

MUSIC, MOVEMENT AND SILENCE IN WORSHIP

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THE SILENCE OF THE BIBLE

One of the annoying things about the scriptures is that often they don't tell us all we would like to know. On some subjects there is tantalisingly little written for our instruction, and we might wonder why God has allowed this to happen; you or I would not have managed things thus. We would have inserted a couple of verses unambiguously clarifying the doctrine of the Trinity, and so have undermined a whole century of Jehovah's Witness confusion. We would have written long, detailed directions for the participation of women in church services and the precise mode of baptism to be used, and so have avoided thousands of hours of theological controversy and bitterness. And—I suspect—we would have said a little more about worship.

Worship is never defined or described in detail in either the New Testament or the Old. Hence Christians have problems in deciding what we are actually commanded to *do*. What are the limits of our freedom? Are some activities acceptable, and others not? Are we to follow slavishly an approved liturgy composed by other men? Or are we to make a determined drive for simplicity, spontaneity and originality—at the possible cost of depth, beauty and theological richness? And what physical or mental activities are involved anyway? Must we restrict ourselves to the style of the early church—in which case, out goes the organ—or are we free to open ourselves up to a bewildering range of innovative techniques of which the apostles never dreamed?

How different it all is from those religions which place tremendous stress upon their ceremonies. In some sacred books there are detailed,

pedantic instructions for every stage of a ritual or sacrifice or sacrament. Roman augurs followed a strict code of rules in trying to read the omens; and if one minor detail went wrong, even at an advanced stage of the proceedings, the whole procedure had to be scrapped and started again. This is the way that magic works, and still does in our own day (as the books of people like Dion Fortune and Gareth Knight demonstrate). Divine power depends on getting the ceremony right. Otherwise, it doesn't work.

But the Bible's reticence about worship methods is precisely what we might expect from the Bible's view of God. For he is a personal, sovereign being, not an impersonal natural force which can be manipulated by initiates. Peter Berger has written a suggestive essay in which he contrasts the pagan nature religions of the Canaanites with the true worship of God for which the prophets contended. He points out that the seductive appeal of Canaanite religion was that it did not involve any personal dealings, any 'I-Thou' encounter, with a God who was loving, jealous and demanding:

The human being's fundamental religious quest is to establish contact with divine forces and beings that transcend him. The cult of sacred sexuality provided this contact in a way that was both easy and pleasurable. The gods were as close as one's own genitalia; to establish contact with them, when all was said mythologically and all was done ritually, one only had to do what, after all, one wanted to do anyway . . .

The sacred sexuality complex was repudiated by those who spoke for Yahweh because it violated their central understanding of both God and humanity . . . Israel encountered its God as a God of history, through the mighty acts that were the foundation of the covenant . . .

Unlike the cult of sacred sexuality, the cult of Yahweh did not lead to otherworldly ecstasy; rather, it directed people back into the world, where their task was to do God's will in human affairs. Worship here was inevitably linked with the whole gamut of moral concerns in society—with social justice, with the right relations between nations and classes, with the protection of the weak.¹

Biblical worship is a two-way process: *God gives to us and we give to God*. Two independent personalities encounter one another. Paul insists in Acts 17:25 that our God 'is not served with human hands, as if he needed anything', and the word used here for 'serve' is *therapeuō*, a word never used of Christian worship. Yet it describes some forms of non-Christian worship perfectly. The basic meaning of the word is 'to take care of' (it is the word from which we derive such words as 'therapy' and 'therapeutic'). This is precisely what the Hare Krishna follower does in his life in the temple. Every morning the temple gods have to be taken reverently out of their 'beds' and put on their shelf in the temple. Food has to be offered to

them. They have to be washed. At night, they are put back in bed again. And throughout the day, the devotee spends a large part of this time quite literally *taking care of the gods*. This is one form of worship.

But such one-way worship is profoundly non-Christian. The worship of the God of Israel involves an interplay of *what God supplies* and *what we contribute*. God does not want the mechanical obedience of robots, following a prescribed pattern of unvarying service in an unthinking way. He wants to draw out of us something which is individual, creative, our own.

