The Deadly Sins of Blended Worship

By Warren Anderson
I love coming to church to see what you music people have cooked up this week!” So proclaimed Edith, my septuagenarian barometer for what’s “working” in our worship services recently. And she had reason to be enthused, for we mix Bach with Balochi, meld Gaither with Greco, and mite Zschech with Ska on a regular basis. We have used drums right along with the organ, electric guitars with the grand piano, a string quartet with a Blood, Sweat & Tears-worthy horn section. And it’s worked. The congregation—an even mix of senior citizens and young marrieds with kids—has found comfort not in the expected, but in the unexpected.

Blended worship is a hot topic these days. Proponents call it the best way to serve the greatest number of constituents as often as possible. Critics call it the best way to serve up the greatest number of musical styles equally poorly. Still others, Robert Webber and Constance Cherry among them, call for convergence worship, worship that converges many different areas in addition to music—for example, the verbal with the symbolic, the rational with the mystical.

I Must Confess...

For my purposes here, I’ll focus only on congregational song, and I’ll state my bias right up front: I like blended worship. I come to this position in part by pedigree. As the son of a music educator, I was exposed to a myriad of musical experiences early on, and I came to appreciate (if not always enjoy) most forms of musical expression. But I also come by principle; I have seen far too many churches torn asunder by narrow-mindedness wrapped in piety, the passing off of “personal preference as Biblical perspective,” in the words of Josh McDowell.

At first blush, it might seem pretty simple to create a blended service. Select a few like-minded hymns and choruses, and you’re on your way. Accompany “Amazing Grace” with the organ and “I Love Your Grace” with acoustic guitar and you’re set. It would be nice if it were that easy, but some preparation is in order. As you contemplate moving toward blended worship, it’s helpful first to have an idea of what not to do. To that end—and with a tip of the hat to Pope Gregory, who had a similar idea first—I present the Three Deadly Sins of Blended Worship.

Pride

Hang around musicians for any length of time and you’ll run into musical snobs. In evangelical Christian circles, they reside in equal measure on the ends of the traditional vs. contemporary continuum. On one end we have conservatory and/or seminary graduates convinced that anything produced in or for the Church since the 1950s—when Elvis first shook his hips and ushered rock ’n’ roll into the cultural consciousness—must, by definition, be dumbed-down theology set to warmed-over music—a combination that appeals only to our most basic, primal sensibilities, our “felt needs.” On the other end, we have the we-must-be-culturally-relevant crowd, young and young-at-heart men and women convinced that anything produced in or for the Church prior to 1990 must, by definition, be a collection of archaic language set to stodgy, hopelessly unhip music—a combination that caused people to leave the Church in droves 40 years ago. Granted, these are stereotypes, but I know folks who resemble each of the examples above, and I imagine you do, too.

These kinds of attitudes will kill the best-laid plans for blended worship. There simply is too much good music of all types available to today’s worship leaders to become too emotionally invested in one genre. The late Rich Mullins said it best: “People go, ‘I really like Southern gospel music.’ That’s one approach, and that’s okay. But I wouldn’t want to miss the second movement of Mozart’s clarinet concerto because I’m listening solely to Southern gospel. At the same time, I wouldn’t want to be an ethnically pure musical prig and risk the chance of missing ‘I’ll Fly Away.’”

Sloth

Blended worship is harder to pull off effectively than either traditional or contemporary worship alone, and the worship leader unwilling to put in the extra effort to make it happen is likely to give up in frustration. You think it’s going to be easy to get Great Aunt Tillie, who’s been grinding away on the organ for fifty years, to embrace the synthesizer on occasion? You think it’s going to be no sweat for your teenage guitar player, who’s used to

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playing one chord every four measures, to play the four-chords-per-measure changes found in so many hymns? You think it's going to be a cakewalk for your sing-by-ear worship-band vocalists to read SATB so that you can do "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross" a cappella as a call to worship? Or that those members of your choir who are classically trained will be able to lose that vibrato of their own volition in order to blend better in a praise-team setting?

No, it's not easy. It takes a lot of effort—tens of time-consuming rehearsals, much massaging of potentially fragile egos, and plenty of patience—but the results can be wonderful. Our church has a sixtyish pianist who is much more comfortable with traditional church music than with the contemporary choruses her grandchildren favor. And yet, because she has been diligent in her efforts to learn the modern music (with its more complex rhythms)—and because our worship leader has chosen well-arranged tunes—the transition has been pretty smooth all the way around. (Therein lies an important lesson. Finding good arrangements can be crucial. If you're just starting the blended-worship process, I recommend those in Maranatha! Music's Green Book, which features, in addition to many of the great choruses, some excellent arrangements of classic hymns, all updated just a bit to make them easier on the modern ear and the guitar player.)

Gluttony

If there is one piece of advice I would elevate above all others in relation to blended worship, it would be this: Move slowly; don't try to do too much too soon. Rather than implementing fundamental changes over time, some church leaders take a bull-in-a-china-shop approach, ramming decisions down the throats of their parishioners, all the while demanding objectors to "get with the program" and insinuating that those who advocate a more moderate pace for change are more beholden to tradition than to the Great Commission—an ideological point of view that nips healthy dialogue in the bud. In one such church with which I'm familiar, the impatient senior pastor finally moved on after five years, taking most of his staff with him and leaving a once-vibrant, now-paralyzed congregation in his wake. Five years later, the church is still recovering.

Human beings—even evangelicals, especially evangelicals—are creatures of habit. We generally resist change. In our church we initially took baby steps toward our blended-worship end goal. The members of our congregation, including several founding fathers and mothers who had helped put the sanctuary's mortar and bricks together, knew only a Cliff Barrows-type approach to worship, with one solitary song leader standing in the middle of the stage waving his arms. We began modestly—a three-piece, drummerless band backing three vocalists, once every other month or so. Gradually we moved to once a month, then every other week and finally every single week. But it didn't happen overnight; in fact, the whole process took a couple of years. The first time we used drums, you could feel the collective raising of the eyebrows among the people. Now they miss them when they're not there. The moral of the story? Move slowly. A gluttonous approach to change will almost always backfire.

The Diverse Body

To be sure, putting your pride on the shelf, preparing for and then following through with the hard work involved, and moving slowly as you effect change will serve you well as you begin pursuing blended worship. Ron Man adds a biblical component and coda to our discussion:

Quite simply put, the strongest argument for pursuing worship which is blended is the fact that that body of Christ is blended (Gal. 3:28); and it is in corporate worship that the truth of the body's unity (in diversity) can be most effectively lived out (Eph. 4:4-6; 1 Cor. 12:20).

Let all God's people, whether they prefer to do so via a Haydn hymn or a Kenoly chorus, sing "Amen!"

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