

**Beyond the Worship Wars:
Music and Worship in the 21st Century Evangelical Church**

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Introduction

Worship is the single most important act in which Christians engage.'Let us worship God' is the most important sentence spoken week after week, year after year, in congregations all over the world. It calls us to attention before God who has something life-changing, soul-saving, and world renewing to say.For centuries, Christians seemed to know what it meant when the call went out, 'Let us worship God'....But as we enter the third millennium, there is no more consensus. When the call goes out, 'Let us worship God', instead of worshipping, men and women begin to argue, explain, advocate, promote, discuss, and denounce. What is spoken, ranges from learned to ignorant. The rude and the courteous compete for a hearing. Not many are listening. Disorder prevails. The work of Christian worship is in chaos.¹

When it comes to worship style, denominations are identified according to it, congregations split over it and ministers resign over it.²

"Worship" is the issue of the day. In the 2000-year history of the church, this issue has never been so contentious. This paper considers why this is so, and reviews what can perhaps be done to alleviate the problem. It argues that congregations adopting a biblical approach to the subject, with wisdom and sensitivity, will find a significant degree of unity and purpose that will overcome the often diverse understandings of worship that exist within a congregation, and the conflict and fragmentation that so often results.

The reader will be aware of the strength of individual feeling on this issue, and the current writer is no exception. Indeed, this has vexed me considerably. I am also aware that this essay is not a comprehensive overview of the issue. However, I believe I am presenting arguments that are often not heard. In doing so, I trust I am contributing to the discussion in a helpful way. I write this paper based partly on my exposure to the wide range of evangelicalism I have gained during a period of employment in a large evangelical para-church organisation. The paper discusses some of the factors that I believe contribute to the worship crisis and outlines the biblical principles that we should use to govern our corporate worship.

I believe we should welcome this opportunity for serious reflection on what we do in our church services and the reasons we do these things. My prayer is that the church will have the maturity and grace to move beyond the current tensions and worship God with greater reverence, fervour, meaning and unity.

¹ Peterson, Eugene. "Forward" in Montgomery, David. *Sing a New Song*. (Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 2000), p.v.

² Montgomery, *Sing a New Song*, p.viii.

SECTION 1. Factors contributing to the Worship Wars

The following factors will be considered:

- 1) Is music the real issue?
- 2) The wider picture
- 3) Worshipping as we please
- 4) Worshipping “worship”
- 5) When worship is good entertainment
- 6) The lack of quality teaching and discipline.

1) Is music the real issue?

Music is certainly a major factor in this conflict. However, I consider it to be only partly about music. A US based survey by the Barna Research Group in 2002 concluded that the “worship wars” has ignored the real issues regarding worship. According to Barna, the major challenge:

is not about how to use music to facilitate worship as much as it is to help people understand worship and have an intense passion to connect with God....Most of the church people who fight about their musical preference do so because they don't understand the relationship between music, communication, God and worship. Church leaders foster the problem by focusing on how to please people with music or how to offer enough styles of music to meet everyone's tastes rather than dealing with the underlying issues of limited interest in, comprehension of, and investment in fervent worship of a holy, deserving God.³

The research also revealed the startling statistics that “only three out of ten adults think worship is primarily focussed on God, and one in five say they have no idea what the most important outcome of worship is.” It is evident that there are some fundamental misunderstandings regarding worship. However, I believe this particular problem is related to some other trends in the contemporary church, and cannot effectively be addressed if it is seen in isolation from them. It is to this wider picture that we now turn.

2) The wider picture

While many recent developments within evangelicalism are a cause for optimism and thankfulness to God, (for example, greater desire to engage with the world, and reach out to our communities, the refusal to allow secondary issues to dominate and pre-occupy churches, etc), there are also some trends that should concern us. Many aspects could be mentioned. We will consider just three because these are particularly pertinent to the current discussion.

³ Barna, George., “Focus on ‘Worship Wars’ Hides The Real Issue Regarding Connection to God” <http://www.barna.org/cgi-bin/PagePressRelease.asp?PressReleaseID=126&Reference=A>. 19th November 2002.

a) The triumph of pragmatism (over theology)

David Wells has documented the decline of theology in the church in his books *No Place for Truth*⁴ and *God in the Wasteland*⁵. These works argue that some of the current problems inflicting the church have their roots in the 1970s which was the time when:

the confessional and theological character of evangelicalism began to fade, leaving the churches wide open to the intrusions of raw pragmatism. As theology moved from the center to the periphery of evangelical faith, technique moved from the periphery to the center.⁶

One of the consequences of this is the elevation of style over content. Style is the issue of the day. Churches used to split over matters of secondary doctrine – that is sad. The issue causing tension today is often style, in particular musical style – perhaps this is sadder? If church members have an opinion on anything it is on this – and often on little else. Moreover because content and substance take second place, everyone is right.

David Smith of the Whitefield Institute has suggested in his lecture “The Church in the West at the Dawn of the Third Millennium” that evangelicalism has been “sloganised”. It has been gutted of its original meaning.⁷ All too often “evangelical” now refers more to style than to content. To be an evangelical sadly often means little more than belonging to a church that has an emphasis on so called “lively” worship and attracting more members.

Kent Hughes outlines how these negative trends have been particularly acute in the Free Church, suggesting that for more than 150 years the Free Church operated on the “scripture only” principle, but this has now changed. “The ‘freedom’ of Free Church worship became not so much freedom to follow God’s word, but freedom to do what worked....Free church Biblicism deteriorated into Free Church pragmatism.”⁸ According to Hughes, pragmatism and anthropocentrism have vastly influenced twentieth-century Free Church corporate worship. “Corporate worship has taken the form of something done *for* an audience as opposed to something done *by* a congregation. And in many places it has come to be regarded as entertainment...”⁹

David Smith’s diagnosis is similarly negative:

Sadly, the form and content of much contemporary worship, the appeal to self-interest in a good deal of modern evangelicalism and

⁴ Wells, David., *No Place for Truth*. (Leicester: IVP, 1990).

