

## What Kind of Service?

As a student at Furman University, I took a class with a psychology professor whose tests consisted of fifty multiple-choice questions usually with six or seven possible answers. I found the number of possibilities exceedingly confusing; consequently I earned lowest grade of my educational career in his class! Today the choices of worship styles confound our churches with a similar situation:

### **Q. What type(s) of worship service(s) should our church utilize?**

- (a.) Traditional
- (b.) Contemporary
- (c.) Blended
- (d.) “Cutting Edge” Contemporary, i.e. Passion , Emergent
- (e.) 1970-1980's, i.e. Gaithers, "Celebrate Jesus"
- (f.) Both A and some form of B
- (g.) All of the above

As one can see from the above example, a plethora of choices does not make life easier! Besides the fact that such a wide array of styles makes it difficult to determine your church's style of worship, more serious concerns must be taken into account. Some configurations contribute to deficiencies or errors in your church's theology and mission. Others provide more entertainment than worship, while a few guard the status quo. The purpose of this study is to inform Christians about a few often overlooked dangers with motives or philosophies associated with the decision to change or modify worship services.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The reader must understand that developing worship service styles involves a complexity of considerations. For example, a major concern is how we should handle subcultures within our culture. The church is a multi-generational, multi-ethnic, and multi-cultural organism. It is a challenge to find the balance between worshipping in familiar idioms, which was one of Martin Luther's great accomplishments during the Reformation, and appeasing people's preferences and personal convictions. In addition, the Bible does not provide a model order of service as it does a prayer (Matt. 6:13-16), so we must discover principles related to what God expects at corporate gatherings and apply them intelligently to our worship services. As anyone in the midst of this controversy is aware, there are no simple solutions.

## Taste-Driven Worship

The first caution against adding or modifying worship services is not to make people's preferences the underlying motive for change. As Marva Dawn aptly describes in her book *A Royal Waste of Time*, “Not only is the idea of taste as an entry point [to worship] wrong biblically, but also it is extremely destructive of genuine community, fosters an independent view of the local congregation, and reduces worship simply to a matter of preferences instead of entering into God's presence in the company of the Church throughout space and time.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, using taste as the principle that helps us begin the journey of worship increases the probability that we fail both to worship genuinely and function in the Body as we are designed. By implementing or modifying services to satisfy the tastes of believers or to attract nonbelievers, worship quickly deteriorates into entertainment with negative spiritual consequences. Other serious implications result from making taste the standard for deciding how we worship.

First, we nurture self-centeredness in the very place that it should never exist. The standard for our ministry becomes *me*. The philosophy is that *I* dictate how *I* want the church to minister to *me*. When churches place people with the same preferences together into one service, people rarely sacrifice their own expectations for worship since they can find what they expect from church. Following Jesus Christ's example of laying down His life (Jn 10:11, 15; 15:13; Phil 2:5-8; 1 Jn 3:16), the church must model the refusal to lay down one's life and desires for another.

Second, taste is destructive to genuine community because it implicitly makes “me” the determining factor in how the rest of the Body should worship. Other than the fact that worship

must be intelligible, personal preferences have little, if any, significant role in the church. Consider Romans 12:10, in which Paul writes, “Show eagerness in honoring one another.” The very fact that the Bible, which is His powerful and dynamic word, commands us to show preference to one another is sufficient reason *not* to take our own tastes seriously when it comes to worship. Not putting one another ahead of ourselves is sinful, and sin *always* damages or destroys community. On this account, we cannot make our personal preferences primary in deciding how to worship if we hope to foster an authentic worshipping community.

Another caution against making taste dominant in worship is that it perpetuates the consumer-driven mindset found in our society. The Bible’s teachings and consumerism as we practice it are mutually exclusive. “The great emphasis of the New Testament Epistles is clearly that believers are to give themselves generously to each other—in building up each other, in caring for each other, in loving each other, and in keeping peace among themselves.”<sup>3</sup> None of these things happen in a consumer-driven culture, particularly apart from Christ. The consumer’s fundamental question is, “How can I get out the most out of such and such for the lowest possible price?” In response, businesses and corporations constantly struggle to develop extraordinary products at minimal prices. Churches have followed suit. As early as 1990, Carl Schalk noted that churches were already asking,

“How do we compete in the denominational marketplace? How do we get our piece of the pie, our market share? Are we giving people what they want, musically speaking, when they come to church? Or the even more insidious question, Are we meeting people’s perceived needs (as if we ever could)? We tend to shop around; if a church does not offer our kind of religiosity—and our kind of music—we will go down the block to one that does?”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Dawn, Marva. *A Royal Waste of Time: The Splendor of Worshipping God and Being Church for the World*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999; 187.

