

## IGNORE THE TOUR GUIDES, IF YOU CAN

Gray Rinehart

The first year we moved to the Research Triangle area, we went to a few pretty good concerts—local bands, obscure enough that few of them even have names beyond the venues in which they play. The shows were well rehearsed, and the bands played well: good musicianship, fine stage presence, sometimes powerful voices. The audiences reacted positively; we clapped in time with the music, sang along where we could, and applauded when it was appropriate. Our responses were polite and respectful, if not enthusiastic.

The only problem was, these weren't concert events. They were worship services.

To get an idea of why this bothered me, imagine that you've gone to an important exhibit at your favorite museum. It could be the Museum of Modern Art, the NASCAR Museum, or the Hall of Fame of your favorite sport. It's an exhibit you've wanted to see for some time, and you're finally there. To make sure everyone gets the most out of the experience, the museum assigns you to a group with a tour guide. Your tour guide is smart, sharp, and professional, but every so often—when you're in the middle of studying a display or reading a placard—your tour guide waves his hands and shouts, "Look at me! Look at me!"

Would that enhance, or detract from, your museum experience?

That's the best word picture I've been able to think of to describe how distracting it is for a musician, in the middle of a praise song (and especially a song everyone is singing), to launch into a long solo.

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My family and I attended many different worship services after our move from Virginia to North Carolina, because we needed to find a new church. (This is one way the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has something of an advantage over evangelical denominations: the "church search" for them is a matter of determining which ward they live in and attending that particular church, rather than trying out different churches to see where they might best serve.) What we found, in most of the contemporary churches we visited, was that the preaching was excellent—Bible-based and relevant to today's world—and the music was near-professional quality.

But that near-professional quality, more often than not, turned out to be a problem when the music actually distracted from the worship experience. Not that poor music would have been better, by any means: off-key singing, out-of-tune playing, and poor sound would have been much worse. But most

of the church bands were distracting because they focused attention on the music and the performers rather than on God.

How does a praise band, formed to lead the congregation in worship, become the center of attention? How do singers become vocalists vying for the congregation's attention instead of leaders helping the congregation to sing the songs?

It is, I believe, a natural human tendency to want to be recognized and appreciated for whatever form of expertise we have. And we may convince ourselves, if we believe our talents to be gifts of God, that the applause after a song is somehow directed at God rather than at us. But the human ego still appreciates it, and so the temptation to grandstand is very strong. In my mother's choir in South Carolina, many years ago, she kept a tight rein on all of us and reminded us that our goal was harmony, not to be heard as individuals. And in the worship band I played in when we lived in Virginia, we reminded ourselves quite often that our role was to point the congregation to God—to enhance their worship experience—not to draw attention to ourselves.

It is important to remember that Scriptural descriptions of Heaven feature groups giving praise, not individuals. A "multitude of the Heavenly host" appeared to the shepherds, not a single angel praising God (Luke 2:13); the four living creatures around the throne cry "Holy, Holy, Holy" together, and the twenty-four elders respond together (Revelation 4). That is not to say that individual praise has no place and no merit; we have the evidence of many passages to prove that God hears even a single voice. "I will call upon the LORD" (Psalm 18); "I will sing and give praise" (Psalm 57); "I will sing a new song" (Psalm 144). But corporate worship should be cooperative: done all together, "decently and in order" (1 Corinthians 14:40). Solos, duets, and instrumentals have their places, but as special musical gifts to God and the congregation rather than intrusions when all the congregants are worshipping together.

Yet almost all of the worship bands I saw in those months of attending different churches made frequent attempts to show off through solos—vocal, guitar, saxophone, or whatever—right in the middle of one song or the other (and not always where the composer had written a bridge). I was treated to competent solos by drummers, bassists, guitarists, horn players, and yes, singers, all conducted in such a way that they summarily yanked me right out of the worship experience. They were tour guides yelling, "Look at me!" Because they were so forceful and so obnoxious, it was nearly impossible to ignore them—and so, nearly impossible to keep focused on God.

Does this indicate a general shift toward performing rather than leading worship? I admit that this phenomenon may be less widespread than I think, but it still seems that some people may enjoy being entertained in church instead of being engaged in worship. Being entertained is certainly easier, but

even in that case the entertainers have a responsibility to be gracious toward the audience.

For the worship leader, and especially the very talented worship leader, there is a distinction between relaxing into their own personal worship experience—which may include long solos offering up musical praise to God—and remaining conscious of the duty they accepted to lead the worshippers in the group setting. Too far in one direction and the other suffers, but the proper choice would seem to be always in favor of the congregation rather than the worship leader or worship team.

Consider that the worship experience is traditionally known as a worship service, and that to be a "minister" is (from the Latin) to be a "servant." We may ask, then, to whose service does the worship service refer? Does it refer to the ministers' and musicians' and others' service to the congregation? Perhaps, partly, but it seems that a better understanding is that it refers to the entire congregation's (including its leaders') service to God. It is shared service, in which everyone reaches upward to God, focuses on His presence, and tries to understand His will.

Some reach that worship plateau best by deep and meaningful prayer, led from the pulpit; some by liturgical responses taken from the Scriptures; some by reciting creeds and prayers handed down from the church fathers. Some reach that plateau best by singing the great hymns of the faith, with their layers upon layers of deep meaning; some by singing familiar praise choruses, each repetition like a step on Jacob's ladder (Genesis 28); and some by listening for the "still, small voice" (1 Kings 19:12) in a gentle musical interlude. The worship service, conducted by the pastor and musicians and singers and supported by the greeters and ushers and audiovisual technicians, should provide as much as possible the environment the congregation needs to "bring the sacrifice of praise into the house of the LORD" (Jeremiah 33:11). They should avoid, whenever possible, guiding the congregants to the plateau and then knocking them back down the path with their own attention-stealing antics.

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We think of Heavenly choirs, not heavenly soloists, and likewise our terrestrial worship teams should do all they can to bring every member of their congregations into a common worship activity. If they are going to be our tour guides, they should point us to what's important—and otherwise, stay in the background.

I know from experience that this is not as easy as it sounds, and I write that admonition again in first person: If I am going to be a tour guide, I should point to what's important—and otherwise, stay in the background.

In late 2008, the Music Director at North Cary Baptist Church asked me to take over as the worship leader, so in January 2009 I got a new opportunity to put into practice what I've written about here. This role is much more

visible even than my previous turn in a worship band, and I struggle weekly to reflect and transmit as much of God's light as I can—and to remain personally as unobtrusive as possible. I am afraid that I fail more often than I succeed.

Maybe I'm being too harsh—too critical of myself, and of those worship bands who are well-appreciated by the churches in which they perform. Undoubtedly they take their roles as seriously as I do mine, and presumably they don't think they are distracting their congregation and keeping them from worship. But this seems to be an age in which worship is more entertainment than effort, when "perform" and "audience" are often more accurate terms than "serve" and "congregation."

Too many of us come together to "praise the LORD" not because the LORD is great and "worthy to be praised" (Samuel 22:4, Psalm 18:3), but because we need to feel good—to get that emotional high in order to make it through the coming week. We do not bring the "sacrifice" of praise, because the very word "sacrifice" reminds us that we have to give up something—and what we have to give up is our pride, our illusions, our very selves. And so, too often, those of us who are trying to lead and guide the worship experience call undue attention to ourselves.

Please ignore us, if you can.

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