

Are Songs Worship?

Song leaders are not, in a biblical sense, the worship leaders, even if they help express worship. *“The idea that ‘worship’ is something that only takes place in a church or a conference—and then only in a ‘time of worship’ is profoundly unbiblical”* (Page 2004:24). Indeed it can foster the idea that once we give deity his weekly shot in the arm and/or get our fix, our duty’s over for another week, while we get on with real life. It is more biblical to say that 24/7 church pastors are the worship leaders, encouraging believers to “give [their entire self] to God because of all he has done for [them. To be as] living and holy sacrifices—the kind he...finds acceptable, [which] is truly the way to worship him” (NLT: Rm.12:1). Paul linked in with the Levitical *hōlâ* offering (Lv.1), that total transfer into the domain of heaven. At the end of the day, talking about times of worship is like talking about having times of breathing, or times of being ourselves. Songs are not worship, but can encourage expressions of worship and the vision to live as worship. I love my wife; at times I do loving things. I worship God; at times I do worship things. Both love and worship should be 24/7, even if they slumber. Residual, background. For us, there can be times when the glory of God is so felt, that we bow done in worship. Such times can come through biblical revelation, through prayer (2 Chr.7:1), the grandeur of the mountains, the brilliance of the stars, in healing services, and triggered by song (2 Chr.5:13f.). Thank God they come, but songs are not key. So, how should they fit into church? Planning can be good. Some churches have spontaneous song selections from the congregation, but where there is a set menu, it can make sense if the speaker is at least consulted, both to coordinate singing to speech (Prime & Begg’s *On Being A Pastor*, 2004:207), and to avoid song vs speaker. Imagine, say, following a hearty Hillsong singsong with a talk on trinitarianism. If for no other reason than to save embarrassment, it’s worth checking beforehand. When it comes to the song menu, Chris Idle (Reform) argued that music leaders have hijacked the idea of worship, and often fail to redeem the time that should have been given to other aspects of corporate service, such as preaching, teaching, quiet reflection. This is not to say that the corrective is to condemn corporate singing, as if it destroys worship, but that we should think in terms of balance. Fit it around church, not church around it. Ritual can be good, without being ritualistic. In the OT there were worship leaders, in the sense of Levites getting the people to bow down in ritual, which for the faithful reflected their inner obedience. There was the sense of doing worship, but not of being worship. I have said elsewhere that there were three kinds of Israelite. Those who neither loved Yahweh nor the ritual: they had leave to depart—non-Yahwists dead to Yahweh and to Sinai. Those who didn’t love Yahweh but were content with ritual: they were free to remain—nominal Yahwists dead to Yahweh but alive to Sinai. Those who loved Yahweh and the ritual: they were spiritually blessed—true Yahwists alive to Yahweh and to Sinai. It was a far from perfect church, and ritual helped preach that Yahwism was for everyday life. After 25 years Tevye & Golde had come to love each other through the daily rituals of marriage. Conversion can come through ritual, familiarisation, acclimatisation, the periphery of the divine, which is something that Paul hinted at (1 Cor.7:14).¹ Singing is a good part of ritual. Quite possibly folk often sang their own songs, but the noticeable singing was that of the temple. Many psalms involved a

¹ He said that children and spouses of Christian had an advantage of proximity to eternal life, by virtue of being in a holy family, yet that living with a preach and receiving eternal life through the message preached, were two different things.

director, a cantor. They would sing the lead parts, with the people at large responding with their own set lines. In some Christian circles, a church priest will sing or chant a line, followed by a sung or chanted response from the congregation. Martin Smith's, *Shout to the North* (1995), has a stanza for women to sing to the men, and one for the men to sing to the women. In the OT, 2 Chr.7:2f. reflects the lay part, though they perhaps they didn't need a cantor to set them off that awesome day. Indeed, only as the glory dimmed could the official worship begin with the musicians in place (6). Likewise, Ps.136, the Great Hallel (Extreme Praise), shows lines by the Levites, followed by lay response. Song leaders seem to have been selected from Levites, who probably combined music with lines inviting bowing down, obedience, worship.

