

## Worship – Contemporary or “Traditional”?

Toney L. Smith

### Introduction

We are commanded to worship God. It is God who created us and it is Him who sustains our very lives. He has given blessings for all of mankind to enjoy. Everyone has access to the physical blessings which declare His majesty and power over the earth and the entire universe (Psalm 19:1; 97:6; Romans 1:20). Since this is the case He reserved and deserves the right to be worshiped by His creation (Genesis 2:7). The 148<sup>th</sup> Psalm devotes itself to calling upon His creation to reserve their entire worship and adoration to Him. Not one thing or person has the right to be worshiped and is the exclusive right of God.

Not only are we commanded to worship God, we are instructed to worship Him in spirit and in truth (John 4:21-24). In the Old Testament God instructed His people how they were to worship and whenever the how was violated God was displeased. In Leviticus 10:1-7 Nadab and Abihu “...offered strange fire before the LORD, which he commanded them not. And there went out fire from the LORD, and devoured them, and they died before the Lord” (Leviticus 10:1-2). Notice, it was not that they did nothing. Yet it was not pleasing to God because they offered that which was not divinely authorized. This principle did not last only during the dispensation of the Old Testament. In the New Testament dispensation, in which we live today, the obedience to worship commandments are still in force. The consequence of disobedience may not be as evident as in the days of Nadab and Abihu, yet if we do not worship according to “spirit and truth” our worship will be in vain and we will lose our souls eternally.

In our modern world we find many who are not satisfied with the “same old” worship services. We find many who are still “offering strange fire before the Lord.” Remember we serve the same God as did those of olden times. Even though His law has changed from the Old Testament to the New (Colossians 2:14) the requirement for Bible authority and obedience to that authority is still the same. Our assigned topic will be dealing with what is known as conventional and traditional worship. The lesson will show the difference in the two and establish that which God desires.

### Conventional Worship

Conventional means different things to different people. However the word conventional means “occurring in the modern” or “of the day.” *Webster’s Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary* defines the word as “coming into being during the same period of time, marked by characteristics of the present period: modern” (pg. 180). Thus, conventional worship is by definition that which is marked by the characteristics of the present time or derived from modern concerns.

Some will try to justify changes in worship by saying we must be aware of the needs in a modern society. In fact, change agents are busy trying to destroy the structure of worship in the church by applying this idea. Keep in mind we are not opposed to varying the order of worship but this not the intent of these dangerous change agents. They do not relish the simple worship which is authorized in God’s word. Many of these look upon this kind of worship as legalistic and out dated.

Emotionalism and the age of change is their main thought and if it feels right and produces numbers, it cannot be wrong. The modern minded are putting catchy phrases to all programs within the church and seek to “power and jazz” up worship services. In their modern minds, change is a must if the church is to survive the changing times!

Those who are enthralled with up-to-date worship are always looking for changes to fulfill their own concept of progressive worship. In the book *The Second Incarnation*, which was co-authored by Rubel Shelly and Randall Harris, they make clear the intent of these change agents. Notice their bold declaration; “The tired, uninspiring event called worship in our churches must give way to an exhilarating experience of God that simultaneously exhibits and nurtures life in the worshippers” (pg. 13) “We have no interest in building a first-century church or a 16<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> or even 20<sup>th</sup> century church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century” (pg. 20). Mr. Shelly preached a sermon at the Missouri Street Church of Christ, West Memphis, Arkansas in April 1990 in which he stated; “My children will not stay with the church I grew up in. They will not be a part of irrelevance.” Please take note the mind-set to move the church into modern day relevance. That is what we mean by “contemporary.” Trying to fit the church into the modern times rather than staying with worship that identifies and sets the church apart from the world (1 John 2:15-17). Paul said; “And be not conformed to this world...” (Romans 12:2). The gospel is to be preached to the world so as to change it rather than the world changing the church (Mark 16:15-16).

The bottom line for people who are seeking contemporary worship is that they are only looking for what pleases them rather than what is pleasing to God. In an article one man said; “I think the contemporary worships helps the people it reaches to worship better than they would in traditional worship. It is true of me. I worship better with contemporary music than I do with traditional music because *I am not fighting against my own senses.*” Whom do men think they are when they put themselves before the worship which pleases God. If what I feel and what I want in worship is the paramount consideration why did Abraham not protest at the command of God in Genesis 22:2. God said; “Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of.” Notice that Abraham said; “...I and the lad will go yonder and worship...” Did Abraham say that he would do that which would not cause him to fight against his own senses? Abraham was faithful in his worship to God (Hebrews 11:17). How feeble men are when they put self desires before that which God commands.

There are several innovations in worship which fit into the category of contemporary worship. However, each one follows the same disposition of mind that we noticed in the statement from Shelly and Harris; “The tired, uninspiring event...” Many congregations have adopted the idea of changing worship to keep pace with the “baby boomers” and those who are tired of the tried and true. We will notice some of these innovations which are part of this change movement.

