

Is 'new worship' compatible with traditional worship?

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The hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth (John 4.23-24).

Can contemporary Christian worship (we shall call it new worship) be combined with traditional worship?

I would like to speak with great respect to fellow pastors and Christian workers who have been inclined to adopt new worship to some degree. I do not want to appear hostile in any way, for there are a number of dedicated men who feel they should give new worship a chance.

They do not necessarily care for it personally, but they have been persuaded that their reservations are just a matter of taste and culture. Therefore, to get the young people in, they give house-room (often reluctantly) to contemporary worship songs.

Such friends almost always have areas of concern. They do not go all the way with the modern trend. They certainly do not share the emotionally manipulative motives of the leading proponents of new worship. Nor do they accept their somewhat mystical notions of communion with God. In fact, they have very little in common with them. Nevertheless, they feel that they live in a new culture and must give guarded acceptance to new things.

These pastors have every intention of keeping traditional worship alongside the new, and of curbing excesses firmly, but the new, they feel, should not be entirely resisted.

I can well understand that anyone who has a heart for the rising generation, and a deep concern for the state of the churches,

will not want to be obstructive to new ideas. I therefore do not intend in this article to criticise other Christian workers who, with reservations, have been accommodating toward the new ways. But I would like to point out, in fraternal persuasion, several great issues of principle which are now at stake. The chief problem is that traditional and new worship represent entirely different concepts of worship, and these are opposite concepts.

New worship, or contemporary Christian worship, started in California in the late 1960s, when many hippies turned to Jesus Christ, becoming the 'Jesus people'. They worshipped with the very same style of song which they had known as hippies. Various movements were formed to encourage this, among them the well-known Calvary chapels.

One-verse choruses

This new worship consisted mostly of one-verse choruses, endlessly repeated. The words were simple –much simpler than those of a traditional children's chorus - and the themes were elementary. There was seldom any confession of sin or any doctrine. However well-intended, the new worship was not shaped or influenced by any biblical model of worship nor by general church practice.

It was a form of worship fashioned and conceived in the womb of hippie meditational mysticism, in which hippies in their hundreds and thousands would sit on Californian hillsides with eyes closed, swaying themselves into an ecstatic state of experience. Former hippies carried into their new Christian allegiance the method of seeking the emotional release or sensations to which they were accustomed, and no one showed them a better way.

The new worship rapidly advanced, merging with another stream of new songs written by those who simply wanted worship music to be like secular rock music. In other words, the latter wanted a 'good time' in a worldly sense. We need to be aware that new worship sprang from these two stables, namely, hippie

mysticism, and worldly Christianity. It was immediately incorporated into the charismatic movement, from which the vast majority of new worship songs have come.

‘Ecstatic worship’

I am not suggesting that traditional Christians who accommodate the new worship endorse those stables. Nevertheless we cannot evaluate new worship without considering its background and objectives.

It must be appreciated that new worship is designed to be *ecstatic worship*. In other words, worship is intended to stir the senses or feelings as a chief objective. The biblical requirement (as we shall see) and the time-honoured view of Christians is that God must be worshipped with the mind, and emotions should support what is grasped by the mind. The great emphasis in traditional worship is *meaning*. It is about the mind inspiring the heart. Ecstatic worship, by contrast, says, ‘Let’s simplify the meaning. Meaning gets in the way. Meaning confuses us. Meaning hurls facts at us, and while that is happening we cannot *feel*. We want chiefly to go for feeling.’

The choruses and songs which come out of the new worship movement are based on this policy of worship. This is not my assessment, but the clearly stated aim of the advocates of new worship. But to use melody or song as a means of working up sensations, raptures, exalted senses and emotional joys is wrong. They say, ‘We must find a way of stirring up this feeling within ourselves. We must "get ourselves going" by the use of music and any other means available to stir emotional chords within us.’ This is the underlying basis of the new worship.

Another way of looking at this feature of new worship is to say that it is *mystical*. Its songwriters may not consciously be mystics, but they mostly believe in the idea that *direct* union with God may be achieved in worship. (*Ecstatic* has to do with *my* feelings, whereas *mystical* refers to a method of sensing union with God.)