This is why the psalms speak so often of 'a new song'. The creative edge in worship, not just the tired reciting of acceptable forms, is vitally important. And it is why Revelation tells us that 'the glory and honour of the nations' will be brought into the heavenly city (Rev 21:26). Even in the direct presence of God, when worship reaches its eternal climax, human creative achievement can and must be blended into the great paean of praise.

HUMAN FREEDOM IN WORSHIPPING METHODS

So much has been taught down through the years, in Brethren circles, about the divine pattern for the construction of the tabernacle and the feasts of Jehovah, that we sometimes fail to notice the element of human freedom which God built in, right from the start, to the worship he had commanded. We must not focus so exclusively upon God's part in designing Old Testament worship that we ignore Israel's contribution. For one thing, although the materials used in the construction of the tabernacle are listed in detail, Exodus 25 makes it clear that these materials came together in an offering 'from each man whose heart prompts him to give'. In other words, God organized the materials once they were provided, but each of the human beings involved had the freedom to decide upon the part that he personally wanted to play. There is more freedom when men of skill are appointed (Ex 31) 'to engage in all kinds of craftsmanship': they have to produce the sacred objects exactly as God has directed, but room is left for their personal creativity, 'to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze'.

Most notably, although the furnishings of the tabernacle and the sacrifices to be offered are closely prescribed, the same is *not true* of the manner of worship. Did they sing? Did they dance? We know little of the style of those days, and the scriptures are no help to us. God left room for *methods* of worship to develop as culturally and historically appropriate.

When later in history the temple worship was established, we gain no sense from the scriptures that this was a bad thing—even though it

involved changes in the strict pentateuchal pattern of worship; even though it was David's personal idea, rather than a sudden command from God. And centuries later, the synagogue emerged spontaneously, changing the style of worship yet again, although God had given no new direction that this was to happen. Jesus used the synagogues as places of worship (and, for that matter, Herod's temple); and early Christian congregations patterned their worship and government on synagogue practices. There was obviously nothing wrong with the synagogue just because it was a human invention.

Perhaps, sometimes, we Brethren have been overly concerned with strict purity of practice. 'See that thou do all things according to the pattern shown thee in the mount' is a text which has often haunted our worship style. In the Darby-inspired quest for a totally, biblically pure fellowship, we have tried to find rules and patterns where the scripture actually leaves us free. (I grew up in an assembly, for instance, where the 'by-laws' included the idea that brethren and sisters should sit at opposite sides of the hall; that the bread should be passed literally from hand to hand, since putting it on a plate would be 'a symbol of Egypt'; and so on. Other assemblies have had laws about not permitting 'ministry' before the bread was broken, not permitting different brethren to give thanks individually for loaf and cup, never breaking the bread before a certain amount of time had elapsed in the service.)

MUSIC, MOVEMENT, SILENCE, AND WORSHIP

What has all this to do with the professed subject of this essay? Simply this: that music, movement and silence are all possible *methods* of worship, and if we want to determine their usefulness to us in worshipping God, scripture will not help us much directly. Scripture does not legislate about our methods; space is left for human freedom; the way to assess our methods is not to ask, 'But did they really do this in biblical times?'—but instead, 'Do these methods really help us achieve the purposes of worship?'

It is important to stress this point, since so many of the current crop of evangelical paperbacks arguing for or against the use of dance, drama, rock music and the arts in worship try to prove their case by listing all the places in the Bible where such activities are mentioned. The result is stalemate, because advocates of dance can point to a few verses that mention their speciality, and their opponents can point to thousands that don't; supporters of rock music can quote texts which refer to loud and rhythmical noises, and their opponents can point out that this is all Old Testament, and a ram's horn trumpet can't be compared to a Vox AC 30

anyway. The only clear conclusion from the biblical evidence—although it is a conclusion both sides seem to resist—is that the scriptures are supremely uninterested in the pros and cons of specific methods. The real question is what they achieve.

What *are* the purposes of worship? That is dealt with elsewhere in this volume. Here it will be enough to note that the key New Testament words for worship (*proskyneō*, *leitourgeō*, *latreuō*) combine three basic ideas: *affection*, *intelligent recognition of the authority* of the person worshipped, and *submission to serve*. In other words, the total response of the human personality to God: emotions, mind and will. Worship thus has three purposes: *release* of the emotions; *recognition* with the mind; and *resolve* of the will in gearing itself for fresh acts of service.

