

Making Room for the Spirit in Worship – Brian Harley 26 February 2013

It is a joy to be sharing some thoughts about the foundations of worship with you today. I am aware that we joining in on an on-going discussion about the theology of worship in our Reformed tradition from an earlier gathering which led to the publication of a book last year – *Reforming Worship*, which I have read recently and will draw from at certain points.

Worship – what's it all about? How do we make sense of this activity that many of us have grown up in the midst of? It's so much part of who we are that it is hard to step back and make any objective analysis of the theology of what we do. Or is that just me?

The late Peter Lawrence was much involved with renewal in the Church of England in the 80's and 90's. He had a way with words to make his point and he once spoke of worship in this way:

“Worship, praise, adoration and thanksgiving are excessive, unnecessary and over the top!

God does not need worship. Our salvation does not depend upon it.

In many ways churches would be more efficient, practical and useful without it.....But God loves it!”

Let us note that worship should really be thought of in its broadest sense as the way we live our lives in the service of God but I shall focus mainly on the times we draw together for corporate times of worship. Karl Bart wrote that Christian worship is: *‘the most momentous, the most urgent, the most glorious action that can take place in human life’*.

“Worship is the occasion when men and women become truly alive, when we humans, made in the image of God, begin to fulfill the very purpose of our existence by relating to the God who made us....

...It is in worship that heaven invades our world, and we discover ourselves in the presence of Almighty God. What an experience! What a privilege!”

From *Faith and Festivity* by Paul Beasley-Murray

This touches on our title for these couple of days together: *Opening The Gates of Heaven* - heaven invading our world – the gates being opened to us. I was also drawn to Beasley-Murray's comment on worship being our very purpose as human beings – our chief end, as in the Westminster Shorter Catechism *“to glorify God and enjoy him forever.”*

So to my chief end today – having been asked to bring a renewal perspective to this gathering I homed in on the theme of making room for the Holy Spirit in our worship. As I thought about this, I found myself thinking about the way we do business as a church. We are not generally happy to receive votes from absent friends at meetings because we believe that when the people of God meet together there is a special dynamic relationship. We seek the Lord's will together; we listen to one another and try to discern the mind of the Spirit – as in the Council of Jerusalem, in Acts 15. Afterwards, James wrote to the Gentile believers: *“It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us...”* They had grappled with a difficult matter together before the Lord and this led to guidance in arriving at a decision. I sense that we must allow that same dynamic to operate whenever we meet for worship. Yes, those in leadership must have done their preparation – hopefully very prayerfully seeking the help of the Holy Spirit – but as we come together, there is no knowing what the Lord might want to do in our midst if we just left a bit of room to let God move. Others attending may have something to bring as well, and the planned activity may not be God's priority on the day. But it's safer to keep a lid on things and keep our hand on the tiller!

Order vs Freedom

In their introduction to the book *Reforming Theology*, Julian and Keith bring to our attention the necessary balance between order and freedom in worship and how this is very much a characteristic of the Reformed tradition: *“Ordered freedom is the scriptural mark of the church's worship”* (pg 6). Those of us in leadership are often afraid of the idea of spontaneity so we fall back on keeping a strong measure of control over what goes on in church. The problem is that we then quench the

Spirit and we reduce worship to being little more than a human activity. It can still be pleasant and enjoyable but we may be missing out on what is best.

By its very nature, the worship of God should involve the supernatural! God is spirit and we cannot engage with God unless we are somehow able to go beyond of the limitations of the flesh, the natural, and make some tentative steps into the sphere of God's kingdom, which by its very nature is supernatural. We may think that worship starts with us as we take the initiative to turn to God in prayer or make the effort to get along to a church service; but worship really starts with God. Paul says we need to *"be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord."* (Eph 5:18-19 NIV) Our worship flows out of God's activity in us. His letter to the Romans most famously teaches about life in the Spirit: *"...the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father.' The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. (8 v15-16).*

Paul builds on the point that Jesus had made to Nicodemus that one can never grasp the nature of the workings of God without something as radical as spiritual rebirth (John 3:3) - *"you must be born again"*. This is made possible by the mysterious work of the Holy Spirit – hard to define and pin down rather like the power of the wind. Being born of the Spirit brings us into relationship with the great God of heaven. We become God's children and learn to relate to God in terms of an intimate family relationship. The Spirit makes this possible in the first instance but the Spirit also helps us at every step along the way, living in us and guiding us into all truth. As Paul writes in Galatians 5, we must *"...keep in step with the Spirit"* (v25). This picks up on the Hebrew emphasis of walking with the LORD.

