

## Concerns about Contemporary Corporate Worship - John Sweetman

*“Contemporary worship” has taken the evangelical worship scene in Australia by storm. In this article, John examines some concerns raised about this trend and its ramifications, and suggests some possible pathways forward.*

### Introduction

While corporate worship styles in many churches remain diverse, there has been a significant move towards the use of contemporary worship styles in Protestant churches over recent years. Based on many years of research in Australian churches, Kaldor, Castle and Dixon (2002, 32) state, “In general, in Anglican and Protestant churches there has been a shift in worship style towards increased attendee participation, informality and the use of contemporary music.” They have found at least two advantages of this shift in worship style; firstly, churches with contemporary styles of worship are “significantly more likely to be attracting newcomers without a church background and growing numerically than other churches” (2002, 33). Secondly, they are “much more likely to retain their young adults than those who are more traditional or formal in their worship” (2002, 33). With these healthy advantages, it is no surprise that contemporary worship is being embraced enthusiastically by numerous churches who have a desire to provide worship that is relevant to the society they serve. There appears to be much to gain and little to lose.

As a pastor, practical theologian and baby boomer, I have been a keen supporter and promoter of this change in worship style over my 30 years of ministry. But, along with many other scholars and practitioners, I have some growing concerns about its practice. In this article, I will raise some of these concerns and suggest ways in which contemporary worship can be developed to more effectively honour God in spirit and truth.

### What is contemporary worship?

Some writers use the word ‘contemporary’ as equivalent to ‘modern day.’ In other words, a worship form is contemporary if it is a form being used today. From this perspective, Langford (1999, 18) describes three primary patterns of contemporary worship: liturgical, praise and worship, and seeker-oriented. These are the main forms of worship being used in the contemporary church in the West. Other authors suggest that contemporary worship means *relevant* worship. Contemporary worship is any form of worship that is relevant to the worshippers and their cultural context. Benedict and Miller (1995, 10-16) list seven characteristics of contemporary worship that include issues like its willingness to change, its practical application to people, its flow, its grace-base, and its friendliness. They list characteristics of worship that are contextual for contemporary Westerners. Factors that have influenced the rise of relevant worship in the West include the charismatic movement, the church growth movement, the praise and worship movement and the seeker movement. Plantinga and Rozeboom (2003, 26) agree that contemporary worship basically is “contemporary, current, of the present period.” However, they distinguish ‘contemporary worship’ from ‘Contemporary Worship’ (capital C, capital W), a distinct form of worship whose development they trace through the last half-century (2003, 27-38). According to Plantinga and Rozeboom, characteristics of Contemporary Worship include the use of technology, worship led by a band and singers, a preponderance of recently-written worship songs, ceremonial minimalism, and a seamless style of worship focused around music.

Some authors more definitively categorise contemporary worship by its use of contemporary music. For example, Pilt (Pinson 2009, 148) defines contemporary worship as “that expression of worship

within the Christian church today that is marked by the primary usage of contemporarily written worship lyrics and music, is sonically concurrent (to some degree) with the music of popular culture, and is used widely and increasingly across the Protestant (and to some degree, Roman Catholic) spectrum of today's globally worshiping congregations." According to Pilt, contemporary worship is centred around and indistinguishable from the use of contemporary music. Frame (1997, 8-9) discriminates between contemporary worship music and contemporary worship positing that contemporary worship originated from a desire for worship to be more seeker-friendly whereas contemporary worship music can trace its origins to the renewal movement of the Jesus Revolution of the late 1960s in America. However, he admits (1997, 8) that "for many people contemporary worship music stands or falls with contemporary worship."

For this article, I will define contemporary worship as "the form of worship that is centred around and dependent on contemporary music." While contemporary worship is often also characterised by the use of contemporary language in leading, preaching and praying, and a relaxed and informal worship atmosphere, it is its reliance on contemporary music that is fundamental to its practice. Pete Ward, in *Selling Worship*, argues that it was the use of popular music that changed the church's style of worship (2005, 65).

## Concerns about contemporary worship

Contemporary worship has transformed worship services in many churches. Worshipers are more aware of God's presence, are more involved and passionate, and are more willing to bring their friends to church. Many churches have benefited from the changes in worship style and God has been honoured. But despite its popularity and wide acceptance by churches and worshippers, contemporary worship has its share of critics. It is impossible in this article to adequately discuss the range of criticisms, but I will briefly examine some of the more prominent concerns. This survey of critiques will form the context for a more detailed discussion of my own concerns. For Johansson (1998), the main problem with contemporary worship is the style of music that has been corrupted by secular worldviews. He argues that Christians have been influenced by culture to believe that there are no divine aesthetic absolutes or standards and so music is seen to be purely a matter of taste. Counteracting this position, he argues that music has theological quality. He shows that characteristics of the gospel like sacrifice, discipleship and principles are denied by the values of pop music like immediate gratification, consumption and success (1998, 76). Johansson (1998, 85) posits that "... the spirit of pop is to be found in the syndrome of trivialization, simplism, reduction to an average, reduction to a formula, mass production, commercialization, and broad dissemination."