It is not difficult to think of historical cases of the distinguished use of music, movement and silence in worship. Music has been with the Christian church from the start, going right back to the early days when a perplexed Roman governor wrote to his emperor, 'They sing a hymn to Christ as a god.' Different kinds of movement have been important in worship in various cultures—from the ritual movements and symbolic actions of Catholic and Orthodox traditions, to the uninhibited self-expression through dance of some black denominations and Latin American Pentecostals. Silence was an important tool in the mystical tradition—Thomas A Kempis, for one, says a lot about it—as well as among Quakers and Quietists.

But do these methods—music, movement and silence—genuinely achieve the purposes of worship? And if so, in what forms? For there are serious questions which need to be asked. Isn't it possible that a wrong application of methods can introduce us to experiences which we fondly imagine to be worship—but are actually something quite different?

Music today raises the problem of contemporary rock. Is it a fitting style for the worship of God, or is it 'devil music', full of dangerous jungle rhythms? Aren't all these new choruses lamentably superficial, repulsively sickly, and sometimes downright misleading? While some are finding new avenues of worship through movement, and writing books with titles like *Praise Him in the Dance* and *Moving Prayer*, others are writing equally trenchantly that 'the dance has more potential for evil than anything else we do in Christian circles today'.²

But surely no one could object to *silence*? Well, perhaps. Ralph Martin points out that in the Old Testament 'praise involves the use of words audibly expressed. Silent prayer is not a Hebrew practice',³ and he cites Eli, who thought Hannah was drunk because her lips were moving but she was making no sound. 'I do not believe it is necessarily true that we are worshipping God when we make a lot of racket', wrote A W Tozer. 'But not infrequently worship is audible.'⁴

The few verses in the Bible which seem to speak about silence in worship (such as Hab 2:20) are actually not about worship at all, but set against the background of a law court—in which the guilty party remains silent because he has no defence to offer. (The same is true of that curious half hour of silence in Rev 8:1—silence speaks of judgement, not worship.) In the New Testament epistles, silence is mentioned only as a *restriction* upon participation in worship, not a means of worship in itself.

Taking all of this together, it would be possible to argue that the normative biblical picture of worship is of *people being compelled to speak*—of impulses of devotion that demand verbal expression, otherwise ‘the stones would immediately cry out’—and that an unscriptural emphasis upon silence will lead into an introverted, idiosyncratic mysticism which separates worshipper from worshipper and ends in the fanciful pursuit of an ‘inner light’ which is no more than a subjective fantasy.

And so the questions mount up. How do we tackle them? Here I want to do it by asking two questions. First: do these three possible worship methods actually achieve each of the purposes of worship—release, recognition and resolve? And, second: if they *do*, how should they be employed for maximum benefit? What is the distinctive contribution that each of the three can make?

RECOGNITION, RELEASE, RESOLVE

First, then, let us ask some questions about the purposes of worship. Do these three methods help us to achieve a *recognition* of God’s greatness? Do they affect our mental appreciation in worship?

Music obviously does. Teaching can often be much more effective when set to an insistent rhythm (‘Thirty days hath September’, ‘i before e except after c’). Jesus knew this secret, and scholars such as Joachim Jeremias have shown that distinct Aramaic rhythms lay behind the teaching Jesus passed on to his disciples. In the Old Testament, several of the psalms clearly served an educational function: recitations of the history of God’s mighty acts, such as Psalm 136, taught the young and reminded the old, all in the context of worship.

In the New Testament text there are several embedded passages (Eph 5:14, 1 Tim 3:16, Phil 2:6–11, 2 Tim 2:11–14, Jas 1:17) where it seems the writer has quoted a section from a current Christian hymn. Obviously, hymns were useful in helping people remember the key facts of the faith—and could sum them up better than the writer felt he could himself.