<sup>3</sup> Ortland, Raymond C. “Priorities for the Local Church.” *Vital Church Issues: Examining Principles and Practices in Church Leadership*. Ed. Roy B. Zuck. Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998; 50.

<sup>4</sup> Schalk, Carl. “Church Music in the '90s: Problems and Prognoses.” *Christian Century* (1990).

In biblical Christianity, however, self-interest should disappear in view of the mission to reach the lost and care for another. Worshipping in the context of consumerism is abhorrent to God simply because it makes my preferences about how to worship Him superior His design and commands. The object of worship cannot be worshipped when worshippers are not coming on His terms (Lev 10:1-2; Amos 5:21-24). It is simply illogical that one would specify how his subjects must worship him, but they make their own competing terms and expect him to honor their efforts.

Fourth, making personal preferences about worship—whatever the style—usually is a result of reversing the lordship of Christ with idolatry of self. Said differently, it is the consequence of failing to understand who worships whom, and why the person is worshipping. The gap between His holiness and our sinfulness is diminished, and we fail to grasp our depraved state (see Ps 51). Therefore it is difficult to come before God humbly when we decide how to approach Him on our own. Simply stated, idolatry precludes humility.

A final implication of taste-driven worship is that we then control our understanding of God. A wide variety of content, forms, texts, and styles stretches worshippers to think about and worship God from diverse angles. Separating the worshippers to satisfy their preferences does not afford opportunities to grow in their awe of God's greatness. It leaves them with incorrect, incomplete, and/or imbalanced theology. The narrower the person's worship experiences are, the narrower God will be to him. The result is always that God appears less worthy of worship!

To conclude, there are at least five ways that basing worship on taste is detrimental to authentic worshipping communities. First, it cultivates self-centeredness, whereas true worship diminishes it. Second, it hampers genuine community because worship becomes a means to satisfying oneself rather than yield to the community. Third, bringing personal preference to the

forefront of decisions regarding worship fosters and perpetuates consumerism in churches rather than corporate liberality. Fourth, we confuse our relationship with God by becoming idolatrous when we make our own tastes more important to us than God's commands. Finally, worshipping according to our tastes is extremely destructive to the way we think about God and understand our relationship to Him. Making worship a matter of our taste is clearly a biblical fallacy.

## **The Idol of Relevance**

A prominent idol in churches today is relevance to the culture. Browse your local or online bookstore and you are guaranteed to find not a few titles related to having a relevant, postmodern ministry.<sup>5</sup> Surely relevance is a major factor in ministry, but it cannot be the dominant principle in ministry. Rather, the precious truths of the Christian faith comprise the content of our worship; relevance to culture clothes those truths in a comprehensible fashion. In one of Charles Swindoll's memorable sermons to seminarians in chapel at Dallas Theological Seminary, he implored, "Stay in touch without losing touch with the truths that we embrace, that God has given us."<sup>6</sup>

In stark contrast to some contemporary churches, other congregations pride themselves in staying out of touch and unaffected by the world; this is not what the New Testament concept of ministry entails. The Incarnation is our perfect model. Without compromising any degree of his divine nature, Jesus Christ left the comforts of Heaven, taking on humanity to minister

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<sup>5</sup> See the *Emerging Church's* line of books, which have made ministering "postmodernly" central to their model (<http://www.emergingchurch.org>).

<sup>6</sup> Swindoll, Charles. "The Essential Balance: Relevance and Rooted." Rec April 6, 2003. Sermon delivered at Dallas Theological Seminary. <http://www.oneplace.com/ministries/dts/Archives.asp>. Accessed May 21, 2005.

graciously to a filthy, broken world. When the gathering of the Body of Christ becomes a haven for the self-righteous, we fail to comprehend the model that our Savior set in regards.

The Bible was not written in a socio-cultural vacuum; the study of customs along with grammatical and literary devices is critical to unlocking biblical truth. Leith Anderson writes, “Exegesis of Scripture seeks to lift the transcultural eternal truths of God out of the original language and culture. Then, since revelation always comes in cultural context, the exegeted truth has practical value only when it is related to another cultural context.”<sup>7</sup> In the same way, our worship and theology takes place in a particular community, in a particular place in time, surrounded by the fears and affirmations held by the culture at large. Relevance and contemporaneity are not inherently negative, but those who elevate them over being grounded in the faith forfeit the unique message of Christianity. Forms without proper content or function are impotent.

