

Contemporary Praise & Worship

by: Michael Penfold, Bicester, England.

The pressure to embrace ‘contemporary praise & worship’ (CPW) is mounting, but before making any changes, the Lord’s people in assembly fellowship would be wise to test it (1) and examine its fruit (2). Although a recent movement, there are at least four features that distinguish CPW from all that preceded it during 1,900 years of church history.

New Actions

First up are the ‘new actions’: these are the use of clapping and hand waving. While the Old Testament does mention clapping, the rhythmic handclap started by an upbeat CPW song finds no mandate in any of the Old Testament records of Israel’s national celebrations, or in the Psalms (3), or in the days of King Joash at one of Israel’s greatest celebrations (4). One New Testament verse speaks of lifting up holy hands (5), but this bears no relation to the hand-waving ritual that is regularly played out in thousands of churches worldwide. Full-orbed scriptural worship is simply described in the New Testament as singing, speaking, making melody in the heart and giving thanks (6).

New Appointments

At the height of liturgical worship in Solomon’s Temple there were 288 male worship leaders (7), but no such office is ever outlined or envisaged in the New Testament. We are informed that the worship leader’s job in CPW is to, ‘take people to the throne room of God’ and give them a ‘taste of heaven’ (8). The fact is, the only One who can truly do this is Christ and He opened the way to the throne for His people through His own death. True worship, and this is the only kind we surely wish to see, is led by the Holy Spirit as the only worship Leader (9).

New Arrangements

In general, our traditional hymns used for worshipping God are objective, doctrinal and of reasonable length. Most CPW choruses are subjective, experiential, short and sung repeatedly. Contemporary songwriters deliberately produce songs that are catchy and easy to memorise for popularity. Often they employ well-worn

love-song clichés such as, ‘I long to worship You...I give myself to You...I want to love You...Let me be Yours alone’. Compare this with the great hymns of Scripture and you will find that from Exodus 15 to Revelation 5 they employ only the majestic themes and expositions of the attributes and works of God and the great truths of the gospel.

Checking through the CPW’s choruses it is clear that there is content enough to make them convenient vehicles of error. In fact, CPW artists have written songs with a ‘restorationist’ agenda in mind (10). That is they teach and expect a coming kingdom on earth established by the spreading influence and power of the church. Thus they view their songs as a fitting accompaniment to ‘what God is doing in the world today’ through such activities as ‘March for Jesus’, ‘Signs and Wonders’ and ‘Spiritual Warfare’.

Many non-charismatic churches have taken the step of selecting some of Kendrick’s better songs and using them as a means of keeping ‘up to date’ or of ‘holding on to the youth’. Since these songs are designed to promote the cause of restorationist theology, inclusion of them can help the promotion of the doctrines embraced by these contemporary songwriters. The use of such CPW compositions may begin to produce a ‘charismatic ethos’ within an assembly, making the drawing of a line in the sand to prevent further slippage very difficult.

New Accompaniments

Worldly music entered the evangelical scene through the hippies who professed salvation back in the 1960’s in California, (the so-called ‘Jesus people’). To overcome resistance to the acceptance of rock-n-roll in ‘the church’, others promoted the idea that ‘all music is neutral’. While a single note is always neutral, a string of notes backed by any kind of rhythm never is, because by its very nature music is a language. This is not a matter of ‘taste’; it’s a matter of ‘fact’. Since the style, message and origin of these is secular entertainment, they are utterly unsuitable for the service of God (11). Writing back in 1945, A.W. Pink said, ‘The more spiritual our worship is the less attractive to the flesh it will be. Modern ‘worship’ is chiefly designed to render it pleasing to the flesh, a

'bright and attractive service'...and entertaining talks. What a mockery...' (12).

As seen at the renowned charismatic church of Hillsong in Sydney, Australia, and mirrored all over the world, the 'big crowd atmosphere' pack a powerful punch. This approach is designed to score a 'direct hit' on the emotional sensory apparatus of the audience. As the worship leader mixes upbeat numbers like 'Shout to the Lord', with slower ones like 'Be Still for the Presence of the Lord', a feeling of being close to God is manufactured in the auditorium. But the experience is a deception. C.H. MACHINTOSH said, 'There may be a great deal of what looks like worship yet which is after all, only the mere excitement and outgoing of natural feeling. It not infrequently happens that the very same tastes and tendencies which are called forth and gratified by the splendid appliances of such so-called religious worship, would find most suited support at the opera' (13).

Assessing the Results

The distinguishing features of CPW are without scriptural support or authority. Such a departure from Scripture has not been and will not be without its consequences. Doctrine will be trivialised and false professions multiplied. Ecumenism has flourished as CPW has formed a bridge between Rome and Evangelicalism. Separation from the world has been compromised as young people copy the lifestyles and standards of the CPW artists. The focus has shifted from 'Christ' to the 'Spirit'. Instead of intelligent worship being offered by engaged minds, 'thinking' has been surrendered to the musical performance.

Worship without truth or worship mixed with error is false worship (14), and must be avoided at all costs by believers desiring to please the Lord in a difficult and confusing day. In the words of A.W. TOZER 'We must learn that we cannot have our own way and worship God just as we please...there are certain kinds of worship that God will not accept, though they may be directed toward Him and are meant to be given to Him' (15).

Further reading

Why I Left The Contemporary Christian Music Movement Dan Lucarini ISBN 0-85234-517-8

This Little Church Went to Market Gary E. Gilley ISBN 1-591600-49-9

Shall We Dance? Dance and Drama in Worship Brian Edwards ISBN 0-85234-190-3

Notes

1. 1 Thess. 5. 21
2. Matt. 7. 15-16
3. Ps. 47. 1
4. 2 Kings 11. 12
5. 1 Tim. 2. 8
6. Eph. 5. 19
7. 1 Chr. 15. 22, 23. 1-5, 25. 7-31
8. Darlene Zschech, Extravagant Worship, Bethany House, p. 155
9. Heb. 10. 20, Eph. 5. 20, Phil. 3. 3
10. Such as Shine Jesus Shine, Majesty and You Are Building a People of Power.
11. Ezek. 22. 26, 2 Cor. 6. 14-18, 1 John 2. 15-16
12. Gospel of John, Zondervan, p. 208
13. C. H. M. Notes on the Pentateuch, Chapter 2, p. 315
14. John 4. 23
15. Whatever Happened to Worship? STL Books, p. 32.