

Traditional, Blended, AND Contemporary

Many Protestant evangelical believers frequently characterize churches by one of three labels that reflect their style of worship: traditional, blended, or contemporary. The major defining elements of modern worship have become atmosphere and style. These labels have caused us to neglect salient demands of worship such as content or the integrity of presentation. Instead we categorize worship in terms that may be inconsequential. In the short space that follows, I suggest that worship must be characterized by all three of these labels—contemporary, blended, and traditional—rather than one or the other.

Most associate traditional worship with hymnals, organs, choirs, and the formalities that have become defined by respective denominations. In a Presbyterian church, for example, one would commonly expect to recite a creed or excerpt from the Westminster Confession of Faith. A lengthy pastoral prayer might be offered, and a homily that is theological in nature would be the service's central organizing component. Many Baptist churches, on the other hand, would infrequently recite a responsive reading, and the hymnody would be the most important aspect for many. Sermons often follow three-point outline that addresses the Christian life. An invitation to "accept Christ" would probably conclude the service. Within different denominations and traditions, the label "traditional" has different meanings.

Across denominational lines, however, "traditional" denotes the patterns of worship that have been established by previous generations.

With the recent surge of contemporary services in autonomous congregations, the reputation of traditional worship services has suffered. Some view it as passé. Despite this, all churches must maintain some sense of tradition. Worship must be distinctly Christian in all that it entails. The Church has practiced various forms and methods of worship throughout time, and these components must continue to distinguish Christian worship. A celebration and recreation of the Atonement and biblical narrative is essential. The centrality of the reading of the Scripture and its exposition has likewise been esteemed highly since Ancient Israel's gatherings. Likewise, singing has been prevalent among God's people for millennia. The Lord's Supper, until recently, has been observed frequently in most circles. These primary components have historically marked Christian worship, and it is imperative that the Church not abandon them.

Worship should never be dead or meaningless, and when idolatry of traditions manifests itself in a local body, that church must abandon its idols and seek out fresh of worship under the

Holy Spirit's guidance. But every local church must be traditional in the sense that it is not isolated from the previous two thousand year history of the Christian Church, not that it must be limited to a prescribed list of ways that it must superficially honor. Thus in any gathering of people who claim to worship Jesus Christ, corporate worship's content and (to some degree) its forms should be recognizable to believers from across international barriers and historical time periods.

Blended worship is the second familiar label used to describe worship. In most contexts, it means that traditional hymns or creeds are combined with newer praise songs and other innovations. A blended service might include the contemporary praise song "We Fall Down" with the classic hymn "Holy, Holy, Holy" in a medley. The amount and degree of technology used, formality of dress, or nature of the sermons depends entirely on the church's decision. Occasionally blended worship means that a congregation borrows rituals and practices from traditions outside its own. Blended worship often strikes a healthy balance between content and contemporaneity. It properly recognizes healthy new trends in orthodox Christian practice while continuing to utilize historical hymnody, creeds, and liturgical prayer. Blended services preserve the time-tested practices of Christian worship while maintaining openness to the best that contemporary forms have to offer.

Proper blending does not mean that various unrelated components are strung together haphazardly in order to appease a wide range of audience, nor does it entail combining hymns and praise choruses together in a medley determined primarily by key relationship. Rather, proper blending is done intentionally, thematically, and gracefully. It requires deft skill and creativity from the church's leadership.

Contemporary worship has become somewhat of a technical term for the worship services that contain guitar- or band-driven music and a sermon. Compared to other forms, contemporary worship is very minimal. Most contemporary services contain a comparable amount of music and preaching. One usually finds exquisite visual productions, whether in slides for lyrics or quotes, or clips from a movie to reinforce the sermon. Contemporary services rarely participate in the Lord's Supper, responsive readings, or lengthy pastoral prayers. These types of services generally attract younger, burned out, or unsaved persons. They often want an alternative to the worship services of their parents or the Christianity they associate with hypocrisy and irrelevancy. The most important contribution that contemporary churches have

given us is the willingness to communicate worship in language and through tools that are culturally relevant and appropriate, concerns that older churches often neglected. Thus the Lord has used this movement in marvelous ways. It is not without problems, however. There is often a lack of theological clarity in the sermons, prayers, and music. Some use adjectives such as McSermon, High-Carb Homiletics, and ChurchLite to describe contemporary worship services. While these labels are unfair to all contemporary churches, they are not void of truth in describing the movement as a whole.

In conclusion, Christian worship should be recognizably Christian by its content and forms while being culturally idiomatic in its practice. In this way worship is traditional, blended, and contemporary. If the Church adopts this paradigm, it may insulate itself from serious flaws. First, new movements will be viewed with a more discerning eye before adoption of new methods ensues. Fads will always come and go, but those who can apply what is beneficial from them without being near-sighted will truly be effective. Second, the Church will view change and adaptation as a necessary part of its existence. Remaining relevant while the culture changes will become more commonplace rather than the unusual phenomenon associated with a handful of churches. Finally, our worship will grow deeper because the unity of the Church will radically be transformed. The grander metanarrative of Christianity and church history will supersede the nearsighted shallow movements of modern churches. We will learn to worship Christ in spirit and truth through the forms and styles of believers throughout time and space.