How does *movement* affect our recognition? First, participation in symbolic actions can make theoretical ideas more concrete, provoke moments of awareness and insight; this is the result of the symbolic act at the very heart of our worship:

Here, O my Lord, I see thee face to face;
 Here faith can touch and handle things unseen . . .

'No Gospel like this feast', we sing. For the physical action of taking bread and wine and passing it from hand to hand *makes actual* what would otherwise be merely an academic concept. Other kinds of movement and action might then have a similar, if less central, effect, in bringing home to our recognition some of the central truths of our relationship to God and one another.

But, second, movement in which we may not be involved personally, but merely watch as spectators (a performance of dance, for example), can also provoke recognition in a unique way. I have seen Springs Dance Company evoke the wonder of the resurrection unforgettably in a worship service, in a way that could not have been equalled verbally. Brian Edwards' critical book *Shall We Dance?* complains that dance and drama are inferior to the spoken word because they 'have generally to be interpreted'.⁵ This, it seems to me, is exactly wrong. Dance and drama can speak more immediately and powerfully, can provoke a more direct crisis of recognition, than words can manage.

What of silence? It has been a remarkable feature of history that churches with a worship style involving plenty of reflective silence (such as the Brethren and the Society of Friends) have typically produced thoughtful, careful people with a more stringent intellectual approach to faith than those reared in churches whose worship majors on noise and excitement, or predictable liturgy. Silence allows time for a whirlwind sequence of conflicting impressions to be analysed into its elements and sifted thoroughly.

So much for *recognition*. But there is also *release*. Here, again, all three methods have a contribution to make. Music, obviously—the emotional release of belting out 'Bold I approach the eternal throne . . .' is something we have all experienced. And movement—for watching a well-executed piece of dance, drama or mime can stir the emotions unforgettably. I can still remember examples I witnessed ten or fifteen years ago, although all other details of the service in which they featured have faded completely from my mind.

It is not natural for us to sit still at times of deep emotional experience. 'Let Israel rejoice in their Maker', urges Psalm 149, ' . . . let them praise his name with dancing'. Rosemary Budd argues, 'Our physical energies are a major element in our lives whether we recognize them or not . . . If we recognize our energies, we can harness them for great good.'⁶ Movement in worship can release emotions powerfully and effectively, because 'body language' affects our state of mind. It is no coincidence that emotion is often hard to detect in meetings where the ground rules dictate

two permissible positions—standing to sing and sitting for all else—with no variation contemplated.

And silence? Everyone who has ever been in love has known moments when words are inadequate and unnecessary: the wondering silence of two young lovers staring into one another's eyes, the companionable, trusting silence of a long-married couple who can almost communicate telepathically. Sometimes worship will touch these emotional heights. And a period of silence can deepen what would otherwise be a passing moment's impulse.

It has been suggested that speaking in tongues is really a regression to the pre-speech phase of infancy—when we make sounds, but they have no logical referent; we express ourselves with total freedom, unconstrained by the demands of grammar and vocabulary. To speak in tongues releases us to express what we could not otherwise; some emotions in worship defy confinement to normal vocabulary. Perhaps (especially for non-tongues speakers) silence can serve the same function.

Do music, movement and silence also help us with the *resolve* aim of worship? Music, it is easy to see, can be powerful in reinforcing decisions we need to make—as anyone can tell you who has been brought into the Kingdom during the singing of 'Just as I am'. Recently after I had spoken to a group of young people on a houseparty, a young musician present quietly played a song he had written himself, 'To be more like Jesus'. The atmosphere of worship as he finished was almost overpowering.

Music has often been useful in strengthening resolve in moments of crisis. Just before he and a group of his colleagues went out into a dangerous, costly mission, Geoffrey Bull records, one of them suddenly began to sing, 'King of my life I crown Thee now'. It was an unforgettable moment, and just what the group needed. Was there even an element of the same thing on the evening on which, Matthew tells us, 'when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives'?

Drama or dance can have the same impact in focusing decision. For our first evangelistic presentation at the Greenbelt Festival two years ago, the committee decided that after the preacher had finished, no music or spoken words would follow. Instead Geoffrey Stevenson would end with a silent mime challenging non-Christians to commitment—and the audience would leave with that unspoken appeal as their final memory. Over thirty people accepted Christ that evening.

