

What's the relationship between Mission and Worship?

Worship

Martin Luther famously identified daily life as worship ('laborare est orare'), and that should certainly be the case – but it's a bigger topic than there is space for here. Whenever worship is mentioned, most readers will think of services, when we join together to honour God as Creator and Sustainer of the universe, celebrating our relationship with God and one another in Christ, and facilitated by the Holy Spirit. The trouble is for many people, that's as far as it gets: a sound theological statement that nobody is going to argue with, but you're not going to be excited about either.

The late Bob Webber's book, *Worship is a Verb* expresses an important truth. Worship is an active thing – something we do – and in fact the Greek word 'liturgy' literally means 'the work of the people'. In line with that, a definition I have used describes worship as being 'All that we are, responding to all that God is', which means that the first question to ask is: 'What will enable people to engage with God?' That's going to be a challenge for us all – because what facilitates my expression of faith will not necessarily have the same significance for others. Genesis describes us all as people made in God's image (1:27), and we only need look at our own families to realize how different we all are. To be made in God's image certainly doesn't lead to a bland homogeneity, but reflects a God who is varied and colourful. To have integrity, worship ought to reflect back to God an authentic expression of that diversity.

In recent years, we seem to have developed a very narrow idea of worship as being about music. 'Worship wars' are usually not about worship, but about styles of music. This is largely due to the introduction of 'worship leaders', who are invariably musicians, and who frequently work with their own preferences rather than exploring silence, prayer, corporate reading, movement and many other expressions of what it means to be people made in the image of God. To define 'a time of worship' as 'a time of singing' is to diminish both music and worship. If we start by asking who we are, and who God is, we would end up with a much richer experience in which we might explore and celebrate all aspects of our humanity in relation to God, including those parts of us that would be nurtured by a more embodied spirituality.

Missional worship

A leader in a Scottish Baptist Church meeting in a community centre recently told me that, 'Last Sunday we sat with the blinds drawn and the door closed while neighbouring children played outside. We would have been embarrassed if passers-by could have heard our singing or observed us.' This suggests a deep lack of confidence in what was going on, and I immediately thought of Nick Page's book, *And Now Let's Move into a Time of Nonsense*. Another one I visited had twenty minutes of singing, minimal prayer, no Bible Reading and the sermon consisted of assembling a pink cardboard box. The guest I took asked, 'What was that about?' I had no idea, so I wasn't surprised they hadn't either. But there was nothing specifically about God.

Think back to last Sunday in your church. What songs did you sing? Did they say anything about God, or were they all about 'me'? Did prayer lead you into a more

holistic experience of God? Was there a sense of mystery? Did the people do any work, or were they passive? Was there a liturgy (remember, unwritten ones are harder to change)? How did this nurture the spirituality of those present? Would you have been embarrassed if your neighbour had shown up unannounced? Would visitors have to be socialized before they could make sense of it? Did the service have theological content?

Remember, mission is God's work, not ours. Our calling by the Holy Spirit's enabling is to identify where God is *already* at work and to come alongside others. That means we should not be striving to be relevant, but *incarnational* as we celebrate who we are and who God is, in cultural forms that have integrity. This is not about tweaking the music in order to attract, nor about persuading people to switch churches, but about creating multiple entry points for anyone seeking God, whether for the first time or as a lifelong disciple. Research on people who are leaving churches (and they are, in their droves) suggests that when they say it is 'not relevant' they mean that it doesn't meet their spiritual needs. Jesus offers a holistic model of discipleship that should also be a model for worship: loving God with heart, soul, mind, and strength (Mark 12:29-31). Worship that engages every part of our being – physical and social as well as internal and personal – is what today's spiritual searchers are looking for, along with very many Christians.

Finally

Every church is only one generation from extinction, and many of our congregations are struggling. Einstein famously described insanity as doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result. When so many of the children of believers are giving up on church, that should make us think, because they know only too well what we do, and quite often that is why they leave. John Wesley regarded communion as a 'converting ordinance' – for the saint as well as the sinner. I wonder how yours might measure up to that. Personally, I have never forgotten a celebration of the Lord's supper in a country where religious freedom was limited by the state. Ten secret police watched as the congregation worshipped, listened to scripture, and broke bread. At the end they came forward to the leader, who expected to be arrested. What they actually said was, 'We want what you have.' Authentic worship and authentic mission really do go hand in hand.

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