

♪ Worship Notes ♪

THEME: Worldwide Worship

LESSONS FROM GLOBAL WORSHIP

(Part 4)

Worship and Culture: Challenges

In the previous three issues we have considered what could be termed "**The Global Worship Phenomenon**," considering it as "**A Work of God**" which has been enhanced by "**The Effect of Globalization and Communication**" and enriched by "**The Rediscovered Relationship of Worship and Missions**." We examined some of the "**Consistent Issues**" which crop up in worship discussions and debates around the globe, and landed finally on what might be termed "**The Bottom Line**" in these debates (everywhere and in every age): ***How do we balance the need for biblical fidelity with the need for cultural sensitivity and relevance in our worship?***

Other ways of framing the question were suggested, including: *How do we bridge the historical and practical gap between the Scriptural mandates and our cultural context? How can our worship be "in" the world but not "of" the world? Where do worship and culture intersect?*

Every Christian group wants to be "biblical" in its approach to worship. But just what does that mean, and how is that to be played out in a given cultural context? This month we will look at a few of the challenges that make it so enduringly difficult to answer these questions.

Challenge #1: The Silence of the New Testament

Every grounded and mature believer would maintain that the Scriptures must guide us as our final and supreme authority in understanding and shaping our worship. After all, worship is *about God*, and the Scriptures are where He has revealed to us His nature and ways; worship is likewise *for God*, and the Scriptures are where He tells us what He expects of us creatures. The Bible is to be our guide in every area of life; so certainly it should be in this crucial area of worship. People change; times change; cultures change; only in the pages of Scripture can we hope to find an unchanging standard for our worship. And with all the debates about worship forms, styles and practices which continue to rage today, the church of Jesus Christ desperately needs a unifying understanding of the unchanging, non-negotiable foundations of worship—and we must turn to the Scriptures for this purpose.

Yet even with this commitment to the Scriptures as our guide for worship, we immediately run into a problem when we go to the New Testament for models and guidelines for congregational worship. That problem has been summarized by John Piper as the “stunning indifference” of the New Testament writers to issues of form and practice of corporate worship. We search the pages of the New Testament in vain for much in the way of specifics, much less structures or liturgies. Even in the epistles, where we might reasonably expect Paul and the other writers to address these issues as they write to guide and encourage brand new churches, we find frustratingly little.

This presents us with a crucial question: Just what is it in the Bible that is supposed to govern and determine our worship? There are ongoing hermeneutical debates as to the place the Old Testament plays in informing and shaping New Testament worship (that's a question for another issue of *Worship Notes*); but there is widespread agreement that the pages of the New Testament itself give little in the way of specific directions. Piper observes:

In the New Testament, all the focus is on the reality of the glory of Christ, not the shadow and copy of religious objects and forms. It is stunning how indifferent the New Testament is to such things: there is no authorization in the New Testament for worship buildings, or worship dress, or worship times, or worship music, or worship liturgy or worship size or thirty-five-minute sermons, or Advent poems or choirs or instruments or candles. . . . *Almost every worship tradition we have is culturally shaped rather than Biblically commanded.* [emphasis mine]

To which Dan Block adds:

In large measure, the reason many churches today are splitting over forms of communal worship may be found in the relative paucity of direct guidance that the New Testament provides. We want to be New Testament churches. The only trouble is . . . the New Testament doesn't give us much specific instruction on how to do church, that is, the cultic gathering. Nowhere does the New Testament tell us to build churches, to meet on Sundays, to have morning worship services, to open with a song and a prayer, to have a long sermon, and then to close with a benediction. . . . About

the only custom which it prescribes as a regular occurrence is participation in the Lord's Supper. . . . Remarkably . . . this is the one liturgical worship rite that the NT describes, but we treat as optional or occasional or random. ("The Joy of Worship: The Mosaic Invitation to the Presence of God [Deut. 12:1-14]", audio message)

We may well ask, why did the Lord leave things so open by not stipulating in detail how corporate worship in the church should be practiced? Piper makes an intriguing suggestion. He points out that Old Testament system was a *"Come and See"* religion. Worship was centralized in Jerusalem, and worshipers had to come there, and at prescribed times. Even those from the surrounding nations were invited, but they had to come through Israel and to Jerusalem (and become Jews) in order to worship the one true God.



Because worship under this system was localized geographically and temporally, the Old Testament gives extremely detailed and exacting prescriptions of how that worship was to be carried out. Exodus and Leviticus are full of minute detail concerning how public worship was to be practiced.

In the New Testament, however, Piper points out, we have the opposite situation: we have a *"Go and Tell"* system. We are to take the gospel to every nation, into every culture. And that may well be the reason why the New Testament does spell out more in the way of specific worship practices: so that worship can be inflected in meaningful ways in each culture where the gospel takes root.



It is a reasonable assumption that the virtual silence of the New Testament writers on matters of form and style for worship means that the Lord intends for us to have considerable latitude and flexibility in these area—from culture to culture, perhaps even from church to church. Yet our worship services still need to look like something—so how are we to make choices? Is it just a case of "anything goes"? We will consider this issue next month.

Challenge #2: People Are Different

When it comes to making choices as to the forms and elements of worship, we immediately run into another difficulty. Music and the other arts are profound and powerful expressions; yet often there are wide divergences of opinion among people between and even within cultures as to their use in Christian worship, as to what is appropriate, meaningful and helpful.