⁵ Wells, David., *God in the Wasteland*. Leicester: IVP, 1994).

⁶ Wells, *No Place for Truth*, p.71.

⁷ Smith, David. Whitefield Institute Lecture 1999.

⁸ Hughes, R. K., “Free Church Worship: the Challenge of Freedom.” In Carson, Don (ed.) *Worship by the Book*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), p.147.

⁹ *ibid.*, p.148.

the pervasive subjectivism and hedonism in Christian literature [and I would add music] indicates that sectors of the Evangelical movement are shaped by the values of consumer society.¹⁰

b) “Seeker-sensitive”?

The development of the “seeker-sensitive” movement in recent years has presented many opportunities for thinking positively and creatively about effective church growth. However, the conflict over style of worship is often its fiercest in churches that are uncritically adopting “seeker-sensitive” principles of church growth. Thus, while the intention is laudable (who doesn’t want their church to be sensitive and accessible to seekers?), I feel some aspects of it are misguided. When secular marketing strategy is incorporated into our church growth ideology as an essential part of its philosophy (as the model does), the congregation become consumers and the gospel is reduced to a product or brand that we try to sell.

David Wells points out the dangers of such an approach:

Allowing the consumer to be sovereign in this way in fact sanctions a bad habit. It encourages us to indulge in constant internal inventory in the church no less than in the marketplace, to ask ourselves perpetually whether the “products” we are being offered meet our present “felt needs”. In this sort of environment, market research has found that there is scarcely any consumer loyalty to particular products and brands anymore. The consumer, like the marketer, is now making fresh calculations all the time. And so it is that the churches that have adopted the strategy of marketing themselves have effectively installed revolving doors. The pews may be full, but never with the same people from week to week. People keep entering, lured by the church’s attractions or just to check out the wares, but then they move on because they feel their needs, real or otherwise, are not being met.¹¹

However, far from resisting this consumer mentality, much of the seeker-sensitive model actually self-consciously fosters it. Seeker-sensitive models often argue for the adopting of a simplistic niche approach to worship. This gives the various parts of the congregation (the consumers) the style of worship (or brand) that they want, thereby reducing the tensions that seem to exist between different generations or groupings. This issue is discussed at length in my paper *Church Family?: Intergenerational Tension in the Church*.¹² But, in brief, I believe it to be fundamentally misguided as it essentially denies the reconciling power of Christ’s work and it undermines the unity of Christ’s body, the Church. Don Carson recognises this importance of this principle:

¹⁰ Smith, David. *Crying in the Wilderness*. (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000), p.51.

¹¹ Wells, *God in the Wasteland*, p.75.

¹² <http://www.theologian.org.uk/pastoralia/intergenerational.html>

We must evaluate what place we are reserving in our corporate life for tearing down the barriers that the world erects – between Jew and Gentile, blacks and whites, boomers and busters. How does our corporate life reflect the one new humanity that the New testament envisages?¹³

Similarly, Mark Ashton suggests that churches that opt for all age services are opting for the Biblical test.¹⁴ Conrad Gempf identifies the apologetic value of this approach:

In the 21st century Christians should be known as people who value face-to-face, live communication across a diversity of groups. A congregation of mixed races, ages and styles worshipping together and enjoying each others' company will be an astonishing witness to the average 21st century person.¹⁵

In the following extract from his paper "Evangelistic Worship," Tim Keller explains that recent research among young pastors from the seeker-sensitive movement highlights some significant problems with this approach.

There are indications of some major cracks in the foundation of evangelical assumptions about what kind of services will reach 'secular' people. The crisis in the church growth movement is due to the fact that the attack on seeker-sensitive worship is coming from inside, that is, from pastors of fast growing 'mega-churches' (though the name and category is eschewed) filled with under-30's. These pastors claim that the Willow Creek inspired services supposedly adapted for the unchurched were calibrated for a very narrow and transitory kind of unchurched person: namely, college educated, white, Baby Boomers suburbanites. The increasingly multi-ethnic, less rational/word orientated, urban orientated and more secular generations under the age of 35 are not the same kind of 'unchurched' people. The critique is that Willow Creek 'over-adapted' to the rational, a-historical, 'high modern' world-view.

The younger pastors say that Willow Creek services do several things that alienate the seekers of *their* generations.

- It removed transcendence from its services by utilizing light, happy music and tone, complete accessibility of voice, using dramatic sketches that create a nightclub or TV-show atmosphere. But their generations hunger for awe.
- It ditched connection to history and tradition and went completely contemporary in all cultural references, from sermon illustrations to decoration to antiseptic 'suburban mall/office building' setting. But

¹³ Carson, *Worship by the Book*, p.60. Baby Boomers are people born between 1946 and 1964. Busters (also known as "Generation X" or "Xers") are those born between 1965 and 1981.

¹⁴ Ashton Mark. "Following in Cranmers' Footsteps" In Carson, *Worship by the Book*, p.89.

¹⁵ Gempf, Conrad. *Church of England Newspaper*, 15th May 1998.

their generations hunger for rootedness, and love a pastiche of ancient and modern.