Other kinds of symbolic movement—standing up, walking to the front, raising a hand—are often used in evangelism to signal commitment and offer a concrete chance to make up one's mind. Creatively used, movement can serve that kind of function in worship too.

After years of 'Just as I am', Billy Graham began to find that silence could be just as effective as music in bringing people to personal crises of

decision. Sometimes the breathless hush as people from all over the auditorium left their seats and filtered to the front could be even more compelling than a hymn. As in evangelism, so in worship. Leaving a space for people to make their own promises to God can be an effective thing to do. Often the stillness for several minutes at the end of an affecting worship service is an indication that people are having private dealings with God, all over the room. The worst thing to do at such a point would be to give out another chorus.

Used in the right way, then, music, movement and silence can all fulfil the three basic purposes of worship. Which leads to our second question. What is the right way? What limits do we set to the use of music, movement and silence in worship?

THE ROLE OF MUSIC

Music crops up often in scripture. The Old Testament mentions all sorts of instruments, both loud and soft, both percussive and otherwise. 'It can be assumed', historians tell us, 'that . . . the singing of the Psalms was always accompanied by musical instruments.'⁷

There were probably no musical instruments in use in the early church, but experimentation and creativity were encouraged. Tertullian tells us that all members were free to participate by words of scripture or 'songs of their own invention'. Ralph Martin believes that the 'spiritual songs' of Colossians 3:16 and Ephesians 5:19 were 'the result of immediate inspiration, as in the scene in 1 Corinthians 14:26 where improvised compositions . . . are brought to the assembly and used in worship. They may well have been no more than single-line statements . . .'⁸

Scholars have often debated the difference between 'psalms', 'hymns' and 'spiritual songs'. Most would agree that it is impossible to define these terms clearly. But it is certain that Paul uses them to indicate an enormously wide range of musical activity: employing the text of scripture, individual compositions, spur-of-the-moment improvisations, credal statements in musical form, personal songs of devotion.

Not all Christians have agreed that such an abundance of musical variation should be possible in the church. (Zwingli, for instance, wanted to abolish all congregational singing; Calvin was ill at ease with anything more than metrical psalms.) And in our own day we have witnessed the rise of a new, ersatz pop art form: rock music. Increasingly now the rhythms of rock are invading worship music, and the instruments associated with it—drums, bass guitars, synthesisers—are appearing in church services. Is this a phenomenon which should worry us?

John Blanchard's book *Pop Goes the Gospel* has no doubts. 'When the

beat overrides the other elements in a song the communication level is significantly changed to one which is primarily physical and often specifically sexual . . . the element of relentless beat in rock music increases the danger of a shallow, emotional, unthinking response . . . ' He quotes approvingly David Wilkerson's comment that 'I also have a sense, an inner knowledge, that the gentle Holy Spirit is not comfortable in the atmosphere this music creates.'⁹

It is hard to argue with comments like this. Blanchard is appealing to a psychological analysis of rock's effect which few psychologists would subscribe to, and at best is unproven; Wilkerson is arguing from inner intuition—and that is inaccessible to reasoned argument. There are really no musical, moral or psychological grounds for damning any particular musical form as 'inappropriate for Christians'. As Larry Norman pointed out, 'The sonic structure of music is basically neutral'.¹⁰ In the Middle Ages the interval of the augmented fourth was banned from church music, because it belonged to the Devil. But no-one bothers about using it today.

Arguments from the dissolute lifestyle, or occult interests, of certain rock stars are beside the point. The medium has been misused, but it has become the major form of cultural expression in music for the greater part of the British population this century; and its misuse by some people should not prevent us from employing it to create an authentically modern, genuine response in worship to God. Says Andrew Maries, musical director of St Michael le Belfry,

To begin to make moral judgements as to the worth of different styles of music and the moral calibre of composers and performers really does become a nonsense. So many of the great classical composers could hardly be considered committed Christians, and yet they produced masterpieces which reveal something of the meaning and glory of life. Their works are windows on eternity through which we may well witness God.¹¹

And yet—however much scripture encourages the *new song*—lively appreciation of *past tradition* always marks biblical worship too. The psalms were not abandoned in the early church. The antiphonal choir complexities of post-exilic worship were a new thing in Israel, but the music reflected the old songs of past centuries. There are dangers in a headlong rush into modernity; throwing out *Hymns of Faith* when we acquire *Songs of Fellowship* may turn out to be a premature move.