Other authors are more concerned about the words and themes of the songs. Page (2004), for example, is critical of the quality of the lyrics. He argues that the worship song is based on the pop song rather than the poem which "leads to a downgrading of the importance of the lyric" (2004, 48), resulting in "incomprehensible songs with archaic imagery, and repetitive themes" (2004, 3). Prince (2008) finds a number of weaknesses in the themes of the lyrics. He observes that "songwriters and worship ministries have tended to draw a great deal from the principles of the old covenant" rather than the gospel (2008, 28), that the lyrics are too self-focused rather than focused on God (2008, 112-123), and that there are too few praise songs (2004, 77). A concern about contemporary worship often raised by those from liturgical traditions is its abandonment of what has been learned through 2000 years of Christian worship. Historic worship offers "rich tradition, heritage, beauty, order, content, and substance" (Thielen 2000, 15). Webber is concerned that we have lost the New Testament and early church focus on both Word and Table. According to Webber (1998), worship should progress through the four traditional acts of worship - we enter into God's presence, we hear God speak, we celebrate at God's Table, and we are dismissed. Contemporary worship gives attention to singing and Word, but little else that has traditionally been valued.

One fierce critic of contemporary worship and the culture that pervades it has been Dawn. She sees much contemporary worship as consumer-oriented and highlights the following inadequate responses to cultural changes that are prevalent in much of the contemporary church and its worship (1999, 63-65):

1. *Relativism*. We are offering less truth and becoming therapeutic rather than theological.
2. *Entertainment*. We sacrifice content for entertainment and confuse worship with evangelism and evangelism with marketing. Worship form should reflect the type of life to which Jesus calls us.
3. *Pluralistic*. We blur our unique identity as the people of God instead of accentuating it with loving commitment.
4. *Rootless*. We give up our heritage as communities with long histories and global connections.
5. *Loss of moral authority*. We become tolerant to the point where we cease to be a people formed by the narratives of Scripture.
6. *Consumerism*. We offer a range of options to meet 'felt needs' and make decisions by majority preferences instead of embracing what is truly needful.

These criticisms of contemporary worship need to be considered carefully. As Plantinga and Rozeboom (2003, 4) observe, "Worship *deserves* a good argument, since worship stands right at the intersection of the church and the world, or of 'Christ and culture.' In worship, as in all else, Christians want to know how to celebrate the gospel in such a way as to show its attraction, but also in such a way that it's still the gospel that gets celebrated, and not some cheaper grace of our own." While most of the above critics call for a radical reformation of contemporary worship, I am not convinced that such a rectification is possible or necessary. As the contemporary worship movement continues to expand its influence, my goal is not to dismantle the movement or even blend it with other movements, but to celebrate its strengths and bolster and develop areas that need improvement. To this end I will identify my major concerns and suggest ways forward for the movement.

### **My own concerns about contemporary worship**

My first concern is that contemporary worship now relies almost completely on music and singing. While singing and music has almost always made a prominent contribution to the corporate worship of God, so also have other worship components like prayer, Scripture reading, the Lord's Supper, creeds, confession, silence and testimony. There are many evidences of the dominance of music in contemporary worship. Preparing an order of worship mainly involves choosing songs. Prayers and Scripture readings are usually included in worship to transition between songs. The worship leader is almost always a musician. Preparing for worship involves practising songs. A worship team is usually, in actuality, a music team. Despite Page's (2004) concerns, I recognise that some excellent songs are being written, and unlike Johannson (1998) I am convinced that much contemporary music enables worshippers to honour to God. Many music teams are passionate about worship and are doing an excellent job with the songs. However, with the dominance of music, I'm concerned that other important forms of worship are not being developed, creativity is diminishing, non-singing worshippers are offered few resources for worship, and some songs are becoming too complicated musically for unfamiliar worshippers. To put it bluntly, contemporary worship is in danger of becoming single-faceted and boring. A preponderance of songs has lessened the opportunity for the creativity that God expects in our response to his revelation. I'm not convinced that Webber's (1998) blended worship is the solution for non-liturgical churches, but we do need to find ways to diversify the elements in our worship.