- It emphasized polish and technical excellence and slick professionalism and management technique, while their generations hunger for authenticity and community rather than programs.
- It emphasizes rationality and practical 'how-to' maps, while their generations hunger for narrative and the personal.¹⁶

These helpful and somewhat surprising observations - although based in the American context - can be applied in large part to the situation in Britain. Keller suggests that the seeker-sensitive model assumes that a church cannot do both evangelism and worship in the same service. On the contrary, he believes, following Calvin, that you can have transcendent adoration, effective edification and evangelism in the same service.¹⁷ Keller's proposed solution is what he calls "evangelistic worship". This methodology adopts the following 3 principles:

- Non-believers are expected to be present.
- Non-believers must find the praise of Christians comprehensible.
- Non believers can fall under conviction and be converted through comprehensible worship.¹⁸

I conclude this section with a warning from Kent Hughes, who fears that "many in the Free Church tradition may be giving away the very heart of an effective ministry as they uncritically enfold seeker-sensitive corporate worship patterns.....My concern is that it could, given enough time or the same trajectory, lead to post-Christian evangelicalism."¹⁹

c) Worship as the new sectarianism

I believe that some of the trends and approaches briefly outlined above are in large part responsible for the recent explosion of the worship wars. The emphasis on the congregation as consumers has created an individualism and selfishness with regard to this issue. It has fostered congregations who want to be entertained. It has elevated style above content. As a result worship is now the new sectarianism. Michael Hamilton observes that since the 1950s, denominational divisions have steadily become less important in American church life (and we can add the UK Church to this as well). However, he suggests:

At bottom we are all still sectarians; we still prefer to congregate with the like minded. Our new sectarianism is a sectarianism of worship

¹⁶ Keller, Timothy. "Evangelistic Worship", www.redeemer2.com/resources/papers/evangelisticworship.pdf, June 2001.

¹⁷ Keller, Timothy. "Reformed worship in the Global City" In Carson, *Worship by the Book*, p.203n.

¹⁸ Keller, "Evangelistic Worship."

¹⁹ Hughes, "Free Church Worship", pp. 139, 149.

style. The new sectarian creeds are dogmas of music. Worship seminars are the seminaries of the new sectarianism; their directors are its theologians. The ministers of the new sectarianism are our church worship leaders. The contemporary proliferation of different worship and music styles may well be the next century's test of our commitment to Christian unity. We seem to have learned charity in regard to differences over mode of baptism, church polity, and a number of doctrines like eternal security or the second blessing—differences that have already produced their schisms. It is not as clear, however, that we have developed the Christian maturity to deal with the deepening differences over music and worship that are now producing our new sectarianism.²⁰

It can be seen therefore that the issue of worship is not simply about music. The real challenges are far deeper than simply providing music that our congregations are happy with. The wider challenges must be faced if a God-honouring, biblical way forward for the contemporary church is to be found.

3) Worshipping as we please

In the helpful volume *Worship by the Book*, the contributors point out that there is no detailed biblical blueprint for worship. There will therefore be a legitimate diversity of opinion and a valid degree of freedom, but this is a very different freedom to the strident subjectivism and relativism that usually dominates the debate, and which sadly has produced more heat than light. There is no blueprint, but there are principles that must govern and inform our worship. We are *not* free to worship as we please. Our worship must be acceptable to the One who is worthy of our “Worth-ship”²¹ - God Himself.²² Reducing worship to a matter of personal preference is irresponsible at best, and at worst results in a form of idolatry. Calvin described men and women as “perpetual idol factories”²³ and this sobering description is an apt one for some tendencies within the contemporary evangelical church.

Who God is determines how we should worship him, and how we worship determines who we worship.²⁴ This is so because it impacts our concept of God, for worship is ultimately “an engagement with God on the terms that he proposes and in the way that he alone makes possible.”²⁵ Therefore,

²⁰ Hamilton, Michael. “The Triumph of Praise Songs” in *Christianity Today*, Vol. 43 No.8 (1999).

²¹ This is the Anglo-Saxon root of the word *Worship*.

²² Carson, *Worship by the Book*, p.54.

²³ Ligon Duncan III, J. “Foundations for Biblically Directed Worship” in Ryken, P, Thomas, D & Ligon Duncan III, J (Eds.) *Give Praise to God*. (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2003), p.59.

²⁴ Ligon Duncan III, J. “Does God Care How we Worship?” in Ryken, P, Thomas, D & Ligon Duncan III, J (Eds.) *Give Praise to God*. (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2003), p.33.

²⁵ Peterson, David. *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), p.20

In contrast to all human creativity and initiative, the Bible is to be our rule for how we worship God, because the Bible is our rule for how we are to think about God – and how we worship impacts our concept of God....The Bible (God’s own revelation regarding himself and his worship) – and not our own innovations, imaginations, experiences, opinions, and representations – is to determine how we worship God. This reminds us that there are two ways to commit idolatry: worship something other than the true God or worship the true God in the wrong way.²⁶

Consequently, neither the words we sing nor the music that accompanies them are neutral, as Tim Keller explains:

Musical form and style are not neutral. Contemporary worship advocates usually insist that music style is neutral and a matter of taste and that there is no reason why we cannot use any form of music. However, contemporary advocates actually do ‘draw lines’ recognizing that some music is inappropriate for gathered worship.....Nobody is really a musical relativist. Therefore each piece of music must be judged on its own merits.²⁷

Our music must also be the servant to the message of the words. On a practical level it is clear that different musical genres convey different theological truths better than others, as Montgomery demonstrates:

As in literature, there are generally accepted ‘rules’ of musical language which, when adhered to, enable the music to communicate as effectively as any spoken language. If the rules are broken indiscriminately the music fails to perform its appropriate function as a servant of the words.²⁸

Therefore, worship style is not simply a wholly subjective issue (although we must recognise that personal preferences will influence us in this area). There are guiding principles that we must heed (and these will be discussed in detail in Part 2). Style and content must not be divorced.

Marshal McLuhan made the well-known observation that “the medium is the message.”²⁹ This statement is not wholly accurate, but there is some truth in it, for Scripture knows no division between doctrine and worship. Michael Horton, writing in *Modern Reformation* suggests: “The problem is that modern church leaders do not seem to appreciate the extent to which style not only reflects content, but actually shapes it.” He warns that many churches have become captive to a marketing ethic, particularly in attitudes towards worship. This captivity does not require the explicit denial of any key doctrines and that is why many evangelical churches affirm orthodox confessional theology “while adopting

²⁶ Ligon Duncan III, J. “Does God Care How we Worship?”, p.33

²⁷ Keller, Tim. “Reformed worship in the Global City” In Carson, *Worship by the Book*, p.237.