For one thing, the modern style of music encourages emotional expression and depth; that is its strength. It does *not* encourage intricate expression of truth, and it is vulnerable to mawkish sentimentality; that is its weakness. We need the strong hymns of previous ages too.

Also, rock music in society is often associated with showmanship, shallow excitement, and self-promotion. If it is to be recovered for use in

worship, it needs to be divorced from these tendencies. We have learned a great deal about how to do that in the last ten years. And blending the new with the old is the most effective way of reaping the benefits of the contemporary style, without losing the perspective of all we have learned about worshipping God from the past.

What can music do that other worship media can't? Music is a tremendously *communal* activity; it brings the church together as little else can. 'The first Christians thought of "hymns" as a means of mutual encouragement and challenge aimed horizontally at a group of fellow believers.'¹² And music provides a means of expression for the less articulate. It is no coincidence that most movements of the Holy Spirit among the oppressed and downtrodden have produced great music—from Negro spirituals to nineteenth century Salvation Army creativity to the harmonies of unschooled Welsh miners. No method is *essential* to worship. But music would be very difficult to do without.

MOVEMENT: THE CHRISTIAN VIEW OF THE BODY

Early in its history, the Christian church was strongly influenced by Greek philosophy. And in some respects the malign influences of Platonic thought have tended to cling around Christianity ever since. This is especially true of the attitude Christians have often adopted to the human body.

For Plato and his popularisers, the body was basically evil, the loathsome prison of the pure and valuable spirit. Growth in spirituality comes as we de-emphasize the material realm and concentrate on the life of the spirit instead.

The Hebrew view of the body never made this sharp distinction of the 'spiritual bit' and 'physical bit' in man. 'Don't you know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit . . .?' inquires Paul. 'So use your bodies for God's glory' (1 Cor 6:19–20 GNB). At creation 'man *became* a living soul' (Gen 2:7 AV)—the soul is not a detachable possession which man was given along with a body, but inextricably involved with the body as part of the complex reality of being human.

But the Greek distaste for the body eventually started to influence Christian thinkers, and anchorites, flagellants, hermits began to pride themselves on their mistreatment of their bodies. Origen as a young man tried to prove his zeal by castrating himself (a deed he later regretted). And the Platonic attitude in less extreme forms has never quite left Christianity alone since, as Macaulay and Barrs¹³ have demonstrated.

The Platonic attitude to the body can produce two very different approaches to worship: first, a horror of anything fleshly, and thus a fear

of undue movement, physical expressions, dance and drama; second, a struggle to release the spirit from the body. Plato said that this could happen through 'divine madness', and in Christian circles this has often led to the attempt to develop 'the things of the Spirit' by abandoning the body to ecstasy. Neither of these responses are Christian.

The Hebrew attitude to the body, however, leads to a recognition of three facts. First, that a body has a place in worship, as a valuable part of creation. Elisabeth Elliot claims,

More spiritual failure is due, I believe, to this cause than to any other: the failure to recognize this living body as having anything to do with worship or holy sacrifice.¹⁴

'For far too long', complains Rosemary Budd, 'many of us as Christians . . . have found it terrible difficult to understand ourselves as bodies, a physical expression of personality in a physical universe. We've tried to pray without bodies.'¹⁵

Second, the Hebrew attitude recognises that the body is not a channel of sacredness—the mistake made by the Canaanite 'sacred sexuality' religions we examined earlier. God communicates primarily through rationality, through propositional statements, and while sensitive use of the body's movements in worship can assist our understanding, it cannot become a substitute for rational appreciation of God.

Third, the Hebrew picture demands that we also recognize the fallenness of the body. 'I see another law at work in the members of my body', writes Paul, 'waging war against the law of my mind' (Rom 7:23). The possibility of evil is always there. Which is not a reason for shunning the body's potential in worship—but simply being careful to exploit it watchfully and honestly.

