



Faith and Society Files: Real Life Worship Files - Introduction

Does what happens at Sunday worship connect with life in the real world? For many people the answer to that question is often 'no'. This leaflet introduces a series of worship files published by our Union to help churches relate their worship to the realities of contemporary living.

'How are you this morning?'
'I feel awful and scared and
lonely.'
'God bless you. Praise the
Lord!'

Several centuries before Christ, the land of Israel was overrun by the might of a hostile empire. Thousands of Abraham's descendents were taken prisoner to the empire's capital, Babylon, where their faith – like their beloved temple in Jerusalem – lay in ruins. How were the people of God to worship when their world had fallen apart? It was a question these people asked of themselves and of God.

*By the rivers of Babylon we sat down
and wept
When we remembered Zion
There on the poplars we hung our
harps,
For there our captors asked us for
songs,*

*Our tormentors demanded songs of joy:
They said 'sing us one of the songs of
Zion!'
How can we sing the songs of the LORD
while in a strange land?*

How can we sing the Lord's songs? 'Not very well' is the answer suggested by the way the hymn ends! But this same question is being asked by growing numbers in our churches today. The world so beloved by God is facing a crisis. Every generation has had its fair share of doom and gloom merchants, and each generation's prophets of doom have regarded themselves as different to their predecessors. But the advent of nuclear technology combined with the unspeakable horrors of global warming are evidence enough that in the twentieth century, the planet became overtly and terrifyingly mortal,

and the human race itself fragile and finite. The economic imbalance of our planet spells human suffering on a scale that is set to rise with the temperature and the sea level, causing misery for millions in the century ahead. The world is not flowing with milk and honey. It is running out of oil and water. Its inhabitants are undernourished and overheated, and their governments seem unconcerned with fairness. The world is in a crisis, and it looks nothing like anyone's promised land.

So how can we sing the songs of the Lord in this strange land? Our western churches may be tempted to spirit themselves out of the reality of our world, not wanting to encounter depressing facts and figures that seem to deny the goodness of God. Our focus in worship would be upbeat and relevant, aiming to meet the felt needs of those fortunate enough to attend. Prematurely lost in wonder, love and praise, ignoring the truth about the world into which we are sent, we would display the insanity pictured in the myth of Emperor Nero, who was said to have played the fiddle while Rome burned about around him. We may be tempted to sing the Lord's song, while refusing to accept that we are in a strange land. But growing numbers it seems, are becoming dissatisfied with such an experience of worship.

On the other hand, if we are determined to face the stark realities of our world, we are prone to an opposite temptation. We might be tempted to try to fix the world, to make the world's problems our primary focus, so that God can then either be grateful for our efforts, or recruited to assist us. We might then use Scripture, worship resources and any other means at our disposal to engage in a well-meaning

quest to be 'political'. The shape of worship will be determined, not by a vision of God, but by the problems of our world. We may grasp that we are in the 'strange land' of injustice, but the songs we sing would no longer be 'the LORD's songs'.

Given the dangers of withdrawal on the one hand, and activism on the other, we may be tempted to hang up our harps, and abandon worship altogether. But the pain felt by those who had been taken captive to Babylon was a pain that has echoed throughout the centuries for all the descendants of Abraham and for all who share his faith today.

The pain is not exclusively political or theoretical. It is painful because it is personal. For example, when our own most personal experience is one of grief, the dangers of withdrawal and activism remain present in our worship. We can try to withdraw from our pain by escapism, spiriting ourselves into a world where all is well. There is no room in such worship for the biblical practices of lament, and our worship might simply force us to chase prematurely upbeat feelings to compensate for our pain without dealing with it. We would be singing the Lord's song without accepting that we are in a strange land. On the other hand, we might accept our grief, accept that we are in a strange land, but fail to sing the Lord's song. That is, we might adopt pious self-help strategies to try to bring ourselves to the wholeness that we know *should* be the fruit of worship.

Real Life Worship is an initiative that has been set up to address these questions of how our worship takes seriously our belief in a saving God of love and justice, and our situation in a broken world. It is an attempt to

encourage Baptist churches towards a worship that engages every aspect of our humanness: our personal, physical, relational, political being. Embracing rather than ignoring the harsh realities and difficult ethical questions of the early twenty first century, we nevertheless worship God in hope of transformation for ourselves, our churches and our world.

Part of the *Real Life Worship* initiative is to explore Baptist ways of worshipping, particularly different elements of a Baptist service of worship. The *Worship Files* prepared along with this introduction address the elements of worship directly, saying something about the importance, the meaning and the potential effects of the different dimensions that shape the worshipping life of our churches. Each file explores a particular aspect of Baptist worship and offers both thoughtful reflection and practical guidelines that encourage us on our quest to 'sing the LORD's song in a strange land.'

*'Take it to the foot of the cross
and bathe it in the blood of the
lamb.'*

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