My other major concern is that thoughtful theology is being lost from worship. I agree with Dawn (1995) that our worship is in danger of being 'dumbed down' by the loss of biblical truth and theological insight. I'm not referring primarily to the songs. While I am convinced by Prince (2008) that we need to be more careful in our selection of songs, there are many contemporary songs have excellent theology. A diversity of quality in songs is not new. The hymns written over the last 500 years evidenced a similar range of quality before time weeded out most of the ordinary ones. I agree with Prince (2008) that we need mechanisms to ensure that our song choice is gospel-oriented and God-centred, but this is not the major issue. The loss of theological quality appears to be more a by-product of a change in worship leadership. Many have applauded the shift of worship leadership from clergy to laity over the last 20 years. We are now choosing worship leaders who are gifted to lead worship rather than those gifted and trained to teach Scripture. However, "gifted to lead worship" often means gifted in contemporary music, but not necessarily gifted in spiritual, theological leadership. This shift of leadership has definitely improved the singing and has released pastors from an extra responsibility, but in many cases it has also resulted in a lack of theological depth in directions, comments and prayers by worship leaders. I am concerned that some of the most important leadership in our churches (some have argued that corporate worship is the most significant influence in forging a person's theology) is in the hands of those who may have not been equipped for or understand the significant role of worship leader. Service leadership is an important spiritual leadership role. The qualifications for and responsibilities of spiritual leadership are spelled out clearly in Scripture (for example in 1 Tim. 3).

### **Possible pathways forward for contemporary worship**

In light of the concerns I have raised, I would suggest the following practical steps to forge a more creative and theologically sound form of contemporary worship.

First, pastors and spiritual leaders need to take responsibility for corporate church worship. If pastors do not lead worship, they need to be heavily involved in setting the direction, reviewing the theology and providing feedback. Pastoral leaders are responsible for the spiritual and theological health of the church (Heb. 13:17). Most take their preaching role very seriously, but many have unthinkingly abandoned responsibility for the worship. However, worship and music play a vital role in theological understanding. According to Prince (2008, 16), Aristotle in 386 BC said, "You take control of the government, education and religion. Give me control of the music and I will control the destiny of the nation." Pastoral responsibility for worship does not necessarily rule out musicians and young people from leading worship. Many are developing spiritual leaders. But they need to be made aware of their responsibility, taught, disciplined, given feedback and supported as leaders of the church.

Second, creative teams need to be developed to prepare worship services under the direction of the church leadership. Members of the team could include a musician (knowledgeable in contemporary Christian music), a theologian (someone with a strong, practical understanding of the Bible), an artist from a non-musical field (so that the team thinks more than music), and a technology guru (to guide what can be done with technology). This team can plan services or at least guide and resource worship leaders. This team must ask the question of all services, "How do the non-singers worship?" Non-singers may include the elderly who can't relate to the style of music, the children who can't read the words, the new people who don't know the songs, the new churchgoers (especially men) who have never sung in groups in their life, the tone deaf, and those who don't like the sound of their voice. With a creative team in support, worship leaders who are gifted in worship areas other than music can be used. Generally a music leader can assist them and lead the songs.

Third, a number of models of worship services need to be provided for worship leaders. The model most contemporary worship leaders follow is extended singing, with a few words of exhortation or prayer in between the songs, leading to the sermon. It's too difficult for most worship leaders to create something different from scratch, hence the great similarities of contemporary worship in many churches. But if churches can offer a few different models for their worship leaders, it may enable greater variety within the security of a church-approved model. One model of worship worth exploring is Webber's (1998) four acts of worship. It can be adapted without its liturgical aspects. A personal concern about our contemporary worship model is that preaching (revelation) usually follows the worship time. If worship is "our response to God's revelation," then a model of corporate worship that promotes preaching towards the beginning of the service and allows significant time for response may be valuable. At the least, a model that includes Communion as an integral part of the worship needs to be available.

Fourth, creative worship needs to be developed in other situations beside church services. Contemporary worship services will probably remain music-dominated for quite some time. Space for real creativity in worship may be found in settings that don't have access to the resources that contemporary worship requires. For example, we should encourage and resource our small groups and smaller communities to develop worship forms that do not rely on singing.

## Conclusion

While the practice of contemporary worship has certainly assisted churches to reach their communities and retain their young people, it has some worrying features that could lead to the diminution of worship. However, if concerns about the lack of creative diversity and thoughtful theology in our practise of worship can be addressed effectively, contemporary worship can continue to be an effective vehicle for worshippers responding to God's revelation.

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