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The New Worship

Reviewed by Wilbur W. Brannon

You enter the sanctuary and are met by a smiling greeter who hands you the program of the service about to begin. As you sit down you become conscious of the clear notes from a piano with appealing rhythmic patterns lifting a contemporary theme. Your mind begins to reflect on the words implied by the music. Almost without noticing when the transition is taking place the notes melt into the vibrato fullness of an organ. An orchestra soon joins the medley of themes around "Jesus in My Heart."

Suddenly you are aware the choir is in place. And with majestic grandeur they sing, "O Most High, Almighty God," the call to worship. As everybody stands we sing with the choir: "Oh, the Glory of Your Presence," "Welcome Into This Place," "We Applaud Your Greatness," "Sing to God," "Have Your Way, Lord." The atmosphere is now subdued. We have passed from the outer to the inner court and are ushered in the Holy of Holies with the pastor's prayer.

The choir's anthem has a strong music score with equally powerful text, "What a Mighty God We Serve!" The congregation is then led in singing a standard hymn, "Praise the Lord! Ye Heavens, Adore Him."

Then follows a video introduction to offering time featuring a family being interviewed in their home. They are testifying about the blessings they receive by tithing. With lighting and music a smooth transition brings us into a live drama on "Titha-litis," a disease afflicting folks that find it hard to tithe. Then the pastor offers a low key, personalized message on tithing with

humor and persuasive appeal. We are dismissed with a feeling we have been in the presence of God, heard the voice of God, and challenged to obey God in the stewardship of our life. The closing is an invitation to accept the Lordship of Christ publicly by coming forward.

I attended the "free-flowing" service just described and it is an example of "The New Worship" Barry Liesch describes in his book of the same title. There is a mixture of contemporary praise and worship choruses with standard hymns carrying us forward from the outer to the inner courts and finally into the Holy of Holies where God and his people meet in a life-transforming encounter. There is no tension between worship and evangelism. Nor is worship for its own sake compromised to facilitate bringing the non-Christian into a personal life-changing experience with the God being worshipped. Liesch's ideal is to blend elements from the liturgical, thematic, and flowing praise formats.

A pastor would do well to read "Part Two" first which deals with the current issues confronting the local church. It deals with worship philosophy, the worship/evangelism dichotomy, and tensions over worship styles. The musician as worship leader would prefer starting with "Part One." Techniques of music performance and transitioning are discussed. The author deals with the differences between Psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs; designing services; and methodologies to make transitions and inspire the people. A helpful summary of the entire book is given in an appendix. There the reader gets a feel of the author's direction and helps to better get hold of the substance of the first two parts of the book.

The book is written primarily for the benefit of performance-oriented worship leadership. It calls for carefully planned and executed movement and transitions toward an envisioned purpose. To achieve the goals of the "New Worship," the pastor and worship leader must enjoy a harmonious relationship and have similar views of how the people are to worship.

It is assumed that anything *new* must be introduced to the congregation with care and be consistent with the culture of the people. Everyone can not fit into the same mold, but without forcing the process, people of various tastes can learn to appreciate diversity among their fellow believers. Forcing radical changes without proper sensitivity could cause harm to a "weaker" member unnecessarily. But to bring all the people

along in a way that shows every person is valued can help build bridges to different tastes and spiritual needs.

Liesch suggests ways of refreshing old ways of doing things in worship. His creative approaches include strategic practical applications of new techniques available to us. Theological coherence is not sacrificed for musical "effects" or methodological innovation. There is proper recognition of the need to incorporate the congregation in the "work" of worship.

The author helps define the values of worship and evangelism without divorcing one from the other. Liesch approaches the tensions of musical style utilizing the multilingual model of Acts 2. He recognizes the music dialects that are recognizable by all and appreciated in various degrees of acceptance. The matter of "diversity training" is met head-on and given a good resolution.

We have made our excuses for not attempting to worship in a way that communicates to those we are commissioned to reach. Liesch notes: were the Gentiles more reluctant to receive the gospel than the Jews were reluctant to preach to them? Maybe the greater conversion *was* in Peter than in Cornelius! (cf. P. 183).

There is not one "established, sacred style" of worship for Liesch, just as the King James Version is not the only translation for today's Christians to rely on. There is nothing in the New Testament to force any particular style on a group of people that is inconsistent with their culture. He appeals for balance and a blending of various kinds of music. He cautions against instituting significant change in worship unless the church is experiencing comparative calm in the other aspects of its life. The author submits biblical arguments for variety. Congregations have the freedom to make a choice in the style of their worship. In his final chapter he appeals to seminaries. Musicians, especially those called on to assist in worship leadership, he insists, must have a strong theological foundation for their ministry. Seminaries should equip both musicians and preachers to speak and understand a common language shared in their traditions and scripture for effective and biblical worship. This volume is an excellent tool in the hands of a church pastor and staff who have "Church Growth" Eyes. Behind everything presented in these pages is the strong assumption that winning the lost is the business of the church. The church worshipping provides the atmosphere and often the occasion for drawing those alienated from

God into His reconciling presence.

Reviewer

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