I investigated my teenage daughter’s music collection only to discover that this collection included a number of CDs that I had previously thought of as mine (mainly music from the 60s and 70s). This set me thinking as to how likely it would have been that as a teenager I would have had my eye on some of my Dad’s 78s from the 30s and 40s – and the answer was that these did not interest me at all because they were from a completely different musical genre. New styles of music in Christian worship are nothing new, though there is not time to chart the history of Christian music here and the following brief overview must suffice.

The main division of points of view about the use of hymns and worship songs in the gatherings of the people of God is between those who take the Lutheran view that admits anything not contrary to the Word of God and those, following Calvin’s view, who limit what may be sung in Christian worship only to Psalms and scripture paraphrases, seeing hymns as human compositions. In Britain, the Free Church of Scotland and the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland adopt the latter view, but most other churches adopt the former view, with greater or lesser latitude for innovation.

The modern English hymn has a relatively short history. Although a few hymns were written in English during the mediaeval period it was the Reformation that brought a greater emphasis on singing in the vernacular. Nonconformists such as Isaac Watts (1674-1748) and Philip Doddridge (1702-1751) had written hymns but their work was not widely known outside the dissenting churches from which their authors came and ‘were read as religious poetry rather than sung as hymns’ (Edwards 1943:74). In the Anglican Church singing was still mostly limited to the Psalms (in versions by Hopkins and Sternhold, 1563, or Tate and Brady, 1696).

The Wesley brothers, John and Charles, encountered the hymns of the German Pietists on their journey to America in 1735 and John Wesley translated a number of these from the German, publishing one of the earliest collections of hymns in 1737 and used these in the public services. After their evangelical conversions in 1738, the Wesley brothers composed and published many collections of hymns and the Methodist movement also produced a number of other hymn writers. Anglicans soon joined the growing number of Methodist and nonconformist hymn writers giving English Christians an immense classical collection of hymnody. This was supplemented by the Victorian hymn writers (often utilising a memorable refrain and a simple tune, including a growing number of Americans) and the twentieth century hymn writers.

Up until the 1960s, hymns for gospel services and popular missions (‘crusades’) still used more or less the classical style of verses and occasional one stanza ‘choruses’ (e.g. *Cliff College* or *CSSM*) before the advent of Christian songs in more popular style. In the 1960s and ’70s, *Youth Praise* and popular musicals such as *Come Together*, which gave rise to the songbooks *Sound of Living Waters* and *Fresh Sounds*, made a different style of worship song widely available. These were largely superseded by *Scripture in Song*, *Mission Praise*, *Songs of Fellowship* and a great variety of songbooks in a similar style (Ward, 2005:121-162). It is the tension between using the hymns in the classical style (including, of course, some Victorian and Twentieth century hymns

of this type) and using worship songs in the more contemporary style that has given rise to the 'worship wars' in some local churches.

A man accustomed to a mainline church went to a seekers' service one Sunday. He came home and his wife asked him how it was.

"Well," he said, "it was interesting. They did something different. They sang praise choruses instead of hymns."

"Praise choruses?" said his wife. What are those?"

"It's like this," he replied, "If I were to say to you,

'Martha the cows are in the corn,' that would be a hymn. Suppose on the other hand, I were to say to you:

'Martha, Martha, Martha
Oh, Martha, Martha, Martha,
The cows, the big cows, the brown cows, the black cows,
The white cows, the black and white cows,
The cows, cows, cows are in the corn,
Are in the corn, are in the corn, are in the corn,
The corn, corn, corn.'

Then, if I were to repeat the whole thing five or six times - that would be a praise chorus."

However, that same Sunday a young woman accustomed to seekers' services attended a mainline service. She came home and her husband asked her how it was.

"Well," she said, "it was interesting. They did something different. They sang hymns instead of praise choruses."

"Hymns?" said her husband. What are those?"

"It's like this," she replied, "If I were to say to you,

'Ernest the cows are in the corn,' that would be a praise chorus. Suppose on the other hand, I were to say to you:

'Oh Ernest, dear Ernest, now hear thou my cry;
Incline thine ear to the words of my mouth.
Turn thou thy whole wondrous ear by and by
To the righteous, inimitable glorious truth.

For the way of the animals, who can explain?
There is in their heads no shadow of sense!
Harken they not in God's sun or his rain,
Unless from the mild, tempting corn they are fenced?

Yea, those cows in glad bovine, rebellious delight
Broke free from their shackles, their warm pens eschewed.
Then goaded by minions of darkness and night,
They all my mild chilliwack sweetcorn have chewed.

So look to that bright shining day by and by,
Where all the corruptions of earth are reborn,
Where no vicious animal makes my soul cry,
And I no longer see those foul cows in the corn.

Then, if I were to sing only verses one, three and four, and if I were to
do a key change on the last verse, that would be a hymn."

It is clear that the whole issue of music and singing in Sunday services is more than simply a matter of musical preference. I don't think we can get away from the fact of musical preference – 'most of us are more conditioned by our custom and personal preference ... than we would care to admit' (Peterson, 1992:15). Some people will always prefer contemporary music to classical music and although the battle lines might be drawn between young and old that is not always the case. Let's turn to Kevin Molecule for some enlightenment.

Dear Brother Davey

Thanks for your comments on the latest CD. I'm really glad that the music 'put you in the mood for worship, even though you were stuck on the A2 going home'. That's a key part of what we want to do as a worship band; we want the music to speak. The people in the Tabernacle really get into the emotion of worshipping when we play. I suppose it's an anointing thing really.