## 1. CONTEMPORARY SERVICES.

- a. In a move to accommodate the various styles or desires for worship some congregations are adding an additional service. This worship time is designed to give the “younger” mind-set a chance to involve themselves with their progressive music and style of preaching that is relevant to them. Some made an excuse at the onset of this movement by saying it would be better for the “unchurched.” It was supposedly for the purpose of making them

feel more comfortable. Lynn Anderson, in his book *Navigating the Winds of Change*, said that modern culture has conditioned people to experience music as “watchers and listeners, but not participators” (pg. 136). What this means is that people come to be entertained rather than to be a participant in worship to God. Truth is - God is to be the focal point of worship and not men (Exodus 20:1-6; 23:24; Leviticus 26:1).

- b. Among other things, this additional worship service is to provide an outlet for the “newer” music, the kind that appeals to the modern culture. Let me say first that we are not opposed to new songs if they are scriptural. The new music to which I refer is that of solos, choirs, and praise teams. There is no authority whatsoever for any special group singing. These special groups are sinful because they violate the command to sing to one another (Colossians 3:16; Ephesians 5:19). This kind of new music is entertainment focusing upon the performers rather than upon God.
- c. Recently there has been a trend toward what is called “praise teams.” A praise team is a group made up usually of four or more singers who lead singing as a group as opposed to the traditional song leader. Their proposed purpose is to give a better blend and fuller leadership in singing. It is to make the singing sound better. The only problem with this idea is that there is no authority for them. Where do we find that God is listening for or looking for pretty singing? From my personal point of view, I am thankful that God does not accept my singing on the basis of it being pleasant to the ears! The instruction is to sing (Ephesians 5:19) not to sing pretty. In fact, we are told to “make a joyful noise unto the Lord” (Psalm 95:1-2; 100:1) which does not require a good voice. We are simply commanded to sing with all of our heart.

## 2. DIVIDED ASSEMBLIES.

- a. Many are dividing the assemblies so as to accommodate the children. Some call this practice Children’s Bible Hour, Children’s Worship and even some are so bold as to call it Children’s church. It does not matter what it might be called it is still a divided assembly and a divided assembly is contrary to Bible authority. We are not discussing the Bible class situation. This division of the church is taking place during the general assembling of the saints. God has demanded the assembling of ourselves together (1 Corinthians 11:18, 20, 33-34; 14:23-26). There is no authority for any to willfully absent themselves from this assembly (Hebrews 10:24-26). The word together in Hebrews 10:25 means; “a gathering together in one place; the religious assembly of the saints” (Thayer). It is then the coming together of the church in one place at the same time. Where could we find any authority to dismiss some adults to be absent from these assemblies?
- b. House churches are another innovation of the modern mind. In this setting members of a congregation are to meet in “cell groups” in various homes. Again we find this sinful because the “church” is not assembled together. How could an eldership oversee each of these house churches? Some try in vain to argue that this is the same as the churches in the New Testament which met in houses. Those mentioned in scripture were congregations of the Lord’s people and not divided cell groups of a congregation. Those cited in the New Testament were complete, autonomous congregations and not several different groups from the same congregation (Philemon 1:1-2; Romans 16:5; 1 Corinthians 16:19).

### 3. WOMEN LEADING IN WORSHIP.

- a. In many places women are being moved into roles which are not authorized by scripture. In fact, the positions now being filled by women in some places are against the clear teachings of Bible. God has prohibited a “woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence” (2 Timothy 2:12). Some are telling the church to get with the times and are allowing women to lead prayers, wait on the Lord’s Table. These changes are not authorized by God’s word but are the inventions of presumptuous men and women.

### 4. HANDCLAPPING.

- a. Worship to God is not a sporting event nor is it an entertainment venue. Handclapping is not another way to say amen, as some lamely claim! I am amazed at those who try and make this their point for authority. We are to do things in an orderly fashion (1 Corinthians 14:40) and we must demonstrate a reverent and respectful attitude for the worship of God (Ecclesiastes 5:1-2). Applause is giving praise to men rather than to God!

### 5. DRAMA, PUPPETS, AND OTHER KINDS OF ENTERTAINMENT.

- a. God’s word is to be preached in its entirety (2 Timothy 4:2; Romans 1:16-17) and men are to be drawn to salvation through this means (Hebrews 11:6; Romans 10:17; 1 Corinthians 1:21). The use of activities such as drama, puppets, etc. are only flimsy excuses for some to want to be entertained and these activities are promoted and carried out by those who want to be entertainers. Can you imagine that one man has started a “Clowning For Jesus” ministry! He may be a clown, but he is not doing it for Jesus.
- b. There is a misconception among some who have the notion that our primary reason for attending worship is to “get something from the services we attend.” This reasoning is motivated by misunderstanding and selfishness. It is a prime reason that today many are not being satisfied with the “same old tired uninspiring worship” that has been taking place since the First century. In this new day of worship the trend is toward the emotional and innovative. Men want to do things they like rather than what God has designated (Proverbs 12:15; Galatians 10).
- c. The preaching of the gospel is not for the purpose of entertainment, but for teaching and saving the souls of those who are lost. If entertainment is used it must be changed from time to time or it becomes boring and ineffective. The gospel does not and must not be changed. Just remember, “What draws them keeps them.” If it be fun and games, then these things must be continually changed in order to keep on entertaining. When people love truth and have a desire to please God, Bible preaching will more than suffice!