Relevance has led many churches to market themselves on a commercial scale in order to survive and thrive in competition with other local bodies. In his provocative study on churches’ marketing strategies, sociologist James B. Twitchell writes, “For many churches this never-ending competition added the perpetual pressure to stay solvent. That, in turn, *always argues for attracting the widest audience, paying attention to the takeaway value, and focusing always on the end user while all the time pretending to a higher calling.*”<sup>8</sup> Twitchell’s perspective indicts all who have made people into consumers bargaining for the best deal on eternal life and a relationship with God.

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<sup>7</sup> Anderson, Leith. “Practical Ministry in 21st Century Churches.” *Vital Church Issues: Examining Principles and Practices in Church Leadership*. Ed. Roy B. Zuck. Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998; 38.

<sup>8</sup> Twitchell, James B. *Branded Nation: The Marketing of Megachurch, College Inc., and Museumworld*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004; 56. Italics mine.

Several deficiencies constantly appear in churches where relevance dictates worship. First, a comprehensive, sound theology suffers an enormous cost. For example, I recently categorized the songs from a praise and worship collection published by the Passion organization.<sup>9</sup> Although few lyrics were transparently unbiblical or theologically incorrect, isolation in this branch of contemporary music leaves the worshipper theologically anemic. There was no trace of Trinitarian or Christological doctrine. Only a few songs made statements that were developed enough to be considered soteriological in nature. Many discussed repentance, lifestyle, and Christian mission. A large quantity might be describes as specifically “praise songs,” yet the lyrics presented few specific reasons to praise Him. Since these songs were narrow in their theological spectrum, those raised on a strict diet of the Passion songs will likely share in their deficiency.

A pure dose of contemporary music will not grant a healthy amount of balanced and comprehensive theology, but champions of hymnody should not boast too quickly. “Interestingly enough, upon close observation much of our older music is just as vacuous as some of the worst of the newer praise choruses. Conversely, some of the new music is just as substantive as some of the old favorites.”<sup>10</sup> The point, however, is that attempts to make worship more accessible, and thus culturally relevant, will be found lacking in broad coverage of theological issues. Not all will be vacuous or poorly crafted, but as a whole, enthusiastic contemporary music ministers must acknowledge these facts and monitor their music selections if they have any commitment to comprehensive, biblical theology.

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<sup>9</sup> *Passion Songbook*. Brentwood, TN: Worship Together, 2001.

<sup>10</sup> House, Paul R. “Worship Is Not About Us.” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 2.2 (1998); 3.

This matters because no one can worship God apart from an accurate, although incomplete, picture of Him as revealed in Scripture. Praise that lacks knowledge may seem sincere, but one cannot live the Christian life victoriously on a slim theological diet. Since specific doctrines are conspicuously missing in the contemporary worship movement, church leaders must be intentional to balance their theology with clear exposition of texts and doctrines. Relevance quickly ceases in importance when doctrinal distinctives of the Christian faith begin to disappear.

Second, if worship music sounds too much like the world's music, it *potentially* becomes entertainment with slightly more spiritual value. It is not inevitable that this will happen, however, "the message is in the medium," as Rookmaaker's saying goes, and overly simplistic songs rarely have the capacity to communicate the rich theological truths. This is not to disparage the work done by Christians to redeem genres typically considered off-limits for believers (rap, rock-n-roll, etc.), but it is urgent that our lyrics rise to the occasion. They must be profound, challenging, biblical, and intelligible, among other things.<sup>11</sup> The Church will not be successful in this regard if it returns to high church music of seventeenth-century Western Europe when it does not communicate truth effectively! The music is a servant to the text. The church must realize that much of our theology arises from congregational song, and particularly if we focus on being culturally relevant through music, the content must improve.

## **Conclusion**

Although creating or reformatting your current worship service may seem like a terrific idea, it is critical that one examine the implications for such change carefully. These

consequences may not be evident for many years, and indeed, it is difficult to say what they may include, but one must prayerfully consider the mindset leading to such a decision. Many churches are making dramatic changes to their approach to corporate worship, but we must first carefully examine the factors that have brought us to this point in history and question how will this affect us for years to come. Furthermore, we must determine what Scriptures teach us about the function and content of our corporate worship and allow that to determine the path on which we embark.

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<sup>11</sup> One might consider Chapter Five, “‘And Speak Some Boundless Thing’: Assess the Lyrics of Congregational Song” from Brian Wren’s book, *Praying Twice* (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press; 2000).