Anyway, I've tried to reflect that in some of my worship songs. You know, keep them simple and not let the words get in the way of the worship. Let the music do the job. I don't think people need to think in worship; they need to feel. I don't think that thoughts are what we want people to think; but feelings are what we want people to feel. What do you think?

Anyway, in the light of that, here is my latest outpouring. It's a simple chant that will just let the emotions do their work.

Isn't he holy? I reckon he is.
His holiness fills every minute.
He's holy and holy; oh holy is he,
God is pure holiness, innit?

He's so holy
Holy, holy, holy,
Holy, holy, holy, etc.
(repeat until blessed)

With deep reflection
Kevin Molecule

(Page, 2004:20-21)

It is important to recognise that emotions do have a place in worship. 'We *should* be emotional about our faith (Roberts, 2002:74) but it is truth ultimately that matters and not the style of the song or the tunes (Roberts 2002:72). We have been called to belong to God for the purpose of declaring his praises (Roberts, 2002:72) and there is certainly a place for telling God how we feel about him (Roberts, 2002:75). The Psalms are a good example of this but 'the Psalms of praise are never simply subjective declarations of the psalmists' feelings. The objective reasons for those feelings are always given, namely the greatness of God' (Roberts, 2002:75). 'Too many of our contemporary songs place an excessive emphasis on us' (Roberts, 2002:75), when what is really necessary is 'God-focused singing' (Roberts, 2002:76). John Wesley wrote in his *Rules for Methodist Singers*:

Above all sing spiritually. Have an eye to God in every word you sing. Aim at pleasing him more than yourself or any other creature. In order to do this, 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.

Most songs have two audiences, a heavenly one and an earthly one (Roberts, 2002:78). It is important to remember both dimensions, singing to declare the praises of God, offering what he has revealed, through scripture, is pleasing to him (Peterson, 1992:19) and singing to encourage one another (Roberts, 2002:77). What we sing must also build us up in our faith, that is, it should be both encouraging and edifying for we cannot underestimate the great influence that songs have on our theology (Roberts, 2002:79).

When it comes to choosing hymns or songs for a group or congregation there are some basic tests that any item must fulfil. We should read the words carefully and ask are they true, are they God-focused, are they clear and are they unselfish (Roberts, 2002:80-82)? 'We should be thinking about what will most edify others, rather than what we ourselves want to sing' (Roberts, 2002:83). 'If we grasp that one of the reasons we are singing is to build up others we will have them in mind' (Roberts, 2002:83); spiritual self-gratification must not become the order of the day for the leader or for the congregation (Peterson, 1992:17). Everyone will have different

personal tastes and yet, as we consider a hymn or song that we might want to use, we could do worse than follow Nick Page's advice and ask these questions of the text (Page, 2004:78) – does it grow from a deep, personal and, above all real experience of God? Does it have a strong, simple structure? Does it use ordinary language and images? Does it have theological depth?

I don't always agree with Nick Page, the man responsible for our friend, Kevin Molecule, because I think that sometimes biblical language or images in a hymn or song might be appropriate even though it is not 'ordinary' but there is certainly no reason to use an extraordinary image or inaccessible language when an ordinary image or readily accessible language will do. On the other hand, there is also a danger in the language and feelings expressed being too ordinary, what might be characterised as 'Jesus is my boyfriend' theology. The satirical cartoon series, *The Simpsons*, observed this problem when, with regard to a Christian band, one of the characters said, 'they switched from Christian music to regular pop, all you do is change "Jesus" to "baby"'. As 'baby' is probably an Americanism, I tried substituting 'Mandy' in a variety of worship songs – the results were rather challenging!

Much of the contemporary debate about styles of worship is missing the point. Worship is not something that happens for an hour or two on a Sunday but is the offering of the whole of life to God in thanksgiving and praise. When the people of God come together the primary reason for doing so is not to worship but that each believer might be encouraged and edified. When sharing in music and singing it is important not to interpret an emotional experience in a song as an encounter with God. More important than any particular style of worship or musical genre is to have our faith anchored in the truth of his Word. Preaching and teaching the Word of God are fundamental to what we do when we gather as Christians, these inform our faith and help us to be encouraged and edified, complemented by music and signing, and are not, therefore, something to be endured before we return to more singing.

References and further reading

- Anderson, J. (1980), *Worship the Lord*, Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press
Carson, D.A. (Ed.) (2002), *Worship by the Book*, Grand Rapids, MI.: Zondervan
Carson, H.M., (1980), *Hallelujah! Christian Worship*, Welwyn: Evangelical Press
Dawn, M. J. (1995), *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for This Urgent Time*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans
Edwards, M. L. (1943), *Methodism and England: A study of the social and political influence of Methodism in the middle period (1791-1849)*, London: Epworth Press
Kendall, R.T. (1989), *Worshipping God: Rediscovering the full dimension of worship*, Sevenoaks: Hodder and Stoughton
Page, N. (2004), *And now let's move into a time of nonsense: why worship songs are failing the church*, Milton Keynes: Authentic Media
Peterson, D. (1992), *Engaging with God: a Biblical Theology of Worship*, Leicester: Apollos
Roberts, V. (2002), *True Worship*, Milton Keynes: Authentic Media
Ward, P. (2005), *Selling Worship: How what we sing has changed the church*, Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press