It surely goes without saying that we therefore need the Spirit's help in our worship. Again in Galatians 4, Paul writes *"Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out 'Abba, Father.'" (v6).* We are enabled to relate to the great God of heaven through the gift of regeneration in Christ and the new standing this gives us as sons and daughters, but also through the indwelling presence of his Spirit. Jesus tells his disciples in John 14 that the Spirit of truth will be in them after he has gone – *"he lives with you and will be in you."* (v17).

Above all things, the Spirit points us to Jesus. This sense of intimacy with God can only happen as we come to know God's Son and embrace all that he has done for us on the cross. I wonder how much Nicodemus had taken in of the meaning of being born in this new way by the time he helped Joseph of Arimathea take down and embalm the body of Jesus and lay it in a tomb. This was a special act of worship on their part; what seemed like the final piece of service they could offer to their master. Little did they know what new and extraordinary era was about to begin. The age of the Spirit of the risen Christ,

Christian worship truly came into being after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. It was here that the full potential of what Christ had done was released upon his followers. A whole new dynamic relationship was possible as the promised gift was endued upon the waiting group. It changed everything – including the way people worshipped. As Jesus had told the Samaritan women, a time was coming and indeed had arrived *"when the true worshippers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth."* (John 4:23). God is Spirit and that is really the only way! These are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks.

Worship should be transformational as Richard Foster points out in his wonderful book, *The Celebration of Discipline...* *"Worship is God's anaesthetic to change our lives... To stand before the Holy One of eternity is to change."* I wonder how much we are ready to be touched and transformed as we gather on a Sunday? Many of us like to keep well in control and keep God at arm's length! We so often want to worship on our own terms but we would do well to let go and to let God....

We have to get fully involved with our whole being, so as to enter into a meaningful relationship with God. This begins in the Torah – *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might"* (Deut 6:5) and is very evident as we read the Psalms. This is reflected in

many familiar hymns as well as the more recent worship songs – for instance Francis Pott's Angel Voices includes the line: *"hearts and minds and hands and voices"* and Martin Rinkart's - *"Now thank we all our God – with hearts and hands and voices"*. The worship of Israel was very physical and included bowing down and raising the hands, as indeed is the worship of heaven pictured in the Book of Revelation. It was also emotional.

It may not seem very Reformed to be talking about the use of our emotions - the Presbyterians have jokingly been referred to as God's frozen chosen! But emotion is surely not to be reserved just for the football terraces or for our private relationships. People are afraid of emotions being expressed in worship as this can lead to emotionalism, where emotions take precedence over the solid foundation of teaching from the Bible. In the Alpha Course, Nicky Gumble refers to this and quotes a former Bishop of Coventry, Cuthbert Bardsley who once said, *'The chief danger of the Anglican church is not delirious emotionalism.'* One might add, 'Nor in the URC'. We perhaps need to be a bit more real as we engage with God in worship rather than trying to hide behind our mask of respectable British reserve.

So, our worship of God should involve our whole being - personality, mind, heart, will and emotions. King David poured out his heart to God in many ways throughout the Psalms and even danced before the Lord in his underpants when overjoyed at the Ark of the Covenant arriving at Mount Zion. Dare we get excited about God even if this leads to the scorn of others? It may not seem very British, but we have to stop and ask "where does our true citizenship lie?" As Peter suggests, we are really aliens, sojourners, whose true home is elsewhere.

The Lord wanted a true worshipper to lead his people – *"a man after his own heart"* (1 Sam 13:14). David later prayed *"Give me an undivided heart that I may fear your name."* (Ps 86:11). And he wasn't afraid to express his love for God... and neither should we. C S Lewis, reflecting on his experience of both marriage and faith, wrote *"delight is incomplete until it is expressed."* Worship that holds back from expressing our love in tangible ways is, I would argue, falling short of the Biblical pattern. The relationship between Christ and his church is likened to a marriage - a relationship where love is expressed. In worship we must learn to express our delight in God and in all that the Lord has done for us. We need to express our love....

The Psalms are packed full of emotion. In her chapter on Singing the Psalms, Barbara Douglas reminded us that the early worship of the Reformers was often restricted to the singing of Psalms and other sacred texts. These metrical versions of Psalms were developed so as to be accessible to the people (not in Latin) with melodies that reflected the meaning and feeling of the text, and memorable so that congregations would become familiar with the Scriptures. They also allowed engagement with God through all kinds of different emotions as are found in the rich diversity of the Psalter.

Modern worship songs are often criticised for being too simple or even banal. But they do allow ordinary people to express their emotions to God. Calvin saw singing as largely a means of corporate prayer, drawing everyone in to worship together. Many of our popular hymns of recent centuries are much more theological in their emphasis. Singing good theology may be helpful in reinforcing Biblical teaching, as Martin Luther found, but there is also an important place for expressing one's heart to God. It is thoroughly Biblical!

