

FINDING REVERENCE IN WORSHIP

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Reverence, peace and quiet are in short supply in most of our churches today – or, at least, where they are found, the church for the most part seems to be declining. (Wow! That’s a generalisation, I know. And yet, in my experience, it is true). Many older people bemoan the loss of the old sacred ‘hush’ before the service, when heads would bow and people would prepare themselves to worship God. Today, however, its like a cattle market. Everybody is welcoming one another and exchanging the latest news. The church is a place of tremendous hubbub. Over the years I have sought to turn the tide, but to no avail. The organ may play or the worship group may lead in some gentle pre-service songs, but all that happens is that people speak even more loudly to one another. At one stage I used to invite a deacon to call the congregation to worship – or should I say to ‘order’ – by reading a few verses from a Psalm or some other appropriate Scripture, before inviting the congregation to prepare themselves for worship. But in a sizeable congregation with lots of young families, this no longer seems to work. Nor does it help that most people seem to arrive either just on time or a couple of minutes after the beginning of worship. But, the question arises, are we right in wanting reverence, peace and quiet in our worship? One of the chief Old Testament words for praise means ‘to make a noise’. There is no Biblical basis for equating ‘worshipful’ worship with ‘quiet’ worship. Indeed, we are told that when Nehemiah led the people of God in worship, the joy of Jerusalem was heard in all the surrounding countryside (Neh 12.43). Similarly in the Book of Revelation, the worship of heaven sometimes seems more like an FA cup final than many a conventional church service (see, for instance, Rev 19.1). Maybe those who are critical of ‘happy clappy’ worship need to take note of John Wesley’s exhortation to the early Methodists: “Sing lustily and with a good courage... Beware of singing as if you were half-dead, or half-asleep; but lift up your voice with strength. Be no more afraid of your voice now, nor more ashamed of its being heard, than when you sang the songs of Satan”. Provided that our focus is truly upon God, then there is surely nothing wrong with enthusiasm. And yet, it seems to me that there is a place for peace and quiet within a service of worship. There are times when we need to ‘be still’ to sense the presence of God. Such stillness may be hard to gain at the beginning of worship – but as the service develops, there will be places where quiet reflective prayer is appropriate, and where a gentle worship song best expresses the desire of the people of God, not least as we gather around the Lord’s Table. It is surely a matter of balance – there are times when worship demands that we make God a ‘celebrity’, and with all that that implies; but there are also times when worship is mixed with awe, and tears and not smiles are the order of the moment..

Paul Beasley-Murray