²⁸ Montgomery, *Sing a New Song*, p.43.

²⁹ His book *Medium is the Message* (1967), argued that the form of media has more significant affect on society and knowledge than the content carried by the medium.

an essentially secular methodology that undermines everything they wish to pass on to the next generation.”³⁰ One example of this error is for a church to believe and preach the power of Christ’s reconciliatory work and the barriers that this has broken down while at the same time conceding that our musical differences are too great for Christ’s body to overcome. The church therefore cannot sing his praises together and instead creates different services for the various opposing groups. This is nothing short of tragic.

4) Worshipping “Worship”

We noted above that the “worship wars” are about much more than music. Music, although important in the worship process, is often elevated beyond its rightful place. “Music is just a tool meant to enable people to express themselves to God, yet we sometimes spend more time arguing over the tool than over the product and purpose of the tool.”³¹ It is also true however, that music can be underestimated and its place in our worship can be unhelpfully downplayed. For example, in some circles all elements of corporate worship services before the sermon are dismissed as “the preliminaries” This is equally erroneous. Aristotle observed that “Music has the power to shape character,” and Calvin acknowledged the significance of music, writing: “We know by experience that music has a secret and almost incredible power to move hearts.” So, music is undoubtedly a powerful medium, with great potential to be used by God for the edification of his people. I believe music helps to set the tone of the church service, helps to communicate doctrine and expresses our view of what God is like.

However, today music, or rather particular understandings of its form and function, have been elevated beyond all justification. In many churches the music ministry has taken over the corporate worship and people know of no worship apart from music. Who are the leaders of this ministry? Are they spiritually mature, sensitive individuals with the wisdom to understand the church and appreciate a breadth of styles from different eras. Are they theologically trained? More often than not, the answer to these questions is tragically, “No”. Carson poignantly asks “Are we beginning to worship *worship* rather than worship God?” If so, he suggests “It’s a bit like those who begin by admiring the sunset and soon begin to admire themselves admiring the sunset.”³²

5) When worship is good entertainment.

Worship is big business. A growing proportion of the music that many churches use is “owned” by large secular corporations such as EMI.³³ “Worship” music is

³⁰ Horton, Michael. “Is Style Neutral?” *Modern Reformation*. Jan/Feb, 1996.

³¹ Barna, *Focus on Worship Wars*.

³² Carson, *Worship by the Book*, p.31.

³³ EMI owns Alliance Music and distribute music from artists such as Kendrick and Delirious.

the fastest growing sector of the American music market, with an annual turnover of \$800M outstripping the classical and jazz sectors combined. Delirious have sold more albums in the US than Robbie Williams.³⁴ Worship bands conduct sell-out tours and are often treated with almost idolatrous affection by their fans. Their websites are dominated by pictures of themselves, news of their latest release, and its position in the Worship Charts “Top 10.” I suggest that the comments above³⁵ regarding our tendency to fall into idolatry are appropriate reflection here.

On the one hand this may appear to be a great victory for the gospel. Getting the gospel out into the real world, reaching our un-churched youth etc. There is undoubtedly some truth in this. However, the undisputed reality is that most of the music is purchased and played by Christians. I am concerned that we do not just adopt the music, songs and practices from the Contemporary Christian Music (CCM) movement wholesale and incorporate them into our churches without proper reflection. Some of the dangers in doing so are outlined below, but these can be summarised well for us in the subheading of the CCM magazine. The subheading is “Good Entertainment.”³⁶

When worship becomes entertainment, and those that lead us in worship become performers and icons, then the gospel has been done a great disservice. Steve Camp, a recording artist and member of the CCM movement has become increasingly concerned about the commercialism of worship, writing:

Those of us who are privileged to represent our Lord Jesus Christ in the arts should be galvanized by mission, not by ambition; by mandate, not by accolades; by love for the Master, not by the allurements of this world. ...Music is a powerful tool from the Lord Jesus to his church intended for worship, praise, encouragement, edification, evangelism, teaching and admonishing. And exhorting God’s people to holiness – with always our chief aim ‘to glorify God and worship Him forever’. But beloved, the serpentine foe of compromise has invaded the camp through years of specious living, skewed doctrine and most recently secular ownership of Christian music ministries.³⁷

If our worship music is owned and distributed by secular companies it is difficult to believe that good doctrine will feature very highly in the list of criteria used to determine what songs should be promoted. Good sales will. Dave Withers, Commercial Director of EMI-owned, Alliance Music admits that they are not free to choose which songs and artists they promote. “We oversee content as far as we can, but our hands are tied a bit”³⁸

³⁴ Hurd, E, “Let there be Rock.” *Telegraph Magazine*, December 14th 2002, p.49.

³⁵ See Section 3 “Worshipping How We Please”.

³⁶ This was the case when this article was being prepared in Jan 2003. This has since been changed.

³⁷ Camp, Steve. “Steve Camp’s 107 Theses: A call to Reformation in the Contemporary Christian Music Industry.” http://www.worship.com/steve_camp_107_theses.htm. 24th January 2003.

³⁸ “Facing the Music”, *IDEA Magazine*, Evangelical Alliance, Spring 2001.

“This points out a very worrying aspect of the Christian music business”, says Chris Cole of Cross Rhythms.

They have all (christian recording companies) been bought out by secular companies because they see a growing, lucrative market. So a heavy price is paid – not by the record executives or artists – but by young people buying and absorbing the music. Money is winning over spiritual content, which is being diluted. Where is the accountability in the music industry? For God’s sake, let’s not consign our kids to the fire of nothingness because of the bottom line of dollars.³⁹

Rob Warner author of *I believe in Discipleship* highlights another danger:

Just as pop songs give young people a vocabulary of love to express their feelings, so they need Christian songs to express their faith and related experiences. But I have to say that many worship songs do not have a particularly clear and thorough grasp of Bible teaching. Often they are no more profound than secular pop music, and the composer’s grasp of Bible teaching and life is very thin.