Enough about emotions. What about this question of freedom in worship? Making room...

One of the problems of letting emotions flow and introducing spontaneity into worship is that it often results in chaos - we have no doubt all been to Songs of Praise evenings where people are asked to choose their favourites. Asking folk to participate in this way usually leads to a disconnected set of songs that have no flow or direction (some planned services can sadly seem little better!). So - what do we do? Keep control: put on a straight jacket, making sure that we do things decently and in order.

Reformers proudly own those words of St Paul in the last verse of 1 Corinthians 14: *“Everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way”* (v40) but perhaps rather skim over the actual context of those chapters where Paul is seeking to restrain some of the excesses of charismatic activity. The verse before that in fact says: *“...be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues”*. Paul is not saying that that we must have a set order of service and stick to it: *“What then shall we say, brothers and sisters? When you come together, each of you has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. Everything must be done so that the church may be built up.”* v26. Worship in Paul’s day was, it seems, highly participative.

If we risk being open to the Holy Spirit are we simply inviting chaos or are we trusting that the good Lord can indeed come and meet with his people and anoint the occasion with his living presence? If we keep to a scripted order, even where that involves the participation of many others in readings, prayers etc, are we perhaps cramping what God may be wanting to do to shape and lead his church.

One of the principles that Paul introduces here is of course discernment – the prophets are instructed to weigh the words that others bring (v 29). In 1 Thessalonians 5, Paul famously says: *“Do not treat prophecies with contempt but test them all; hold on to what is good, reject every kind of evil.”* (v19-22). That follows his injunction *“Do not quench the Spirit.”*

We who are in leadership probably throw cold water on the work of God far more often than we are aware. There can be moments of great expectation when we are in the midst of worship – a special time when the Lord is seeking to move in a mighty way, and we miss it because we are too reliant on what is next on our schedule or concerned that the Sunday roast might get overdone.

At Shanklin, we enjoy some lively and often quite loud praise but we also find that the more intimate songs can lead us into moments of hushed expectation. Silence falls – even the babies seem to understand! We find ourselves at a point of simply waiting in silence – what I like to call a Holy Spirit silence – it’s as though no one dare make a sound as we sense God’s presence and wait on the Lord. My Presbyterian and Reformed renewal friends in the United States have coined the phrase – a *Kairos Moment*. Like when Jesus says – now is the time; God’s moment in time, rather than the time on the clock (Chronos time).

We do well to be alert to these moments when God is knocking on the door of our activity in order to do his work. We so often miss them – or don’t even expect them. My friend in the States, Brad Long (Executive Director of PRMI), says that: *“Worship welcomes and invites the presence of God.”* We should expect things to happen when we draw near.

The Bible must always be our reference point in discernment.

It is most often through the reading of Scripture or the preaching of the Word that the Lord speaks to his people. In his historical overview in the book *Reforming Worship*, David Cornick draws attention to *“the essential dynamic of reformed worship – through the word, God comes.”* (Pg 33). – but God can interrupt the speaker as with Peter at the house of Cornelius when the Spirit came in power just like on the Day of Pentecost (A Kairos moment indeed!). The Bible is full of stories that remind us how we should always be ready and responsive to what is happening and not seek to control the way in which the Sovereign Lord should work. We pray “Your Kingdom come, your will be done” but rarely stop to listen to what that might mean for the congregation on that day.

I like this quote... from *In Tune with Heaven – The Report of the Archbishops’ Commission on Church Music* (Tim Bavin, 1992):

“We worship God because we know Him to be worthy of worship, and because He both desires and enables us to offer it. In our worship God often takes what we are trying to give Him, no matter how inadequately, transforms it and makes of it a gift to us.

We think we are doing one thing, only to find that God has turned the tables on us and given us much more than we have been able to give to Him. This is His nature and character.”

I would suggest that we should be on the lookout for God's activity as we both prepare for and lead a service of worship – and indeed as we draw near as participants (never spectators I hope!).

Scripture exhorts us to “*sing to the Lord a new song*” PS 96:1. How often do we do it – simply make something up – even in the car when alone, or in the shower? God loves to hear our praises – even if it is little more than a joyful noise! Worship in the Spirit may sometimes involve what is often called singing in the Spirit. This is where the worship song comes to an end but there is a sense that people need to go on praising in their own way. For some this may include the gift of tongues while others simply pour their heart out to God with whatever words or melody that comes. It may only happen infrequently and last for a minute or two. This is perhaps what Paul refers to when he speaks of both praying and singing with his spirit as well as with his mind or understanding (1 Cor 14:15). In his reflections on the theology of Charismatic Worship, Tom Smail comments that this “*Singing in the Spirit by-passes the rational faculties... Such praise is direct, spontaneous and simple. It escapes from complicated conceptuality and a second hand dependence on such liturgical resources as prayer-books and hymn-books, and responds in immediacy and freedom to the contact with the living Lord that the Spirit makes possible...*” (Pg 109, Charismatic Renewal, The search for a Theology. Tom Smail, Andrew Walker and Nigel Wright 1993).