This was brought home to me vividly a few years ago. The mission organization that I was a part of, Greater Europe Mission, has a conference every summer for the entire mission family. One year a friend of mine planned and led a Sunday morning worship service during the conference. At the end of the conference, evaluation forms asked for input on various parts of the conference; one question concerned the Sunday morning service. Below are the six specific comments made by various missionaries about that service:

1. The Sunday morning service was a real downer.
2. *Sunday was powerful for me – a feast of worship. I appreciated the reverence and awe.*
3. Sunday morning seemed like a funeral.
4. *Sunday was super!!!! – simple but profound.*
5. Sunday morning worship was extremely boring and difficult to sit through.
6. *The time of worship on Sunday was a very special blessing.*

The amazing thing about these statements is that they were all made about the exact same worship service! What a powerful illustration of how widely personal tastes and preferences can vary.

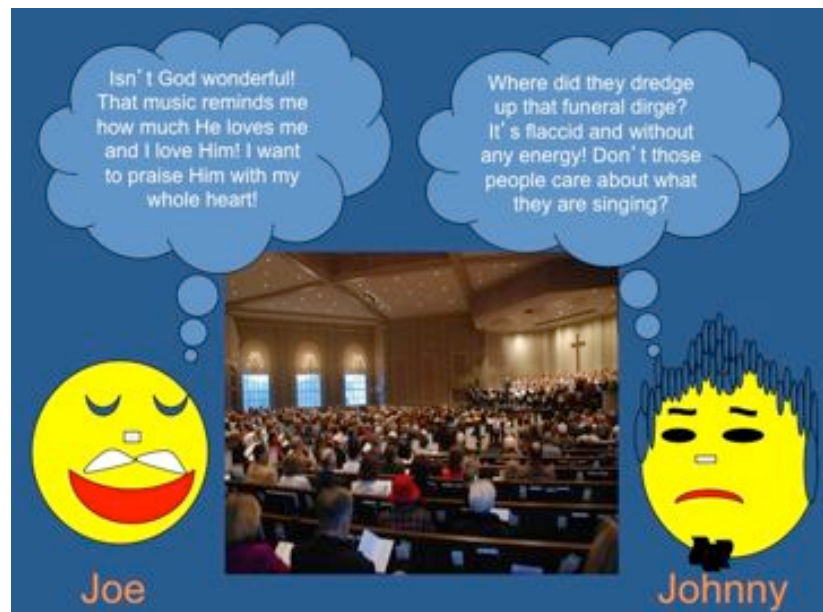
The late Tom Avery, a pioneer ethnomusicologist with Wycliffe Bible Translators, drew following insights from his field work and applied them to issues of worship music in our churches:

1. It is common for people to feel very strongly about the music with which they identify, and to find the music with which they don't identify to be extremely distasteful.
2. We live in a society where different generations may and often do have different musical cultures. (This is caused by the rapid rate of culture change experienced by society, probably unprecedented in the history of the world.)
3. We have people in the same churches who partake of radically different musical cultures.
4. Music is NOT a universal language.

This last point is a crucial one: not only does music *sound* different in different cultures, and indeed to different generations; but it can communicate widely varying things and elicit a wide array of different responses. Robin Harris expounds this point further in her recent *Worship Leader* article (see [HERE](#)).

A vivid musical example of how music speaks in profoundly different ways to hearers of different cultures can be found in [this audio clip](#) of the Canela tribe in Brazil singing a newly composed Christian song. (Western hearers never guess that the sentiments being expressed therein are that "God's Word makes me happy"!)

Avery further offered this humorous but incisive look into the kinds of thoughts which infuse many common disagreements about worship and music style (especially between generations):



Given the silence of the New Testament, and the resultant freedom of expression that that silence seems to allow for, we need to be very careful about assuming that we have discovered the one right, God-honoring way to do worship (and even more careful about condemning those who do it differently). When the Bible is not explicit, we need to be open-minded. We should still look to the Scriptures for guidance (as we will consider next month); but we also need to be careful to differentiate what is truly *biblical* and therefore *non-negotiable*; and what is *cultural* (or culturally shaped) and therefore *negotiable*. That is not an easy task; but it is worth the effort. We will jump into some of those considerations next month.

NEXT MONTH: *Lessons from Global Worship, Part 5*

UPCOMING WORSHIP EVENTS



St Martin in the Fields

Trafalgar Square, London
Concerts at St Martins



church | cafe | **music** | visiting | hiring spaces | building | christmas appeal

In Every Corner Sing: World Music Workshop
6:30pm - Monday 6 June 2011

Geoff Weaver - In Every Corner Sing

The well known music director, teacher and lecturer **Geoff Weaver**, editor of 'In Every Corner Sing' - a recently published collection of church music from throughout the world - leads a come-and-sing workshop on world music for Pentecost, featuring inspiring songs from all corners of the globe.

Programme

6.30pm Doors Open
7.00pm - 9.00pm Workshop



alleluia many voices | one song

JULY 19-22, 2011

Baylor Center for Christian Music Studies Presents the Annual Music and Worship Conference

INFO: www.baylor.edu/alleluia

Worship God 11 [The Gathering]

**August 10-13, 2011
Covenant Life Church**

Gaithersburg, Maryland

INFO: www.worshipgodconference.org

INFO: www.worldofworship.org/AiM2011

Arts
IN MISSION
2011

**Training for
Cross-Cultural
Ministry**

**September 4-11, 2011
London**

WORSHIP NOTES is a free monthly online digest of reflections, views, news and reviews concerning biblical worship. It is produced by Ron Man as a publication of **Worship Resources International**, a ministry devoted to “strengthening the body of Christ in the U.S. and around the world by promoting the priority, understanding and practice of God-centered, Christ-exalting, Biblically-based worship.” To subscribe, please go to www.worr.org and click on “Worship Notes” at the top; all back issues can be accessed there as well. There are many other free resources on the website also. You also might want to check out the worship quote blog, Quotables (worr.wordpress.com).