It is true that New Testament worship did not include dancing, as Herbert Carson points out in his book *Hallelujah!* Carson asks why the church eschewed such a powerful means of communication, since it was known and practised in the Roman world. But earlier in his discussion he has supplied his own answer: dance was a practice exclusively related to pagan ecstatic religion; there was not much use of it for other purposes. For the Christians to have incorporated it, at that stage, would have been unthinkable.

But dance and movement played an important part in Old Testament worship. Or did they? In his book *Shall We Dance?*, Brian Edwards has bravely—if perversely—tried to prove that they did not. He claims that most of the words commonly translated 'dance' can mean something else, that when dancing is mentioned it is not as a part of worship (or, as in Jud 21:21, it reflects a decadent form of worship), and that David's famous dancing before the ark in 2 Samuel 6:14 was 'exceptional', 'the spontaneous overflow of an excited worshipper'.¹⁶

This argument will not do. Dance was a common feature of Oriental festivals, and it would have been strange—strange enough to require comment somewhere—if the nation of Israel had been markedly different from all their neighbours. The Hebrew word for ‘festival’ comes from the verb *hagag*, to dance. Edwards suggests that David did not exactly *dance*—“Skip for joy” would be more accurate—but 2 Samuel 6:13–14 is clearly describing a set of deliberate ceremonial procedures, not a momentary burst of unscheduled enthusiasm.

Psalms 149:3 and 150:4 both exhort worshippers to ‘praise his name with dancing’. Edwards counters that the verses ‘do not set out to discuss the content of Jewish worship in the temple; they simply claim that everything in the life of God’s people, from dancing to war, should be to the honour of God’.¹⁷ If so, one would expect both psalms to mention a wide range of human social activities which could be unexpected avenues for the praise of God. But they do not. They simply elaborate a list of ceremonial implements of praise—the trumpet, the tambourine, the harp . . . The obvious conclusion, for an unprejudiced reader, is that dancing is just one item in a list of recognised worshipping methods.

The use of physical movement opens up many possibilities for worship: artistic presentations to add a dimension to a service; free participatory spontaneous movement; physical positioning and symbolic gesture. We must guard against mentally reducing the list to a few obvious, well-worn routines. For instance, many house church people who take pride in having rediscovered dance in worship have really gone no further than the curious, stylized, self-conscious little dance step cruelly christened by onlookers ‘the charismatic hop’. Freedom has frozen into liturgy. We Brethren know all about that.

Again, we must guard against becoming too pompous about it all. Surely I’m not the only one who finds Rosemary Budd unduly fanciful when she writes that hands held under a Bible ‘are a symbol of receptivity to its contents’, or unduly programmatic when she advises us practically: ‘Your pelvis is very important. Tuck your tail in and check that the lumbar vertebrae are bent neither forwards nor backwards.’¹⁸ It sounds faintly ludicrous. But there again, if the lumbar vertebrae are part of a good God’s creation, perhaps they have their own humble part to play in praising him.

SILENCE AND ITS USES

Another result of Platonism, through the ideas of Dionysius the Areopagite, has been the *via negativa*, the ‘negative way’ of acquiring spiritual knowledge which has characterized Christian mysticism for many centuries.

Spiritual growth, according to Dionysius, does not come through understanding who God is and what his blessings are. Rather, we must remove all positive

statements about God until we are left with silence—the bare communion of the soul with God.¹⁹

St John of the Cross wrote about the experience in these words:

The man who truly there has come
 Of his own self must shed the guise;
 Of all he knew before the sum
 Seems far beneath that wondrous prize:
 And in this lore he grows so wise
 That he remains, though knowing naught,
 Transcending knowledge with his thought.²⁰

Evangelicals disagree about how to assess this kind of spirituality. But all agree that, first, it is the province of a few rare people, rather than a practical possibility for every Christian; second, even if genuine, it comes so close to the experience of mystics in other religions (Sufis, for instance, or the writers of the Upanishads) that it can lead to religious relativism and heresy.