Let's get down to worship. *Leviticus* is chock full of once meaningful ritual. The five types of Levitical offering were the Total Commitment (Enslavement), the Loyalty (Passion), the Fellowship (Oneness), the Restoration (Normalisation), and the Restitution (Pay Back). They give insights into how worship went down, and what it symbolised. We could look at what some still call the Holiness Code, a C19 nickname² for a portion of *Leviticus* that some once thought was a document added to a document, to be precise, rules about ethico-dynamic holiness added to ritualistic rules of static ceremonial holiness: two lines of thinking by two sets of people. Nobuyoshi Kiuchi has well undermined that idea, and the desacralising idea that formed it. My college's notes BS08 (*Leviticus*) looks at such a little more. Here I shall limit myself to a few Hebrew terms. The main one for *worship* (*shakah*, *similarly kâra'*), involved low bows, even nose and forehead to the ground, prostration before the object of worship. Some Africans practice this posture in showing filial submission to their fathers. The main NT term for worship (*proskunēsis*) comes from a background idea of the obedient kiss of submission. This is probably because the Greek social custom of picturing worship, differed from the Hebrew. Jewish translators usually used *proskunēsis* to translate *kâra'* and *shakah*. Likewise, Est.3:2,5 employs both terms, *kneel* (*kâra'*) and *reverential bow* (*shakah*). The Greek *gonupetō* carries more the idea of bowing down. Mk.15:19 combines both words "with no real difference in meaning," in the mock context of Roman soldiery (H Schönweiss: Willem Van Gemeren's *New International Dictionary of OT Theology & Exegesis—Computer Version*, 2001:G1206 (*gonupeteō*)). Php.2:10 basically carries the *gonupetō* visual: every knee must one day bow to Jesus.³

Yet those who teach that true worship requires physical prostration and/or kissing, are high on literalism, and low on meaning. 1 Sam.15:22 indicated that while meaningful ritual had been established, the true meaning of ritual was heart submission to Yahweh. Similarly Is.1:11-7 said that symbolic ritual might as well be discontinued as meaningless unless people lived its meaning of neighbourly concern. Likewise, Mt.23:23 showed that while vassal tribute (tithing) should see out that covenant, unless Sinaitics reflected the heart of Sinai, namely God's concern for others, they literally strained out unkosher gnats but metaphorically swallowed unkosher camels (Lv.11), and were morally unclean. Peripherals can help, but it's the meaning they serve. As Paul Stookey sang in *The Winner* (1977), if you get the message, you might refuse it, but if you get the meaning,

² Given by August Klostermann in 1877 as a throw away term. Indeed it should be thrown away.

³ This is not Universalism. Universalism teaches that God's love will eventually win every human spirit (possibly every demon spirit) to himself, thus all shall be saved. Php.2:10 simply says that even those who reject Jesus will see that he is lord. Likewise demons reject God yet acknowledge him.

hey, don't ever lose it. The meaning is where it's at. I'm not saying that there can never be times when physically bowing or kissing in worship isn't highly meaningful whatever your culture. What I'm saying is that inner submission, love, and real awareness of being inferior, are key. Without such, ritual is merely going through the motions (Mk.7:6). Worship in church should be corporate submission and awe. Worship is neither praise, nor thanks. I can praise my wife as being a good cook, and thank her for her cooking, without worshipping her as cook. I am grateful for food (thanks), any food, but enjoy (praise) good food, and can honour (worship) the cook even if having none of their cooking. Worship is meaningful recognition of those who are in some or all good ways, greater than we. The bigger the perceived greatness, then the bigger the worship, and the more the head is metaphorically down. Pliny the Younger noted that the early church had weekly times of corporate submission and respect to Jesus, perhaps followed by antiphonally chanting Christian realities, their obligations, and reaffirming their sacred vows (*sacramento*) to live as Christians in society. Such is worship.

Nor is worship meant to be only to deity. This is a concern that gets some uptight. They sometimes cite the unhappy case of Herod⁴ lest we get praised instead of God. Certainly it's good, for the sake of the people, to get folk looking towards God rather than to our merits (Ac.14:13-8), though the latter can help the former (Mt.5:16). But still we could literally say that Lot worshipped angels (Gen.19:1), that Abigail worshipped David (1 Sam.25:23), that Ruth worshipped Boaz (Ruth 2:10), and that Jacob worshipped Esau (Gen.33:3). Tell me they were wrong. Of course, they would not have said it was on par with worshipping Yahweh, and Bible translations are right to choose alternative words in line with the range of meaning of *kara'/shakah*.⁵ In Mt.4:10/Lk.4:8 it refers to a context of God vs gods, and in *this* sense Israel's worship was limited by covenant to God: covertly Satan was claiming worship as a god.⁶ The Israelites were fine to worship in lower senses, so long as the lower did not dismiss the higher. In Rv.19:10 the context of being beyond the human arena, made it appropriate for an angel to say "worship [only?] God": focus on the Author, not the postie. In fact, in that context it would seem to mean the father, not the son, nor the spirit, though it seems appropriate to take the angelic words as a basic contrast between created and creator. When the creator is in view, reverence and obedience to any creature, seems feeble by contrast. Thus, biblically, the overall idea is not that only deity is to be worshipped, but that supreme worship is only appropriate to him. Somewhat akin, we may say that while worship—as obedience and respect—is proper to human levels of authority, it is not due when the authority clashes with deity's authority (Ac.4:19; 5:29).

