



God is spirit, and those who
worship him must worship in spirit and truth.

John 4:24

On Worship

with Pastor Steve

Contemporary or Traditional

Over the years I have received e-mails from pastors who are struggling with the idea of introducing contemporary worship music into their congregations. It seems their biggest fear is that their congregations might become divided by, as one pastor put it, the “ubiquitous worship wars.” Many churches have successfully dealt with this issue by scheduling an additional worship service for those who prefer a more contemporary approach to worship. But, that is not always possible nor necessarily the solution.

One pastor posed these questions to me, “Do you think that it is possible to be in a worshipping congregation that uses only the traditional hymns? Do you think that by God’s grace we might still be capable of worship in spirit and truth?” My personal perception is that you can have spirit and truth worship regardless of what you sing as long as it speaks the heart of the worshiper to the heart of God. The style of music doesn’t determine the worship, rather the heart or the lifestyle of the worshiper. Though I prefer modern worship music to the exclusive use of traditional hymns, I cannot find in scripture where worshipping in spirit and truth hinges on the style of music that is being used.

All music when first written is contemporary. When King David and others wrote the Psalms they were contemporary. The type of worship David established on Mount Zion had not been done before. Do you think there were some contemporaries of David who balked at what he did? There were some who probably said, “Wait a minute, you’re supposed to have a veil in front of that ark. And the priests are supposed to be the only ones who can see it. And only once a year! With blood! Besides we’ve never had that kind of music in the presence of the ark before. It looks like you guys are just carried away with emotionalism.” I don’t know about you, but I’m sure glad David and his buddies didn’t listen to them. We might not have the book of Psalms today if they had.

When Fanny Crosby wrote *Blessed Assurance* it was a modern song. When H.G. Spafford wrote *It is Well with My Soul* and Martin Luther penned *A Mighty Fortress is Our God* they were contemporary songs. John Newton (*Amazing Grace*) and William Cowper (*There is a Fountain*) published a hymnal of 268 songs to be sung by Newton’s church. That was their contemporary worship music.

I have read that some of the tunes of the old hymns were tunes taken from bar room songs. Do you think some of the traditionalists had problems with that? Do you think some of Newton’s parishioners complained about the “new” music? Do you think some could have even left the church because of the “new” music? Surely today’s generation of pastors is not the first to be faced with the dilemma of which style of music to use in their church. Yet, these founding fathers and gifted writers pressed on even in the face of criticism. In doing so, they have left us a legacy of anointed worship music which should not be ignored by this generation.

So Pastor Steve, you might ask, why do you prefer modern worship music to the exclusive use of traditional hymns? I suppose the reason is that the modern songs help me to express my heart to the heart of the Father. I worship to express my gratitude and love for God to God. I want to sing to him and for me the modern worship songs best facilitate that activity. For the most part the modern songs speak the way I speak as opposed to backward sentences and the use of King James English. I much prefer to say, “I love you, Father” as opposed to “I lovest thou thee, O Father.” Now, I don’t have an issue with anyone who wants to sing traditional hymns exclusively if that expresses their heart and worship to God.

Also, I believe revelation is progressive. God is still revealing things about himself to us. In other words, we don’t know everything there is to know about God and how we should respond to him. There

are still mysteries in scripture. I certainly don't understand all of it. Some of the modern worship songs capture some of the "new" things that God reveals about himself. It's fresh for me. I am not suggesting that God has changed or that scripture or the gospel has changed. But, the way we understand him and how we respond to him is changing all the time. I believe God is still creating. At the least, he has gifted people with creativity. The gifts they offer to the church are just as important as the gifts offered by the saints of old and should not be ignored by the older generations.

I believe the Apostle Paul, by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, answered the question of which music should be used in corporate worship. He wrote to the church in Ephesus, . . . *but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord. . . .* (Ephesians 5:18-19) Paul conveyed the same message to the believers in Colosse when he wrote, . . . *teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.* (Colossians 3:16) In each of these verses Paul gives us three mediums of acceptable worship when believers gather: psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. In a previous article titled, *Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs* I wrote the following:

"To properly define psalms, hymns and spiritual songs we should take a look at their meanings from the original language in which they were written. The Greek word used in the Pauline epistles for psalms is psalmos. Psalmos is defined as a set piece of music, a sacred ode accompanied with the voice, harp or other instruments. There are religious denominations that believe music should not accompany songs in the church. However, the very definition of a psalm refutes that idea. I am not suggesting that the way these denominations worship is unacceptable just that their theology of worship is incomplete.