Any attempt to be in direct touch or union with God by means of a technique, is a form of mysticism. It is the opposite of our traditional Christian worship which says that union with God is via faith based on knowledge, and not by emotion. We understand or believe in the God revealed in Scripture, and *by faith* we touch Him. Many hymns in the new worship speak of touching God (or similar terms), suggesting that this is something we do by turning on our emotions. The danger of this philosophy cannot be understated. Emotion-driven, mystical worship is a delusion, producing intensely emotional and subjective worshippers for whom personal enjoyment is the chief aim. Biblically, however, we touch God as we appreciate the truth about Him, and approach Him in faith. Deep feelings are the *result* of this.

Another incompatibility between old and new worship is found in what has been called the *aesthetic factor*. Traditional worship, as we have noted, says that human beings can worship God only by words and thoughts. But the aesthetic policy (universally adopted by the promoters of new worship) says that God can be worshipped by human creativity. If I play an instrument well enough, I legitimately worship by instrumental skill. God will look upon the beautiful thing I have produced, be pleased with it, and accept it as valid worship. I will have pleased Him and glorified Him by my expertise. An Anglo-Catholic hymn puts it in this way, but it is wrong:

'Craftsmen's art and music's measure, For Thy pleasure all combine.'

From - 'Angel voices ever singing', Francis Pott, originally entitled, 'For the dedication of an organ'.

The great cathedral builders of centuries past believed that the very arrangement of the stones, and the ingenuity of the stained glass, was an act of worship.

Words used sparingly

Of course, God is to be glorified in everything we do, but acts of

direct Christian worship consist solely of words and thoughts flowing from sincere and earnest hearts.

In the new worship words are often used very sparingly, because words do not count for much. Creativity and clever instrumentation are considered to be more moving or exciting to worshippers, and more acceptable to God. The new worship is therefore incompatible with the old because it is built upon different foundational concepts.

I have been reading a book by John Frame of the Californian branch campus of Westminster Theological Seminary entitled, *Contemporary Worship Music: A Biblical Defence*. The author, a reformed theologian, surprisingly turns out to be strongly in favour of new worship.

One of John Frame's many complaints about traditional worship is that it is far too complex. It has too many words, is too intelligent, and too scholarly. It is not for ordinary people. In supporting this complaint, the author pronounces himself in favour of minimal words. He wants to bypass rationality, and substitute feelings as the leading component in worship. He also insists that there is a physical dimension to worship, dancing and other activities being valid. He wants to get the senses and sensations strumming in order to touch God. The point in raising his book at this stage is to show how 'traditionalists' who adopt new worship eventually capitulate to the sensational-mystical-aesthetic philosophy of worship.

In spirit and in truth

To establish the traditional view of worship I turn to *John 4.24* – the words of the Lord Jesus Christ - -'God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth.' First, to worship in spirit means we are not to worship in any *physical* way. There are no physical elements or actions in spiritual worship with the exception of baptism and the Lord's Supper, which were ordained by the Saviour exclusively as teaching figures. Aside from these there is no physical ingredient, other, perhaps, than to fall in reverence before the Lord. (The issue of

the raising of hands will be examined in a subsequent article.) Because worship is by the spirit, and not physical, it is obvious that you cannot worship in dance. (A comment on dancing will also be made in a later article.)

Worship, being a spiritual activity, cannot be offered by way of melody or instrumentation. Instruments and music are merely helps to the singing of intelligent praise. An organ or piano is a great help, but has no greater status than that. You cannot abandon or minimise the words, and worship through the music instead. The music cannot add to the spiritual acceptability of the words. Biblically, there is no such thing as worship which is 'a celebration of words and music'. Music, if it has an appropriate 'mood', may certainly help focus the mind, but you cannot worship through it. Worship is not by melody or instruments, but by faith.

Instruments have no more status in worship than radiators which supply heat to the building. God trusts us to use such 'helps' reasonably, but they must never be elevated into a form of worship.

To consolidate the point, the Lord defines worship as being exclusively 'in truth'. This, of course, means that genuine worship comes from a true, honest and sincere mind. It also means that worship is intelligent. Our Lord said that the Father seeks to worship Him those who will worship Him through the rational faculty -the mind, or the reason. He insists that worship themes must arrest the mind, and be understood. He tells us that is the only valid way of worship.

'In truth' also means that worship must be made *according to* the Truth, or, in other words, as prescribed by the Word of God. (We will in due course consider whether or not new worship follows the rules of Scripture.)

