

Tradition Vs. Traditionalism

Exploring The Contemporary Worship Model

Introduction: Ephesians 4:11-16

- A. Perhaps it is an occupational hazard, but I always notice “church signs.” I suspect you do too. And you have probably noticed that they are changing. Many churches now offer more than one kind of service. They will have a traditional service followed by a contemporary service.
1. Contemporary worship is about **the music**.
 - a. In fact, for some the two are virtually the same. A contemporary service is essentially defined by the music.
 - b. There will be no congregational singing and certainly no traditional hymns. In fact, organs and choirs are frowned on.
 - c. Instead, there will be a praise band with professional singers raising the roof with modern songs that sound a lot like soft-rock music.
 - d. In some groups even the praise band is beginning to be dated. They are simply using a worship DJ.
 2. Contemporary worship is about **the message**.
 - a. At some point the speaker will address the crowd - usually in skinny jeans and tennis shoes. Jackets and ties are out because you cannot reach lost people if you wear a suit.
 - b. His message will typically be short and devotional, with only passing references to scripture.
 - c. It won't be negative or controversial because that might drive visitors away. One of the keys to bringing in the crowd is keeping everything positive – the Lakewood/Joel Osteen Model.
 3. Contemporary worship is about **the emotion**.
 - a. The crowd will be on its feet, waving their hands back and fourth and cheering or singing along.
 - b. It looks like a spiritual rock concert; although the feeling and passion of the moment will often be attributed to the moving of the Holy Spirit on the crowd.
 - c. The people seem genuinely enthusiastic about what they are doing.
 4. Contemporary worship is about **the impact**.
 1. It is an approach to worship that really draws a crowd.
 2. Young people seem to be especially drawn to this type of service.
 3. As a result, many religious groups – concerned with the epidemic loss of their youth – now offer a contemporary option.
- B. Some brethren are drawn to this kind of service, especially young people.
1. I got a little feedback a couple of years ago that some of our college kids were a little too curious about a campus group called Release. Again, the pictures tell the story. This group met weekly for worship and offered this kind of contemporary approach – right down to the skinny jeans and tennis shoes!
 2. What's the draw?
 - a. Our kids (and some older people too) look at these groups and see people who seem so alive and full of passion for God.

- b. And frankly sometimes our services are dull and lack that same passion. Tired of worship that seems routine and absent of genuine passion, they start looking for something with more energy.
 - c. Some begin to look around and see this contemporary approach to worship and start to think...maybe we ought to do things that way too.
3. Contemporary worship is the latest religious fad. The broader religious world has caught the wave. Some of our people are tempted to go along for the ride.

C. But is this the right choice?

- 1. Is the contemporary worship model the answer to worship that in some places has become formal, routine and passionless? Is this what God wants? Is He honored by what groups like Release offer up to Him?
 - a. I'm not imposing some unreasonable standard on these groups. We ought to ask the same questions about everything that we do.
 - b. We cannot offer up anything to God, slap a worship label on it and expect Him to be happy with us. This didn't work for...
 - 1) Cain (Genesis 4:3-5)
 - 2) Nadab and Abihu (Leviticus 10:1-3)
 - 3) Israel at Mount Sinai (Exodus 32)
 - 4) The people of Malachi's day (Malachi 1:6-14).

The problem in each case was that God's instructions were not being followed and He was not honored.

- c. The objective of worship is to honor God (Ephesians 5:19, "to the Lord"). If this is the objective, then the first question we need to ask is, Will this please Him? Is this what God wants?
 - d. The only way to know the answer to that question is to examine what God said about how He is to be honored (John 4:23-24). God does not leave us on our own to figure out how to worship. He not only tells us TO worship Him, but He also tells us HOW to do that.
2. Let me be clear that this isn't just about personal preference.
- a. I don't object to this style because I prefer something a bit more subdued or because I want the preacher to wear a tie.
 - b. I hear about people doing this periodically. They leave one church and go to another over an issue of personal preference (use of a supplemental hymnal or because they sang a hymn during the Lord's Supper).
3. This is not about what I want, but what God wants.
- a. At the end of the day, honoring Him, offering worship that is pleasing to Him is our objective (John 4:21-24).
 - b. Contemporary worship is a flawed approach to worship because it does not share this objective. It is not first and foremost about pleasing God.
 - c. Some background will help us see this.

The Background on Contemporary Worship

Where did this idea come from?

