



Paul's Blog

Flow – Minimize the Distractions on the Journey of Worship

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Flow – Minimize the Distractions on the Journey of Worship

by Paul Baloché

Rivers love the sea. Constantly on the move, there is not much that will stop them from their persistent drive toward the goal. One of the few reasons a river will stop its journey to the sea is when something gets in the way. Whether it's a mass of land, a manmade dam, or a natural change in the landscape, something stops the flow. The worship of a congregation can be seen like a river driving toward the sea of communion with God. When the flow is there, the congregation may be unaware. When it's not there, just about everyone can feel it – the current is random, and people feel as if they are being led from one rock island of guitar chords and praise lyrics to the next.

For me, flow is simply minimizing the distractions. How can we remove the things that are impeding the natural, organic flow in an authentic spiritual journey? So in other words, we're striving for a natural flow, like a river would flow, like healthy plumbing would flow. We are forecasting potential distractions or potential places where things might get plugged up. This is something that must be thought out and planned, and that is one reason many of us avoid this subject. We are trying to produce a 20-minute spiritual journey, and yet we don't want it to feel like it's being produced. So it's a tricky, fine line.

Yet to avoid this altogether can be a big mistake. Without a sense of flow and the art that goes into fostering a spiritual journey, we are not using our skills to their greatest ability. And worse, we may be leading people into a distracted, disruptive singsong session that comes before the real show – the sermon. We want to try to create more of a seamless flow where the music, prayers, perhaps a brief Scripture, all of those things help create a more continuous flow.

Pay Attention

Again, our goal is to eliminate as many distractions as possible, and through the vehicle of music, prayers and Scripture, make it easy for people to focus and connect with the Lord. So, how do we do it? It's never something we can reduce to a formula, but there are principles we can use to guide us. One of those is simply, pay attention. When we participate in worship, we have the opportunity to learn. When we are being led, we can join in the worship service, but for the sake of our job skills we can also take note.

If you don't want to sit and analyze it right in the service, cannibalize the moment so to speak, pull out your notebook while you're sitting in the parking lot and jot down when you felt – pinpoint what the leader did and what response it provoked in you. Maybe they used a very gentle scriptural encouragement before moving on to the next song. If it moved you, give it a slot on your tool belt.

Be Mindful

The pay attention principle applies, too, in our set design. When deciding how the flow of your service will go, it's important to be prayerfully mindful of the moment. There's no one-size-fits-all, and again, there's no formula. But before we start putting down songs, it's important to ask ourselves who the people are we are going to minister to, what their denominational backgrounds are, what's the demographic?

Like me, you probably don't have one single age or ethnic group in your community. Of course, you might approach a Wednesday night of worship differently than you would a Sunday morning. The whole idea is to forecast or imagine ahead of time who's going to be there and then prayerfully consider what songs would overlap some of these groups. As far as flow is concerned, it's important to find trust as soon as possible.

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One way to quickly connect is to pick a song that is pretty familiar to most of those present. You may be tired of a certain song, but it's important to immediately establish a level of trust with the people you are leading and getting them singing helps to do that. And remember, as opposed to thinking, my goal is to get through four songs without a train wreck, your goal, using the tools you have cultivated, is to create an environment that makes it easy for people to connect with the Lord.

The Plot

It has been said that the old charismatic liturgy for worship songs was three fast ones and three slow ones. But we have to be careful with that; it's easy to get stuck in a rut. Because we're leading worship every single week at the same church, it's important to look for our patterns and mix it up a little bit. So sometimes I will start off with a very up-tempo, celebratory gathering type song. Other times I'll start with a very traditional hymn that everybody knows. But whatever I do, I want it to be something that immediately engages people.

The only danger of leading fast songs right at the front, every single time is that, many times, people will only do what you expect of them, for your sake. They will clap and sing, but they may not engage with God. They just kind of do it out of respect for the worship leader. There are times when a mid-tempo opening song will give people a chance to get focused. Then I'll often let our second song be more up-tempo. It's important to let people to connect in worship before we put a heavy expectation on them to produce an outward external behavior. And we always want the hand clapping and dancing to be before the Lord, not before us as worship leaders.

This also takes some of the pressure off of us to be the bearers of a mighty worship experience. It is the connection and engagement with God that will make the worship service mighty, not my ability to start like a racehorse out of the gates every time. Sometimes we tend to act like a fictitious superhero called Worshipman (or Worshipwoman). We step into a phone booth (the greenroom) and we come out with our cape on and we yell out, "Good morning everybody! Praise the Lord! Hallelujah!" Our job is to bring something that feels real and authentic and avoid the histrionics.

It is good if we have the mentality of being a host, inviting people into our home, then our initial promptings will be much more natural. We are constantly striving to be comfortable and to be real because that sets a tone for our community to be real.

The Audible

Of course there is a time for excitement. That is part of worship – celebrating God with all our hearts. In working our services, we should have a sense in our minds of the entire journey. We can even program spontaneity. I find it helpful to imagine, "Ok maybe I'll share this Scripture here right before we start, and maybe the piano player will start just noodling in the key of the first song as I read a Scripture. Maybe I'll just speak the words of the first verse of the song, and then we'll begin the song at the chorus."

So there is that balance of having a plan and also a bit of planned, potential unstructured moments. For example, we could think if there was going to be a moment in the set where we would linger just a little bit, it would probably be between songs three and four. We could imagine inviting the people, if they are comfortable, to close their eyes and think about what they just sang, and whisper that back to the Lord in prayer. But I'm always asking myself, does it feel like we're on an honest journey or does it feel like I'm trying to hype them.

High Wire

In the end, these are all balancing acts. We've all been in those churches where everything looked right and lots of good looking, smiling people were on stage singing, yet it somehow felt too slick. We want to be professional but not in the same way a Vegas show MC is professional. The way we do this is by planning and being prepared, and then, at the last second, taking a deep breath and offering our hard work to the Lord.

Like any art, ours finds its best voice when we have poured over it with all our hearts and skills. But without our authentic invitation to the Father to inhabit our plans and lead us in His Spirit so that His will is done, our plans are like an empty glove. A glove is useless unless it is filled.

Some of the concepts discussed in this post are demonstrated by Paul and his band in the instructional DVD "Leading Worship: Creating Flow" – available at www.leadworship.com

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Ministry, Money, and Motivation

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Missing A Beat

Passion's Place in Faith

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Just the Band Guy

Visionary Songwriters

Revealing the Divine

How to Stimulate Creativity

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