Andrew Wilson-Dickson highlights the danger of allowing worship to become entertainment. “To move gospel music out of the church and into the world of entertainment changes it subtly, for the musical and emotional has been exploited while the spiritual has been denied or perverted.”⁴⁰ To this I would add that moving Christian performance music from the stadium to the “sanctuary” is equally dangerous. Montgomery warns “the commercialisation of Christian worship music is sailing perilously close to the winds of materialistic idolatry.”⁴¹

6) A lack of quality teaching.

Scores of new worship CDs and song books appear every month and worship tours and seminars are proliferating. And yet, many of these resources fail to address the subject in a Biblically informed way. I consider this to be a significant factor contributing to the current issue. Where there is conflict, I believe church leaders need to deal with it more effectively than simply bowing to the various demands that are made by sectors of the congregation. Teaching on the form and function of biblical worship is a priority for the contemporary evangelical church. Church members, particularly those involved in the “worship” ministry of their churches, may need to be disciplined if these individuals are consistently unwilling to “look to the needs of their brothers and sisters”; if they are unwilling to submit to the leadership of the church; and if they are unwilling to tolerate any change; or indeed if no change is enough. The unity of the church and the glory of God are at stake and we must not allow such great realities to be traded for the petty squabbles of a vociferous minority.

These battles are inappropriate distractions from meaningful ministry and fruitful discipleship. Christians need to be more zealous about,

³⁹ *ibid.*

⁴⁰ Wilson-Dickson, Andrew. *The Story of Christian Music*. (Oxford: Lion, 1992), p.203

⁴¹ Montgomery, *Sing a New Song*. p.106.

and devoted to worshipping God. The Church needs to move on and focus on the One worthy of worship and the desire of His heart - which is to be worshiped with intensity and passion by His people - rather than to focus on the tools used to facilitate our expressions of love and gratitude.⁴²

SECTION 2. PRINCIPLES OF CORPORATE WORSHIP

The focus of this discussion moves now to an outline of some of the Biblical principles of worship. It is generally accepted that in the New Covenant worship is whole-life centred. However, our corporate worship has the dual function of affording God his rightful place (as we praise him in song, offer our prayers to him and receive his word), and of mutual edification. As we noted above, the content and format of this corporate worship is not determined in detail in Scripture. Nevertheless, if the Biblical principles that should govern our corporate worship are taken seriously I believe much of the conflict surrounding this issue will be resolved. Seven principles are noted below. These are largely a consolidation of the principles outlined by Carson *et al*⁴³, and by Montgomery⁴⁴, supplemented by some of my own convictions and observations.

1). God centred.

Worship is first and foremost about God. This is in contrast to the human focussed model that aims to please as many people as possible, be the least offensive to the outsider and which results in “dumbing-down”. “When humanity is played to first, when what humanity wants becomes the determining factor, it will corrupt not only worship but theology.”⁴⁵ We must add here too, that as Christ is the ultimate revelation of God, he must also be at the centre of our worship, otherwise the focus of our worship can become a vague, unspecified deity. This may seem obvious to the reader, however, even a brief review of many recent worship resources reveals a dominant anthropocentrism - the centre of focus being the worshipper rather than the One being worshipped. It is certainly appropriate for us to express our feelings, hopes and fears to God (the Psalmist is our supreme model here), but our worship must primarily proclaim the splendour of God and not just our meagre (however well intentioned) feelings about him.

2). Biblical

According to Montgomery, “From the days of Ambrose, through Luther and Wesley, what was sung was the doctrine of the church. We are losing this, and

⁴² Barna, “Focus on ‘Worship Wars’”.

⁴³ Carson (ed.), *Worship by the Book*.

⁴⁴ Montgomery, *Sing a New Song*.

⁴⁵ Hughes, “Free Church Worship”, p.150.

losing it rapidly.”⁴⁶ The Wesley’s saw their hymns as a valuable didactic tool in an illiterate culture. Charles Wesley’s hymns convey in powerful poetic form many of the wonderful theological insights of his brother John.⁴⁷ While our culture may not be illiterate generally, biblically literacy in our society and in the church is now considered by some to be at its lowest level since the Reformation. Song must therefore be an important strand in any strategy seeking to halt or reverse this slide. Ashton commends Cranmer’s understanding of worship as a helpful model. Worship according to Cranmer should be biblical, accessible, and balanced. Cranmer was passionately convinced that the text of our services, including our songs should not conflict with the bible – but should positively express the ideas of the Bible – often in the very language of the Bible. Hughes explains that the Word must infuse every aspect of our services:

This means that our corporate worship must be Word-centred from beginning to end. We do not meet for “worship *and* the Word.” It is *all* a ministry of the Word. This means that the preaching must be wholly biblical – in a word, *expositional*....But installing exposition as the main event is not enough. God’s Word must infuse everything. The careful reading of the Word must be central. Hymns and songs must be Word-saturated.⁴⁸

The songs and hymns we sing should play an important teaching role. We must aim to teach the whole counsel of God not only in sermon but in song as well.

What we must strive for is growing knowledge of God and delight in him – not delight in worship *per se*, but delight in God....There is so much more to know about God than the light diet on offer in many churches; and genuine believers, when they are fed wholesome spiritual meals, soon delight all the more in God himself. This also accounts for the importance of “re-telling” in the Bible. (e.g., Psalm 75-76). Retelling the Bible’s story line brings to mind again and again something of God’s character, past actions, and words. It calls to mind God’s great redemptive acts across the panorama of redemptive history. This perspective is frequently lost in contemporary worship, where there are few elements calculated to make us remember the great turning points in the Bible.⁴⁹

Matt Redman, one of the most talented and popular of the contemporary Christian musicians admits that this is both a challenge and a responsibility for song-writers. However, he reveals that “personally I never write songs to teach, but I’m aware they do.”⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Montgomery, *Sing a New Song*, p.118.