Hymns are another acceptable medium for worship. The Greek word used here is humnos. Humnos is defined to celebrate, or one of the psalms, a hymn. When we generally think of hymns great songs like *Amazing Grace*, *How Great Thou Art* and many others come to mind. *O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing* is one of my favorites. However, these songs we refer to as hymns are actually psalms. We said a psalm is a set piece of music accompanied by an instrument and voice; so once these "hymns" were recorded they became psalms. In fact all of the recorded worship songs we sing in church are in reality psalms. Since hymns and psalms are different we must conclude that a hymn is a song that has not been recorded. Thus it is a new, spontaneous song.

The third medium of song Paul speaks about is the spiritual song. The phrase spiritual songs in the Greek is 'ode pneumatikos; meaning songs of the breath of God. Spiritual songs are songs sung in or by the Holy Spirit. These songs are inspired by the Holy Spirit and are spontaneous and prophetic in nature. Sometimes spiritual songs are sung by the worshiper to God, and sometimes the song is sung by God through the worshiper. When God sings through a believer, he prophetically reveals his heart to his people. This is done to bring edification, exhortation and comfort to the church. This type of spiritual song is sung in a language understood by the congregation.

So, Paul is exhorting the church to sing psalms (songs that have been recorded), hymns (new, spontaneous songs), and spiritual (prophetic) songs. These acceptable mediums of song transcend time and include songs of all eras; traditional hymns as well as modern and spontaneous worship songs. I suspect that God enjoys it all."

Often times in the quest for what is best, the church has allowed the world to determine what mediums are used in worship. We should always be careful not to mistake the unholy for what is holy. We must also be careful not to call unholy what is holy. It is equally important that our definition of worship not be relegated to just what occurs on Sunday mornings or other times believers gather.

Expressing our worship includes activities such as feeding the poor, visiting the sick, taking care of widows and orphans, loving our neighbor as ourselves and being conformed into the image of Christ. My perception is that all of these acts of worship, coupled with our emotional responses to the Father comprise the sum of our worship. Our worship is not determined by the style of music we use but by the style of life we live.

I recently read a book by John Piper titled *The Hidden Smile of God*. The book is a reflection on the lives of John Bunyan, William Cowper and David Brainerd. In his conclusion Piper writes, "If the Christian life has become the path of ease in the modern west, then corporate worship is the place of increasing entertainment. The problem is not a battle between contemporary worship music and hymns; the problem is that there aren't enough martyrs during the week. If no soldiers are perishing, what you want on Sunday is Bob Hope and some pretty girls, not the army chaplain and a surgeon."

He goes to say, "...faith-filled suffering is essential in this world for the most intense, authentic worship. When we are most satisfied with God in suffering, he will be most glorified in us in worship. Our problem is not styles of music. Our problem is styles of life. When we embrace more afflictions for the worth of Christ, there will be more fruit in the worship of Christ."

Piper's assessments might be best illustrated by in the lives of Paul and Silas. Their abandonment for the cause of Christ landed them in a Philippian jail. Broken and bleeding, when most of us would be licking our wounds, the two preachers began praying and singing hymns in the middle of the night. In response, God caused a massive earthquake so violent it shook the foundation of the prison. The prison doors were opened and all the prisoners were loosed from their chains. As a consequence the jailer and his entire family were saved.

The worship offered by Paul and Silas was authenticated by the affliction they suffered for the worth of Christ. The fruit of that worship was the salvation of souls; the loosing of prisoners.

If we want God to shake our worship services with his manifest presence, if we want to see prisoners loosed from their chains, then we must be willing to lay down our lives for the sake of God's kingdom. The style of worship music we use is not the stimulus that moves the heart of God. It is our willingness to suffer for the cause of Christ and be obedient to his call on our lives. The question of authentic worship is not, Do we use contemporary or traditional music? but rather, Are we willing to die to display the worth of Christ?