Perhaps the reason that the scriptures pay so little attention to *silence* is that the silence of mysticism can be a dangerous route to travel. Speech is more characteristic of a religion in which 'it is in the nature of God to speak. The second Person of the Holy Trinity is called the *Word*.²¹ Edmund Clowney insists, 'Christian meditation, therefore, looks to Jesus. It treasures his words and remembers his deeds. The vision of God is not a mystical achievement requiring prodigious feats of trance-like concentration.²²

And so the scriptures have little time for the kind of silence which blanks out normal thought processes. This does not mean, however, that *all* silence is necessarily a bad thing. Periods of silence can heighten thought, as well as depressing it; can reinforce ideas, as well as obliterating them. Silence in worship can legitimately achieve three useful objectives at least.

First, it prevents worship becoming a 'spectator sport'. It suddenly removes from the worshipper all outside stimulus, and throws him in upon his own resources; for a short while now he will be unable to coast along as a passive observer of prayers, hymns and readings offered for his benefit by other people. Silence *personalizes* worship.

Second, paradoxically enough, silence draws worshippers closer together. We are never so aware of one another as when a group of people sit together without talking. (For example, watch a carriage full of Underground passengers when the train stops between stations!) A shared, almost palpable silence expresses deep communion more eloquently than the singing of a dozen hymns.

Third, silence can change the direction of worship. In the stillness it is

possible for worshippers to listen more closely to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, to hear him saying something unexpected which would otherwise be missed in the noisy forward thrust of an all-action period of worship. As a result, the worship time can have quite a different outcome to what anyone present might initially have expected.

Of course, silence can be misused. There is a fine line between the reverential silence of worshippers awed at the presence of God's holiness, and the bored silence of a bunch of Brethren in one more standard 'morning meeting' with nothing new to say. Silence, like any other method, can be overused and cheapened.

But it is good that it should be so! God has not given us strict and specific instructions about how much of which elements to incorporate at which moments in order to produce an approved worship service. Instead, he has left it up to us. The methods we use are at our discretion. And that is the awful joy, the responsibility, the delight and freedom of worshipping in Spirit and in truth.

Sometimes the silences of scripture are a thoroughly good thing.

Footnotes

- 1 Peter Berger, 'Cakes for the Queen of Heaven', in *Facing Up to Modernity* (Penguin 1977) 243, 245–246.
- 2 Brian Edwards, *Shall We Dance?* (Evangelical Press 1984) 98.
- 3 Ralph Martin, *The Worship of God* (Eerdmans 1982) 20.
- 4 A W Tozer, *Whatever Happened to Worship?* (STL/Kingsway 1986) 16.
- 5 Edwards, *op cit*, 88–89.
- 6 Rosemary Budd, *Moving Prayer: An Introduction to a Deeper Devotional Life* (MARC 1987) 42.
- 7 K H Bartels in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Vol 3 (Paternoster 1978) article 'Song'.
- 8 Martin, *op cit*, 53.
- 9 John Blanchard, *Pop Goes the Gospel* (Evangelical Press 1983) 17 and 133. Odd to find a non-charismatic Calvinist like Blanchard—who criticizes advocates of rock music for their woolly subjectivism—using evidence of this kind.
- 10 From the sleeve notes of his *Solid Rock* albums.
- 11 Andrew Maries, *One Heart, One Voice: the rich and varied resource of music in worship* (Hodder 1986) 98.
- 12 Martin, *op cit*, 53.
- 13 Ranald Macaulay and Jerram Barrs, *Christianity with a Human Face* (IVP 1979).
- 14 Elisabeth Elliot, *Discipline—the Glad Surrender* (Pickering 1983) 45.
- 15 Budd, *op cit*, 42.
- 16 Edwards, *op cit*, 57.
- 17 *Ibid*, 61.
- 18 Budd, *op cit* 79 and 46.

- 19 Macaulay and Barrs, *op cit*, 42.
- 20 'Verses written after an ecstasy of high exaltation', in *St John of the Cross: Poems* tr Roy Campbell (Penguin Classics 1968), 47–48.
- 21 A W Tozer, *The Pursuit of God* (Aslan Paperbacks 1968) 75.
- 22 Edmund Clowney, *Christian Meditation* (IVP 1980) 23.