## **Traditional Worship**

The word traditional means the “handing down of information, beliefs, and customs from one generation to another; the beliefs of those opposed to modernism, liberalism, or radicalism.” In simple terms it is the opposite of contemporary. When we speak of traditional worship we understand it to mean that which is given and handed down from divine authority and from Biblical examples.

Some have said that traditional worship means no changes at all. That certainly is not what we mean in this material. We would not object to changes which do not violate the word of God. Can we observe the Lord’s Supper before the sermon or must it be following the lesson? Is it proper to have two songs, a prayer, and then another song before the preaching? All of these things are of no consequence as long as they are done according to truth and decently and in order (John 4:24; 1 Corinthians 14:40). These all fall within the realm of expediency.

However, there are some things which cannot be changed or updated. God has given commandments concerning worship within the church and these must never be changed. The Lord’s Supper is to be observed on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7); the support for the church is to be collected on the Lord’s Day (1 Corinthians 16:1-2); only the gospel is to be taught (2 Timothy 4:2-4; Romans 1:16-17); prayer is to be offered to God the Father by faithful men of a congregation (Matthew 6:9-13; 1 Timothy 2:8; Isaiah 59:1-2; Psalm 34:15-16; John 9:31; 1 Peter 3:12); and we are to sing songs of praise unto Him (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16). To these no changes can ever be made (Revelation 22:18-19).

### **Worshipping in Spirit and in Truth**

The Bible contains that which is “...profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.” (2 Timothy 3:16-17) It contains the pattern for godly living. God gave a pattern to Noah concerning the building of the ark (Genesis 6:14-22); a pattern to Moses and the building of the tabernacle (Exodus 25 and 26); and a pattern was given to Solomon for building the temple (1 Chronicles 28 and 29). He intended for these patterns to be followed in every detail. The same is true pertaining to our worship to God.

In Isaiah 29 we read of the vain worship of Israel. They went through the motion of honoring Him, yet their hearts were not in it. God found no pleasure in the false worship which they offered. Jesus taught that worship is to be both “in spirit and in truth” (John 4:24).

To worship in spirit involves worshipping God with the right disposition. This true worship is to come from the heart with love for the object of that worship. God seeks our love, honor and adoration (John 4:23). The Jews worshipped, yet with no concern for God and His desire for that worship. In their worship they exalted themselves and sought the praise of men (Matthew 6:1-5; 23:5). Many innovations would never come into being if there was not the need for some to find approval with men and a desire to have numbers at any cost. When men truly seek to please and honor God in worship they will have the correct disposition of heart.

Worship is also to be done in truth, meaning that it is to contain the proper actions and be carried out in the manner prescribed by God. The truth is the only authority by which men can acceptably worship God (John 8:32; 17:17). In Matthew 15:7-9 we find the Jews offering unacceptable worship because it was not authorized of God. “**In vain do they worship me**” - That is, their attempts to worship are “vain,” or having no purpose they are merely going through the motions. They were “**teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.**” The word “doctrines,” here, means the instructions and requirements of religion. It was those things to be believed and practiced in religion.

As sincere as anyone might be in their worship, if truth is not present and authority is not given, that worship is rejected by God. He alone has the right to declare what shall be done in his service. In 1 Kings 13:15-24 the young prophet died, not because he was insincere, but because he believed and followed something contrary to God’s commandment. The same is true with us today. If our worship is not “in spirit and in truth” it does not matter what our motive might be or how sincere we are. Believing and practicing things which are not authorized will cause men to be lost, whether it be in the initial obedience to the gospel, our daily Christian lives or in our worship.

### Conclusion

What are the reasons for unauthorized worship? Many and varied can be our answers. It may be due to man’s desire to do what he feels is right. However, God has spoken against this kind of mentality; “O Lord, I know that the way of man is not in himself: it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps” (Jeremiah 10:23). Sometimes there is no godly leadership and men do as they please; “In those days there was no king in Israel, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes” (Judges 17:6). I am also convinced that there are many who have come from denominationalism without ever being converted to the faith. As time goes by these men are put into leadership roles and they revert back to their former days and bring in their former practices (Ephesians 4:22-24; 1 Peter 1:14).

The very bottom line in answering why many are getting involved in unscriptural worship practices is because they do not love the Lord! Love is an emotion which causes us to go out of our way to please the object of our affection. Jesus said the proof of our love for Him is to be obedient; “If ye love me, keep my commandments” (John 14:15). The demonstration of our lack of love is not being obedient. It is doing what we want and rejecting the instruction of our Lord; “He that loveth me not keepeth not my sayings: and the word which ye hear is not mine, but the Father's which sent me” (John 14:24).

Worship is a wonderful privilege given to the children of God. May we seek to always please Him and not ourselves (Galatians 1:10).