Many worship leaders suggest that it is quite in order to anticipate this possibility and even create the context where it can flow out of a worship song. Roger Jones calls this a Planned Spontaneous Happening. You can plan for the possibility but you cannot be sure what might emerge at the time. It may be a moment for prophetic words or pictures to be shared; it may just be a special time of intimacy with God in praise. It may be well outside of your comfort zone but I have recently been alongside traditional choir members who were encouraged to let go of the notes and words on the page and sing out from the heart in harmony with others. And they had a go. It can be a beautiful and deeply moving and spiritual thing. Tom Smail suggests that singing in the Spirit is “*the quintessence of worship in its charismatic mode.*”

This may not be common in URC congregations but is certainly not unknown. Similarly, there are times when people bring prophetic words. I would expect that in such a gathering as this some of you will hold a dispensational view concerning the gifts of the Spirit; that gifts like prophecy and tongues were for the apostolic age. I'd be happy to have a discussion about this over supper tonight! But may I just say at this point that I am persuaded by personal experience that God is still at work supernaturally in his church – having seen such Words speak deep into my own life and circumstances - but also I think that Church History shows the power of the Spirit at work in the church down through the ages. In Scripture, Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 13 that when perfection, or completeness, comes these things will cease. That seems to suggest that in the imperfect world we are still in, during these in between times as we await the second coming of the Lord, we still need the help of such supernatural resources. They have not ceased yet – nor should they ever come above the most excellent way of love – too many churches have been torn apart by people hungry for supernatural experiences – and where the cross of Christ has lost its central place (Tom Smail points out one of the weakness in charismatic worship as not having sufficient focus on the cross and repentance but I believe that the movement has matured somewhat over the last 20 years).

Being open to the prophetic can at times seem risky and there are those that can be over keen and can abuse the privilege and jump in when the time does not seem right. Prophets of the Bible were often awkward and sometimes rather crazy people – but God had a place in his plans for them. To keep things in some sort of order, it can be helpful to suggest that those who sense that they have something from God should speak to an elder and get a message to the worship leader rather than diving straight in.

I am try to explain a few practical things here but do not wish to stray too much into the “how to” area, as our focus here is on the theology of worship. I do hope that I have opened up a few challenges for you on why we ought to make room for a bit more freedom in worship to allow the Lord to speak to his people. Yes, much of that does come through good pre-prepared material: hymns, songs, prayers and a well crafted sermon, but I would urge us all to be open to the unexpected; to be bold

enough to drop the plan and follow the Spirit's lead. God is the initiator of worship – as one translation of Psalm 22 puts it *“God inhabits the praises of his people”* – he is enthroned in that place. God dwells in an atmosphere of praise. This is not something we manufacture but something that the Spirit inspires as his people open their hearts to him. To quote those words from Romans 8 once again - *“The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children”*. We are caught up in a wonderful family relationship that starts with God’s initiative and is sustained by God’s Spirit working deeply in our lives.

Dare we go into uncharted waters in our experience of God and make room for the Spirit to move in our services of worship; to build in some times of silence not simply to allow us all to bring our personal prayers, but also to receive from God as individuals and as a body of believers. We long for a sense of God's presence in the church – we must work at making room to welcome that presence through greater flexibility and some “not too well ordered freedom”. The balance has perhaps swung too much on the cautious side of “order” rather than bravely pushing the frontiers of greater freedom.

Wouldn't it be great to be known as a people with great expectations!

This principle of openness to the Spirit of God applies of course to the widest understanding of worship which is a really a 24/7 lifestyle; our daily walk with the Lord – keeping in step with the Spirit in our work, rest and play. It all should be an offering of worship to the Lord – a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – our true and proper worship (Rom 12:2).

The new booklet on Spirituality and Prayer produced by GEAR for Vision 2020 explores the whole idea of how God speaks into our lives, which naturally has some emphasis on making room for the Holy Spirit. A copy is being given to every congregation of the URC through the March Synod meetings and more copies can be ordered if churches wish to look at this material together.

Questions to consider:

What is your experience of freedom in worship -

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| | A good experience? |
| | A bad experience? |

Should we try and create more space for God to move – if so, how?