There is a world of difference between traditional worship and new worship. If we bring simple and short choruses, with all their repeated lines and their shallow sentiments, into adult worship, we severely strain the Lord's demand for intelligent

understanding of profound and glorious truths. To use the hackneyed term, we ‘dumb down’ worship.

The traditional approach to worship is further confirmed in *Revelation* chapters 4 and 5. These chapters present a vision of the rule of God over His Church, and also of the Church’s worship of Him.

At the centre of the vision is the wonderful throne of God, and as you work through the two chapters you find all three Persons of the Trinity present at that throne. Exalted language is used to describe the throne, with precious stones and powerful phenomena symbolising the attributes of God.

Before the throne are the beasts or living creatures, most commonly identified as God’s cherubim of justice. Then there is the great sea of glass, a favourite interpretation of this being that it represents the atoning merits and the righteousness of Jesus Christ, the only means of approaching the throne.

Church universal at worship

Outside and around that sea of glass, often pictured as forming a vast circle, are the twenty-four elders, representing twelve patriarchs and twelve apostles. This is the Church, both Jew and gentile, past, present and future; the entire company of redeemed people.

Outside and around that circle is the angelic host. There are ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands. In the course of the passage we discover how men and angels worship. In *Revelation 4.8* we read, ‘And the four beasts had each of them six wings about him; and they were full of eyes within: and they rest not day and night, saying, Holy. holy, holy, Lord God Almighty.’ The word to notice is that little word – ‘saying’. They *said* their worship. (We shall apply this in due course.)

In verses 10 and 11 we read, ‘the four and twenty elders fall down before him. . . and cast their crowns before the throne,

saying, Thou art worthy, O Lord.’ They *said* it.

In chapter 5.8-9 we read: ‘And when he had taken the book, the four beasts and four and twenty elders fell down before the Lamb, having every one of them harps, and golden vials full of odours, which are the prayers of saints. And they *sung* a new song. They *sang*.

In verses 11 and 12 we are told, ‘And I beheld, and I heard the voice of many angels round about the throne and the beasts and the elders: and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands; *saying* with a loud voice, Worthy is the Lamb.’ They *said* it.

In verse 13, the record says, ‘And every creature which is in heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth, and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, heard I *saying*, Blessing, and honour, and glory, and power, be unto him that sitteth upon the throne.’

In the next verse we learn that the ‘four beasts *said*’. That is the worship of God in Heaven and Earth. They *said* and they *sang*. In this vision of the true worship of God, we see that worship is words. We must affirm this most emphatically - *worship is words*. Worship is not words *and* music. Music assists us, but the efficacious or valid part is the words. There is no other vehicle of worship aside from words. The rational mind is the seat of worship. Worship is by faith and love, but it has to be in words, whether thought, said or sung.

It is a matter of fact that if this article had been written 150 years ago, most Nonconformist readers would have thought it too obvious to be printed. They all knew this. It was fundamental to them that worship is words. Today, tragically, this principle has been eroded away.

I often give this portion of my article as a lecture, and when we come to this point, I realise that some listeners are thinking, ‘What about the groanings which cannot be uttered, in Paul’s

letter to the *Romans*? Is this not prayer without words?’

Language of Heaven

The answer is, no, for the simple reason that the groanings are not ours, but those of the Holy Spirit. With our words we pray, and the Holy Spirit, in His majesty and power, translates those words into the language of Heaven, and conveys them to the throne on our behalf. We do not know what to pray for, or how to pray for it as we ought, but the Holy Spirit takes our stumbling efforts, and beautifies and perfects them, and presents them before the Lord.

We should not say, ‘I can pray just by feeling, even though I cannot express it in words,’ It may happen that a believer feels so strongly about something that his feelings seem to outpace his mind. But should he be asked – ‘What were you praying for just then?’ – he would be able to reply.

There is no true prayer which has not passed through the rational mind. There is no prayer that cannot be put into words. This alone is true worship. Anything other than this is mystical and ecstatic worship. For this reason we place the emphasis on the mind, whereas advocates of the new worship want the emphasis to be on emotions.

In my now rather elderly book *Healing Epidemic*, I have a chapter called ‘The Law of the Sound Mind’. With the growth of new worship this chapter has become even more relevant. The chapter title came from Paul’s words to Timothy – ‘For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.’ It is about the centrality of the sound mind.