⁴⁷ It is estimated Charles Wesley composed 6500 Hymns. Wilson-Dickson, *The Story of Christian Music*, p.116.

⁴⁸ Hughes, “Free Church Worship”, p.159.

⁴⁹ Carson, *Worship by the Book* 2002:32-33.

⁵⁰ Seager, P., (ed) “Facing the Music”, *IDEA Magazine*, Evangelical Alliance, Spring 2001.

3) Accessible

Tim Keller argues that Calvin advocated accessible or simple worship. This simplicity is a crucial strand in Keller's "Doxological evangelism" which rests on the conviction that we worship before the world as well as before God and that evangelism and worship are not mutually exclusive. However, this simplicity must not be at the expense of transcendence:

A lack of simplicity or a lack of transcendence will bore, confuse, or offend non-believers. On the other hand, if a service aims very strictly at being *only* evangelistic, the Christians will not have their hearts engaged in worship, and the main power of "doxological evangelism" is lost. Non-Christians will not see a people formed and sustained by glorious praise.⁵¹

4) Corporate

Mark Ashton helpfully indicates that Paul's emphasis in 1 Cor. 11-14 is on intelligibility, order, clarity and "corporateness."⁵² This corporate dimension is particularly important in light of "the common assumption that church services should be designed primarily to facilitate and encourage a private communion with God, whether by spiritual exercises or ritual."⁵³ Similarly, Tim Keller underlines the importance of this mutual edification and suggests that "community building" is one of the "tests of reformed corporate worship". Christian worship is essential to our unique identity. It is both a cause and effect of our being this distinct community.⁵⁴ Therefore, we must resist an individualistic interpretation of worship and seek to involve the whole congregation as participants rather than as an audience. The latter can result if too much emphasis is put on the worship as a performance. Montgomery expresses concern "at the way in which the domination of the leading band deprives the worshippers of the experience of participating in communal worship, and they could easily, in some cases, be reduced to the role of spectators."⁵⁵

5) Reverent and Orderly

Keller uses Calvin as a model. Calvin refused to choose between transcendence and accessibility. The glory of God and the edification of participants must be held in tension. This can be achieved if the following principles are heeded: Simplicity, the centrality of the Bible, and congregational participation. With regard to simplicity Keller urges us to retain "dignity in representation" and warns against exchanging ceremony with sentimentality. When this is done mediocrity and informality result and there is no sense of awe, no sense of being in the

⁵¹ Keller, "Reformed Worship in the Global City", pp.218-219.

⁵² Ashton, "Following in Cranmers' Footsteps," p.88.

⁵³ *ibid.*, p.67.

⁵⁴ Keller, "Reformed Worship in the Global City," p.219.

⁵⁵ Montgomery, *Sing a New Song*. p.51.

presence of the Holy.⁵⁶ The goal of worship is transcendence. Both heart and head should be transformed as worship is both devotional and didactic. The demeanour of those leading is therefore important. Transcendence is served best when delight and awe are evident in the leader.

Hughes stresses the importance of right conduct in corporate worship. Our worship must acknowledge God's rightful place as He is a consuming fire who can only be approached because of his grace.

I have come to see that while all of life is worship, gathered worship with the body of Christ is at the heart of a life of worship. Corporate worship is intended by God to inform and elevate a life of worship. In this respect, I personally view how we conduct gathered worship as a matter of life and death.⁵⁷

6) Consecrated

Corporate worship provides mutual edification and strengthens us to live consecrated lives of worship throughout the week. It is therefore whole-hearted, giving over our mind, bodies and soul to the service and adoration of our God. It is more than a buzz on a Sunday. Worship engages the whole being and therefore should be passionate and engaged. Another of Keller's "tests of reformed corporate worship" is "character for service". Our corporate worship must lead to "all of life worship" and service in society.⁵⁸

7) Balanced

We will deal with the issue of balance in more depth because I believe it is often where the battle is fiercest. We all need a balanced diet and this is as true spiritually as it is physically.

a) Breadth and Variety

The precise meaning of the Biblical references to "psalms, hymns and spiritual songs" (Eph 5:19 and Col 3:16) is unclear as these are not three neatly defined categories. However, together these three terms possible indicate that our corporate worship should incorporate a variety and richness of sung praise. However, it is interesting to observe that many of the "alternatives" that have been adopted by many churches during recent years have themselves become narrow entrenched traditions⁵⁹ (and inferior ones according to Carson⁶⁰). I believe this is resulting in an imbalance that is unhealthy. It is important to remember though, that the primary aim of providing this breadth must not be "to keep as many people happy as possible", but to enlarge the experience and knowledge of the congregation.

⁵⁶ Keller, "Reformed Worship in the Global City," p.209.

⁵⁷ Hughes, "Free Church Worship," p.142.

⁵⁸ Keller, "Reformed Worship in the Global City," p.220.

⁵⁹ Eg. Insisting that there ought to be a lengthy block of praise songs to enable the congregation to "enter into true worship"

⁶⁰ Carson, *Worship by the Book*, p.13.

Corporate meetings of the church, however much God is worshipped in them, have the collateral responsibility of educating, informing, and transforming the minds of those who attend, of training the people of God in righteousness, of expanding their horizons not only so that they better know God (and therefore better worship him) but so that they better grasp the dimensions of the church that he has redeemed by the death of his Son (and therefore better worship him) – and that means, surely, some sort of exposure to more than the narrow slice of church that subsists in one particular subculture. The importance of intelligibility (in music, let us say) must therefore be juxtaposed with the responsibility to expand the limited horizons of one narrow tradition.⁶¹

If we allow a concern to please the congregation to become the primary goal we will have failed in our responsibility, as we will put the focus on the congregation as consumers, and God is reduced to a commodity.