- A. From a broad perspective, several movements over the last 150 years appear to have influenced the contemporary worship movement.
 - 1. **Charismatic Movement** (Change In Focus)
 - a. Pentecostalism started on the fringes of denominationalism in the late 19th and early 20th century. But in the fifties the Charismatic Movement began to make inroads into mainstream denominationalism.
 - b. This movement contributed to the shift in the focus of worship. Worship became less about honoring God and more about the experience of the worshiper.
 - c. It is interesting that even while the charismatic movement has declined, their focus on the experience of the worshiper continues to be a key element of contemporary worship.
 - 2. **“Christian Music” Movement** (Change In Music)
 - a. For many it is the music that defines contemporary worship. It is a contemporary service because the music is contemporary. Traditional hymns are frowned on as dated and unappealing.
 - b. This trend began in the sixties with the Jesus Movement. Young people pressed for music in worship that sounded more like the music of the pop culture.
 - c. Churches sought to accommodate their youth because they were concerned about losing them. Keeping young people happy is one of the frequent justifications of those who advocate the contemporary style.
 - 3. **Church Growth Movement** (Change In Message)
 - a. The church growth movement with its emphasis on being “seeker-sensitive” has also helped to shape contemporary worship, specifically the message.
 - b. We are told that, if we want to draw a crowd, we can’t have any negative preaching (no calling out sinful behavior and certainly no warnings about hell). It needs to be positive, devotional and practical.
 - c. Joel Osteen and the Lakewood Church illustrate this well. The media has struggled to nail him down on any controversial issue.
- B. Shifting to a more narrow focus, there is one church that got on board early and has done more to promote this contemporary style than any other – the Willow Creek Community Church.
 - 1. For more than 30 years, they have not only drawn thousands each week to their contemporary styled worship service, but they helped other groups all over the country develop this same approach.
 - a. The Willow Creek model has been touted in books and explained through seminars. Countless churches have adopted this model and have experienced similar results.
 - b. But where did this idea come from? A study of this group’s history is revealing.
 - 2. In the case of Willow Creek, their community shaped their approach to worship.
 - a. In 1975, they hit the streets of suburban Chicago and started talking to people who did not attend worship services. They posed a simple question: “Why don’t you attend services?” The most common answers they received were: “It’s boring.” “It’s not relevant to my life.” “They are always begging for money.”

- b. Armed with these answers, Bill Hybels and his crew set out to build a new kind of church, one built on a marketing strategy. To put it simply, they found out what the consumers wanted, and they designed a church that would fit the needs of their target audience (show-biz service, soft-sell sermons, easy parking, child care). One writer compared the approach to the old Burger King slogan – they let them have it their way.
- 3. They were very successful.
 - a. Fifteen years later, the story of the Willow Creek Community Church was a featured article in USA Weekend Magazine (April 15, 1990).
 - b. Their average attendance was more than 14,000 at their Sunday services (25,000 were expected for the Easter Special).
- 4. Some will be so impressed with the size of the crowds that they will miss the fundamental flaw in their approach.
 - a. Think about it: They decided how they should worship God...by talking to people who had no interest in worshipping God.
 - b. Is this really a good strategy? Should we decide how to worship based on the opinions of people who don't? I don't think that crowd will have the answer.
 - c. Also, their underlying motivation is wrong. Their objective was to please the consumer so they will attend. Our objective should be to please God, even if people choose not to attend (John 6).
- 5. Knowing that this is how it all started, I'm left with some pretty big doubts about their ability to help me figure out how I ought to worship God.

The Defense of Contemporary Worship

How is this approach defended?

A. I'm rejecting traditionalism.

- 1. When people begin to talk about traditions, it becomes very important for them to explain what they mean. Not everyone who uses this language is saying the same thing. (See attached article by Doy Moyer)
- 2. There are some elements of our worship that are simply traditions.
 - a. For example, the sequence we use in our service (how many songs and prayers; the order in which they fall) is largely a matter of tradition. Scripture does not provide an order of service.
 - b. We ought to be open to adjust these if it will improve worship.
- 3. But some things people are quick to label as traditions are not traditions.
 - a. I've encountered some young people who claimed that singing without instruments is simply a "Church of Christ" tradition.
 - b. This is simply not the case. I do not know of anyone who opposes using a band in worship simply because we've never done that before.
 - c. Instruments are not used because they are not authorized. We cannot use them with the confidence that God will be pleased.
- 4. Contemporary worship is not about altering a few traditions. It's about introducing unauthorized practices and, as a result, failing to offer worship that honors God.