The strongest feelings that we are capable of should be in our worship, but supporting the words. We must feel things because we think them. If we understand and mean the words, then the Holy Spirit (Who inspires all genuine worship) will touch our minds so that we see them even more clearly, and He will also touch our hearts so that we feel what we see all the more strongly. The emotional system is a system of support and

response. It is not the prime mover in worship. It must never be stirred into action or ‘worked up’ by musical techniques.

A sound mind

In the pastoral epistles, the apostle Paul makes many exhortations about sound-mindedness. He calls for rational control at all times. He insists on sensible words and thoughts. He says that the rational faculty must always be switched on. By these exhortations he condemns trances and purely sentimental worship.

He calls us to be alert. All must be watchful and vigilant. All must be moderate in their approach, and discerning. Every word of a hymn must register first in the mind, for this is the prime channel of praise. Paul establishes the centrality of the rational faculty.

This matter is so important that Paul makes separate exhortations to ministers, to older men, to older women, to younger men and to younger women. He makes this call repeatedly, and it especially applies to the exercise of the mind in worship. In *1 Corinthians* he tells us that we pray and sing in the spirit, but always with the understanding also. In worship we think and comprehend. Knowledge and understanding are foundational.

Those teachers who urge the abandonment of historic worship are rejecting a basic principle of worship –the centrality of the mind. We must hold on to this. New worship ranges from the extremes of ultra-simplified worship, to sheer emotionalism. It is not *biblical* worship.

John Frame, in his book, says the trouble with traditionalists is that they are snobs. They are musical snobs, and they are theological snobs! No believer wants to be a snob, and this kind of charge intimidates us. Innate Christian humility begins to wonder whether the charge is true. We begin to think that we may be prejudiced against new worship merely because we prefer the way we have always done things. But it is not

snobbery to be alarmed at the new worship. There are great principles at stake.

John Frame is delighted with choruses and other short, repetitive songs. He says the great advantage with choruses is that there are very few thoughts in them. He takes a typical verse from a hymn of Wesley, and pronounces it inferior to a conspicuously vapid chorus, as a means of efficient communication! His problem with Wesley and Watts and every other traditional hymnwriter is that they say far too much. No one, apparently, can grasp all their thoughts, for they are too numerous and too sophisticated. Millions of believers over the centuries have in his view suffered from great personal inadequacy in worship. By his thinking, what place could the *Psalms* have in worship? They are often long, complex and profound. Must they be rejected also as a model for our hymns?

Dismal 'biblical' examples

Frame attempts some novel interpretations of Scripture to justify this dumbing down of hymns. He looks at Job, noting the fine speeches he prepared to hurl at God when the opportunity arose. But when he saw God, he put his hand over his mouth, and choked out the simplest things. Says Frame – that is the right way. That is the difference between traditional worship and new worship. *Traditional* is all Job's fine speeches, and *new* is what Job should have done all along. The fewest words and the strongest feelings are best.

Moses and Isaiah are also brought into the argument. They fell silent before the Lord, and said very little. This, according to John Frame, is what justifies contemporary Christian worship.

He repeatedly says that we must be biblical in these matters, but he makes no use of the Lord's own hymnbook – the *Psalms* - in deciding what hymns should be like.

The 'mathematics' or proportions of the *Psalms* are closely respected in traditional hymnbooks, but totally neglected in the new worship. Traditional worship tracks well the ratio of praise

to petitional psalms, and accommodates the entire range of subjects in the Psalter. New worship almost cries out against the structure of the *Psalms*. Indeed, the very notion of a chorus has no basis in the *Psalms*.

The Lord's policy

Are our traditional hymns too complex? When the Lord compiled a hymnbook for an agricultural people who were probably 95% illiterate, He gave them not a book of choruses, but the book of *Psalms*.

C H Spurgeon once expressed his delight at the arrival of popular national newspapers, because they reached into all the towns and villages. With his own rural background he was qualified to comment on the limitations of village intellectual life. Mrs Smith, he said, was simpleminded because she and her friends only talked about petty events and village gossip. What a wonderful instrument, he said, these newspapers were, to widen their horizons, and show them about cities and lands beyond their village.

From the Psalter all the way down to the Reformation, and through subsequent centuries, hymns have been clearly understood by the Lord's people. They have lifted up the people of God spiritually and intellectually. They have expressed worship, and taught the great truths of the Word. The Bible first, and godly hymns second, have liberated generations from ignorance and naivety, teaching and articulating intelligent praise. Today, the new worship is pulling believers down to a level they have never known before.