We cannot suit every taste present in our congregation in everything we do, nor should we: it could be a bad sign if someone leaving at the end of a church service remarked, 'Every aspect of that service was exactly how I would have wanted it to be.' Every church service ought to be a mixture of tastes, challenging all of us to make greater allowances for the tastes and preferences of others present.⁶²

The balance must not be reduced to a simple division of songs and hymns, but rather attention must be paid to the balance of genre, emotional mood, tone etc. Our services must stretch the intelligent as well as feed the simple. They must comfort the sorrowing as well as celebrate with the rejoicing.

b) Ancient and Modern

This balance can only be achieved if we are prepared to treat the church's past, present and future seriously, and with wisdom and sensitivity, submitting all to the test of scripture. Much of the conflict has been because we have not treated the Bible, tradition and culture with sufficient respect. Tim Keller rightly states that "an unwillingness to consult tradition is not in keeping with either Christian humility or Christian community. Nor is it a thoughtful response to the postmodern rootlessness that now leads so many to seek connection to ancient ways and peoples."⁶³ Similarly, J. Ligon Duncan argues that "an appreciation of the devotional treasure of the ages bequeathed to us in the legacy of the historic worship of the church helps us resist the rampant chronological snobbery of our own age."⁶⁴

The church must also be willing to embrace current developments where these will serve the cause of the gospel and help us to reach out to our culture more

⁶¹ *ibid.*, p.56

⁶² Ashton, "Following in Cranmer's Footsteps", p.86.

⁶³ Keller, "Reformed Worship in the Global City", p.194.

⁶⁴ Ligon Duncan III, J. "Foundations for Biblically Directed Worship", p.61.

effectively. Indeed, I believe we urgently need more talented songwriters who can express the timeless truths of the Bible in ways our culture can understand. I also believe that many of the great hymns of the past could be given new a lease of life with sensitive linguistic and stylistic updating. We must also avoid simplistic comparisons between the old and the new. These are unhelpful and problematic as we are comparing the “sifted” old with the “unsifted” and unrefined new. However, we must be prepared to exercise discernment and selectivity in choosing what material we use. Hymns that are written in an idiom that is not easily understood⁶⁵ or are accompanied by tunes that are hard to sing should be discarded or linguistically and stylistically updated. We must also be prepared to draw attention to some of the dangers associated with an easy acceptance of some new material. Montgomery’s detailed analysis of recent songs reveals that:

In many of the latest contemporary worship-songs, the lyrics are almost incidental,.... with words and phrases (often clichés) chosen for their sound rather than their meaning....The fact that many current songwriters and worship-leaders are first and foremost musicians goes some way to explaining the dual phenomena of the popular appeal of their songs, and the general weakness of many of their words.⁶⁶

It is also true that “Any corporate worship that is strictly contemporary will become dated very quickly. And will be gauged to a very narrow market.”⁶⁷ In the research by George Barna referred to above, it was found that nearly half of the respondents said that the new songs lacked spiritual depth. Keller points out that some popular music has severe limitations for corporate worship, as it is the product of mass-produced commercial interests and is marked by sentimentality, lack of artistry, sameness and individualism.⁶⁸ Montgomery, who is a Pastor and Musician, and certainly not a traditionalist (e.g. he advocates the removal of Organs), has a very negative view of much CCM.

The standard of contemporary worship songs is embarrassingly low. In spite of much talk about the great new wave of songwriters that has emerged, when one takes time to examine the theological depth and literary quality of the songs in question, one is left with an over-riding sense of shallowness, sentimentality and sameness. The songs may be popular, even catchy, and the writers may have earned their reputations as competent guitar players (usually) and leaders of worship at mainstream evangelical events; however, it seems that in

⁶⁵ I am not suggesting that all references to ancient words such as “thee”, “thou” etc ought to be updated, for everyone understands what is meant by these words. Furthermore, I believe it can be helpful for the contemporary church to include some ancient material in their corporate worship, as this serves to remind the faithful that they are worshipping God along with believers down the ages, and it reminds them of the historic roots of the church.

⁶⁶ Montgomery, *Sing a New Song*, p.37.

⁶⁷ Keller, “Reformed Worship in the Global City”, p.194.

⁶⁸ *ibid.*

many cases their reputation far exceeds the worthiness of their compositions.⁶⁹

A large part of the problem of this imbalance has, in my view, been caused by the almost total dominance of a very narrow selection of worship resources, with almost all of these coming from the charismatic end of the evangelical spectrum. In the past each denomination had its own song books, reflecting its own doctrinal convictions and adding a richness and diversity across the evangelical church. This is less true now. The Spring Harvest worship book, which is updated annually, is the main source of songs for thousands of evangelical churches. Montgomery, warns:

The big danger is that we become lazy and uncritical. It is not just traditionalists that revert to their comfort zones rather than engaging in creative and thoughtful analysis. The unquestioning adoption of the next Spring Harvest book as the authoritative canon of praise, can be as debilitating to growth through worship as a rigorous adherence to the liturgical forms of Cranmer's Book of Common Prayer.⁷⁰

In an article entitled "Singing the blues in Church" Hughes Oliphant Old points out the false presupposition that all that we sing in church has to be positive and uplifting. This simply does not square with the Bible. Many of biblical prayers and psalms involve crying before God. "Singing the blues in church is a matter of honesty....From the standpoint of Scripture nothing could falsify our worship more than coming and acting as though everything were just great."⁷¹ Hughes and Keller also advise that in the selection of song, we do not forget silence. In Keller's model, each service incorporates at least two periods of silence. Using a wide range of genres acknowledges the range of theological truths that need to be conveyed, the range of human emotions that need to be expressed and the range of personal preferences that exist. The tunes used must fit their setting and the serve the words. "Whatever the genre of music, it must meet three criteria: text, tune, and fit."⁷² Those selecting music and songs must ensure that a wide range of genres is used. This does not mean that each service needs to incorporate all of these, but it does mean that all worshipers are exposed to them on a regular basis. Keller identifies the difficulty of blending different genres, but nevertheless acknowledges, "judicious mixing of classical and folk in a service is both possible and desirable."⁷³

⁶⁹ Montgomery, *Sing a New Song*, p.58.