B. I need worship with more emotion.

- 1. The complaint that our services are routine and passionless can sometimes be valid.

- a. We've all had the experience of worshiping in a place that seemed dead. This is a problem and needs to be addressed.
 - b. Worship ought to be a very moving, emotional experience. Our actions in worship should flow from a heart filled with love for God and gratitude for all that He has done for us.
 - c. God takes no pleasure in disciples who mindlessly go through a routine each week (Malachi 1:13).
2. But this problem is not fixed by introducing unauthorized practices. It simply trades one problem for another.
 - a. Israel was excited and passionate about their calf worship (Exodus 32:1-10), but God was certainly not pleased.
 - b. Similarly, a praise band may stir people up. They may raise their hands, close their eyes and shed tears. But God will not be honored.
 3. Careful thought should also be given to this emotional response people are so concerned about producing. What exactly are we really trying to achieve?
 - a. Genuine emotion in worship should be truth driven. I can be moved to tears by the words of Charlie Couchman's song, *Immanuel, God With Us*. "Hands that lighted the evening stars, reach out for comfort in Mary's arms." What moves me is the message; the truth the deity came from heaven to earth to save me.
 - b. I'm not convinced that the emotion that attaches to contemporary services is always truth driven. We need to appreciate that the actions we perceive as "emotional" "or "more spiritual" may also be merely ritual and not necessarily driven by truth acting on the heart.
 - c. Also, just because someone is outwardly subdued does not necessarily mean they are unmoved by what is happening in worship.
 - d. My point is simply this: It is a mistake to judge a service as "more spiritual" or "emotional" simply based on some outward behaviors (raising hands, clapping, or shouting "amen").
- C. We must change our style of worship if we want to win the lost.
1. Let's not forget that Jesus was never interested in merely drawing and keeping a big crowd of followers.
 - a. Jesus called people to be truly committed to Him – who He was, His plan, His will. In fact, there were times when Jesus intentionally did things to weed out the uncommitted, shrinking the size of the crowd (John 6).
 - b. The contemporary worship crowd does not share Jesus' objective. They want to draw a crowd, and then do whatever they can to keep it.
 - c. We need to be sure that we share Jesus' objective and are not taking our cue from the denomination up the street.
 2. There are many myths being circulated about what it takes to reach lost people. Some of our brethren have come to believe them.
 - a. Suburban churches with nice buildings cannot reach the poor from the other side of town.
 - b. If members dress nicely and the preacher wears a jacket and tie, then poorer people will be intimidated and will not return.
 - c. If the preacher frequently addresses denominational error and takes firm stands on controversial moral issues, then guests will be offended and will not return.
 3. These things are simply not true. These are not barriers that prevent us from reaching the lost.

- a. The Dowlen Road church in Beaumont, Texas, serves as an excellent example. Over the last three decades, they have grown from a group of less than one hundred to almost five hundred. They have gone from an all white, middle-class church, to a congregation that is ethnically and economically diverse. They have baptized more than 300 in the last decade, currently averaging about three baptisms per month. They have done all of this in a town of about 100,000 people, with no special circumstances that would draw disciples to their area.
- b. It is amazing they've been able to accomplish this because they don't do any of the "right" things.
 - 1) Max Dawson is well known for his direct, first principles preaching. This is a regular part of the spiritual diet both in sermons and Bible classes. For more than a decade he conducted a call-in radio program that created a good bit of doctrinal clash with other religious groups in town.
 - 2) The group relocated in 1990 from an economically depressed part of town, to a new, large building on the main street. They were told that this would hamper growth and hinder their efforts to reach minorities. It did not.
 - 3) The preachers at Dowlen Road wear jackets and ties and most members wear their Sunday best to services.
 - 4) They have not adopted a contemporary worship model.
- c. This congregation is reaching lost people because they are sharing the gospel. If we want to reach the lost, we need to do the same and quit taking our cue from the denomination up the street.