⁴ This was Herod Agrippa 1 of Judea, grandson of King Herod the Great. For more see my college notes on *Luke & Acts* (BS07).

⁵ See Terence E Fretheim: Van Gemenen 2001: H2556 (*chavah*). Similarly the NT says that for us there is only one lord (1 Cor.8:6), yet commends Sarah for calling her husband *lord* (1 Pt.3:6). Paul & Silas were called lords (Ac.16:30). Again, semantic range was in play. *Kurios* (lord) sometimes simply meant on a social level, *sir*, a common level of courtesy, but at its highest level the NT says that it excludes any rivals to deity and even transcends Jesus. Worship words had a meaning range: the English word *worship* likewise has a semantic range.

⁶ Biblically we should jettison the ideas of Satan as a horned beast in a red suit making a pitch, in favour of a fallen photosomatic being with some authority over lesser evil spirits, all using deception and psychic power against humanity and strongly involved in politics.

In short, the biblical idea of supreme worship is yielding 24/7 to deity, in awe of him who transcends his universe⁷ yet indwells it. As said, *proskuneō* conveys the idea of bowing down, a kiss of obedience, orientation of the mind. Related terms are *sebazomai* (a feeling and yielding in service to awe: the *numinous* theme of Rudolf Otto) and *latreia* (sacred service). Tabernacle/Temple paradigms in the OT have been transferred to the NT church, both corporately & individually. That is, Global Israel over the millennia is deity's holy place, likewise any local congregation serves as an inner sanctum to him, and so does each Christian. Each format of sacred space, besides being separated by him to him, is to be ultimately and effectively submitted to him. Every aspect of our lives, for example family, workplace, marriage, finances, emotions, all are to bow to him. This is in line with OT awareness that the Sinaitic Covenant was partly intended to show the limitations of what deity can do, short of inner change at the individual level (Jr.31:31-4; Ezk.36:24-7).⁸ True love and true insight is the worship the father seeks.

Corporate singing can focus on reverence themes, as well as on gratitude and praise themes. Themes such as deity's transcendence, his love to us, redemption, and our covenant relationship with him and with each other. It can be a manifestation of our corporate life. Few songs survive from before the C18, and the handful of C18 songs that survive have not necessarily done so because of biblicality. Old does not mean right. However, in days before discrimination became a criminal offence –yes, it was once believed a virtue—probably many bad songs got killed off without having done much harm, and the better ones, at least ones by better known writers, have had more chance of making it through into our days. A natural weeding process. But even popular ones weren't necessarily biblical: nor are today's popular numbers necessarily biblical. It's simply that they should be. Popularity should sometimes sound alarm bells (Lk.6:26—which *The Message* paraphrases well). Songs can be nice; they can even be true. But no matter how popular, we should still engage brain before opening mouth. When *Lord of the Rings'* author, J R R Tolkien, wrote the ultimate beginning, he pictured Ilúvatar (the One) teaching creative wisdom through song. Later, the One's greatest created power, Melkor, introduced his own darkening thoughts into the Creation Song, and having moved into discord was cut off from Ilúvatar, becoming Morgoth, whose second in command was Sauron. Effectively Melkor was accursed because he sang a false gospel he himself had invented. Tolkien well understood the impact of song (*The Silmarillion: Ainulindalë*). Tolkien's close friend, C S Lewis, also wrote about the creation song of Narnia (*The Magician's Nephew*). Let us be in no doubt: songs are powerful, and popularity should not be the measurement of truth. But paraphrasing Paul, even heaven's most popular angel should be kicked out of heaven, if preaching against the true gospel (Gal.1:8).

⁷ Antony Flew's *There Is A God*, 2007:120f., well noted that atheism's creative invention of a multiverse, besides being lacking science, expands its problems of sourcing the laws of nature, to a superlaw of natures. Scientifically, creation appears limited to one universe.

⁸ Ezk.36: though prophesied in Ethnic Israel terms, arguably it bespoke the creation of Global Israel, with pictures of re-admittance to Canaan indicating the spiritual level of joy offered by the Yeshuic Covenant. For more see *Israel's Gone Global. The Last Battle*, by C S Lewis, also offers insight as to what God can and cannot do.