⁷⁰ *ibid.*, p.77.

⁷¹ Oliphant Old, Hughes. "Singing the blues in Church"

<http://www.ccli.co.uk/worshipresources/Articles.cfm?itemID=12>, 24th January, 2003

⁷² Hughes, "Free Church Worship." p.169.

⁷³ Keller, "Reformed Worship in the Global City", p.238.

c) Planning and Leading “Worship”

Selecting the songs and hymns that are to be used, deciding on the format, and leading the service play an essential role in maintaining a healthy and appropriate balance in our worship. This balance must apply to both the content and the style. The individuals who are involved in this important ministry have a significant responsibility as Carson notes. “The way they lead must in the first instance be marked by faithfulness to the Word of God: they must know their Bibles well.”⁷⁴ However, this is often not the case. Many contemporary worship leaders have training or experience in music but none in Biblical studies, theology or church history. Without this training the criteria for choosing songs can easily be reduced to personal preference and a desire to keep the congregation happy. “If such leaders operate on their own with little guidance or training or input from senior pastors, the situation commonly degenerates from the painful to the pitiful.”⁷⁵ I believe that those involved in this ministry must also be able to thread the various parts of the service together with a theological and spiritual “logic”. Without this the unhelpful but common attitude that only singing or music equals worship is reinforced. Carson highlights this danger:

It is folly to think that only part of the “service” is worship – everything but the sermon, perhaps, or only the singing. The notion of a “worship leader” who leads the ‘worship’ part of the service is so bizarre, from a New Testament perspective, as to be embarrassing.⁷⁶

Similarly, Montgomery warns that

Too many churches who have departed from the ‘one-person show’, have erred in the opposite direction by handing over full responsibility for worship to a group of team who may be adequate musicians but who neither know well the people whom they are meant to be leading in worship, nor have sufficient theological knowledge or Christian experience to raise the level of worship above a series of banal introductions and generalised prayers.⁷⁷

Keller advises that all who are involved with leading worship need much practical and spiritual preparation.⁷⁸ This preparation should inform the following aspects:

- Demeanour. Those leading need to demonstrate dignity and a sense of wonder that draw attention away from the leader to God. Humility and authenticity are essential.
- Emotion. It should be clear to others that the leader has the full range of emotions but are able to keep them in check.
- Language. The language used by leaders should not be too archaic on the one hand, or too colloquial on the other.

⁷⁴ Carson, *Worship by the Book*, p.59.

⁷⁵ *ibid.*, p.47n.

⁷⁶ *ibid.*, p.47.

⁷⁷ Montgomery, *Sing a New Song*, p.93.

⁷⁸ Keller, “Reformed Worship in the Global City”, p.223.

Those leading corporate worship must be attuned to the Word. They must also understand and respect the congregation. For these reasons, I maintain that the primary responsibility of leading public worship must rest with the Minister. This is not to say that the Minister should not sometimes involve others who are able and gifted in this area. However, if the Minister is not the one who is primarily responsible for leading his people in corporate worship an unhelpful separation between the sermon and the rest of the service can result. Furthermore, the congregation should not only benefit from the Minister's experience and knowledge of the Word as he preaches, but also as he prays and as he leads the people in their worship of God, under whom he has the responsibility for nurturing and directing the church.

God-honouring and congregation-edifying services take significant preparation and planning. Ashton, Keller and others recommend weekly service planning where all who are taking part can meet to plan and pray:

It is particularly important to assess the sermon and to consider how the rest of the service relates to it. Sermons should not be divorced from the context in which they are delivered. Every preacher benefits from hearing his sermons reviewed, and every service benefits from the preacher playing a part in its preparation.⁷⁹

Keller suggests a system of "Templates" can be used, perhaps 25 on a rotation basis. Therefore each template is only repeated twice during the year. This helps to avoid unnecessary work but also protects against over-repetition. The songs, creeds, and prayers used in each template will vary from week to week depending on the Church calendar, preaching programme and other considerations.

⁷⁹ Ashton, "Following in Cranmer's Footsteps", p.81.

Conclusion

This paper is not comprehensive but my hope is that it is of use in helping the reader understand some factors that have contributed to the tragically common “Worship Wars”. I have tried to show that this problem is really a symptom of a wider malaise in the contemporary evangelical church, which is sadly often preoccupied with style rather than content, a church that has relegated theology and doctrine and has imported a culture of entertainment and the secular world’s strategies for trying to promote growth.

I also trust that some of the biblical and practical principles for corporate worship are of some assistance to those who are trying to find a solution to this problem. I am aware that the subject of worshipping God must not be treated merely as an academic topic, but deserves great care, sensitivity and wisdom, for worship is the greatest privilege and responsibility that God’s people are engaged in. Our corporate worship must glorify God and edify our fellow-believers. It must also communicate our faith in a credible way to a watching, and often sceptical world.

The Bible is our sufficient and infallible guide in all matters of faith and conduct, and this is certainly true with regard to how we should worship the God of the Bible. If the Church takes the Biblical principles of corporate worship seriously and discards all that is incompatible with these principles, then I am confident a positive, God-honouring way through the “worship wars” can be found. It is appropriate to conclude by referring to the first statement of the Westminster Catechism:

Q. What is the chief end (aim) of man?

A. To glorify God and enjoy him for ever.

“Let us worship God”

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