The Answer to Contemporary Worship

- A. We have acknowledged that this new religious fad poses a danger to us, particularly our young people. How do we protect them?
 1. Obviously we need to address these issues in our teaching. Congregations need a steady diet of fundamentals (Bible Authority; New Testament Worship; Plan of Salvation; Answers for Denominational Errors).
 2. But these lessons have to connect with the audience; they have to be presented in a way that is understandable and relevant. For example, a lesson on instrumental music can be introduced as an evangelistic resource (three questions to ask your friends when they ask about instrumental music).
- B. But equally important is the need to offer a viable alternative.
 1. Let's not allow the only choices to be either the excitement (and error) of a contemporary service, or a dull, passionless service. There is a third option. We can do things God's way, with the passion and zeal He wants us to have.
 2. Let me offer a couple of practical suggestions.
 - a. Be consumed with excellence. Whatever you do – from the sermon preached on Sunday to the announcements made at the close, always give God your very best effort. Do whatever you do VERY WELL!
 - b. Work on song worship. This element of our service contributes a great deal to the pulse of our worship service. Teach about the importance and objective of singing. Present lessons that help people connect with the message of the songs. Consider bringing someone in to train the congregation in some of the mechanics of music. Incorporate newer hymns being written by our brethren.

- c. Work hard to make all preaching relevant. My mother gave me some excellent counsel when I first started preaching. She urged me to always send people home with something they can use. Even first principles/ doctrinal lessons can have a “so what” attached to the end of them.
- d. Move away from the “everyone gets a turn” philosophy. I realize that worship is not supposed to be a professional performance. But nor should we turn it into a free-for-all where everyone gets a turn no matter what their level of ability.
- e. Preach about grace and mercy of God. Don’t allow the Calvinist to own these subjects. Address error, but give people hope as well. Teach what the Bible says about these subjects.

Conclusion

- A. The word contemporary means “of the current time, modern.” But I would suggest that there is nothing contemporary at all about this “new” approach to worship. In fact, it’s as old as the golden calf, even Cain and Abel. It’s about men doing what they want, rather than what God wants.
- B. We will not find the path to pleasing God in some new teaching or method. Instead, we’ve got to get back to something very old – HIS BOOK THAT EXPRESSES HIS WILL.

- David A. Banning

Tradition as Error, Truth, and Choice

Doy Moyer

There is a difference between traditions that are simply traditions, and tradition as truth. A tradition is something that is handed down as a teaching or a practice. To simplify, we can note that traditions may come in at least these forms:

1. **Error.** A tradition can be passed down that is erroneous. Jesus challenged this kind of tradition in Mark 7, where the Pharisees had made their tradition of “Corban” such that it violated God’s Law. Wrong-headed traditions need to be challenged and overthrown. This is not to be done, however, just based on mere preference or whim, but on the truth. If a practice or teaching is in error, then truth needs to prevail, lest we find ourselves under Jesus’ rebuke: “Why do you yourselves transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?” (Matt 15:3)

2. **Truth.** God expected His truth to be passed down through time, and this, too, is tradition, as Paul wrote: “So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught, whether by word of mouth or by letter from us” (2 Thess 2:15). If we are teaching new doctrines that cannot find actual biblical support for the sake of doing non-traditional things, then we have conflated tradition as truth with tradition as error or tradition as choice. Tradition as truth should always be upheld and practiced, and failure to do so will put us out of line with God’s revealed will.

3. **Choice.** By “choice” in this context, I mean that the tradition is neither necessary nor wrong. Not all traditions are necessary in the sense of being required truth (#2). They might help facilitate the teaching of truth, and they might be reasonable expedients depending on the circumstances (e.g., meeting twice on Sundays or using song books), but they are not necessary. In this case, they are also not wrong, but the danger is that we get used to doing something by choice and then confuse these traditions with truth itself. That is, if the tradition by choice is changed, we fight like it is the truth that is being compromised, when it is, instead, just choices that are under scrutiny. On the other hand, some try to change tradition by choice and may take an approach that is offensive and disrespectful toward those who prefer the tradition to remain as is. There is no need to change such a tradition just for the sake of change, but neither is there a reason to hold on to it if the reason for changing it is warranted. People need to be reasonable, respectful, and open-minded in dealing with tradition as choice.

For the sake of clarity and unity, it is vital that we understand the differences between these types of tradition. So many divisions and problems can occur because we just label something “traditional” without further clarifying what we mean by it. Someone may fight against a “tradition as truth” while thinking it is “tradition as choice,” or vice-versa, and problems ensue. First, we should figure out where the tradition we are considering fits. Is it error? Is it truth? Or is it choice? Then we can look at options: 1) reject it if it is error; 2) accept it and practice it if it is truth; or 3) consider our options and weigh the effects if it is choice. Divisive attitudes should never be allowed to prevail, especially over tradition as choice.