

# Rational or Ecstatic Worship?

## The Second Broken Principle

By Dr Peter Masters | Contemporary Christian Worship  
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The second major deviation from biblical principles in contemporary worship is that it promotes a substitute for rational worship which we call ecstatic worship. The Lord requires that we worship Him 'in spirit and in truth'. The 'truth' part of this means that worship must be right, and also that it must be understandable or rational. Paul echoes this when he insists that Christians pray and sing with the understanding. The conscious, sound mind is the vital human organ of worship. (See *1 Corinthians 14.15*, and chapter 5 – 'Let the Lord Define Worship'.)

Ecstatic worship is completely different. This aims at stirring the emotions to produce a simulated, exalted emotional state. Ecstatic worship takes place when the object of the exercise is to achieve a warm, happy feeling, perhaps great excitement, and even a sense of God's presence through the earthly, physical aspects of worship such as music and movement. Among charismatics this is eagerly pursued, the programme being carefully engineered to bring worshippers to a high emotional pitch, and often to a mildly hypnotic state. In non-charismatic circles the objective is a little more modest, but essentially the same – to make an emotional impact. Worship leaders want to bypass rationality and get the feelings going by other means. They want to stir up 'sensations' in order to produce euphoria.

We do not accuse the advocates of new worship unfairly, because they say this themselves in their books and worship guides. The upbeat opening number will (they say) have such-and-such an effect upon worshippers, and then the music should take this or that direction to maintain the mood, and after that move on to another tempo, volume and key. Instruments, arrangements, chords and beat should be woven into a pattern that will bend and sway the feelings of the people to maximise their feelings for worship.

Frequently, tremendous musical expertise goes into the 'production' of a service, but it must be realised that any attempt to make a direct impression on the soul by the use of music or any other earthly tool is ecstatic worship as opposed to spiritual and rational worship. The latter does not try to manipulate the feelings by earthly techniques, but derives its joy from sincere spiritual appreciation of the Lord, of His words, and of the great doctrines of the faith. Of course, music (and instrumental accompaniment) is permitted by the Lord, but it is not to be deliberately deployed as a means of arousing feelings. 'Feelings' in worship should be our response to things we understand and appreciate in our minds.

It is true that many hymn tunes touch our hearts because of their strong association with salvation sentiments, and this is wholesome and acceptable. Such tunes have taken on a special quality derived from precious words. But the architects of ecstatic worship techniques have no right to hijack this pleasant phenomenon, and to use music as the chief means of moving hearts and producing feelings. This is carnal, cynical, artificial and manipulative.

It is only as we are moved primarily by intelligent thoughts providing a view of the Lord and His work, that we have genuine and legitimate spiritual feelings. Emotions fanned into flames by sentimental or stirring music may be enjoyable feelings at a purely human level, but they are not worship. The same goes for all artificially generated feelings. If a preacher moves people to weeping by telling 'tear-jerkers', their sense of need for God or their repentance will be nothing more than short-lived

emotionalism. If, however, the people understand their need through hearing the Word (which is surely moving enough), their conviction and repentance will be genuine and lasting.

Music cannot really move the soul. It only moves the emotions. Valid worship starts in the mind. If it bypasses the understanding, it is not true worship. If it is overwhelmed by physical things, such as the skilful and moving performance of orchestras, it is compromised and spoiled. Such worship reminds us of the Israelites who wanted to supplement manna with other foods. Today many say to God (in effect): ‘You are not enough; I need unusually loud or rhythmic music in addition, to excite me.’

Paul states the prime role of worship in these words: ‘Let all things be done unto edifying’ (see *1 Corinthians 14.26*). The word edifying refers literally to the construction of a building, but Paul always uses it to mean the building up of the understanding. Every element of worship must be understood in order to be valid. We are spiritually moved, not by melody, beauty or spectacle, but by what we understand. ‘Worship,’ says Puritan Stephen Charnock, ‘is an act of the understanding applying itself to the knowledge of the excellency of God . . . It is also an act of the will, whereby the soul adores and reverences His majesty, is ravished with His amiableness, embraceth His goodness . . . and pitcheth all its affections upon Him’ (Works, 1.298). With our minds we appreciate the Lord, His mighty acts, and the doctrines of His Word. Whether we are directing our praise to Him, or receiving truth from Him, it is the mind that must be active and edified. Emotions must be activated by what is recognised in the mind, and not by the direct power of music, rhythms or bodily movements.

We repeat yet again that in Christian worship we have the privilege of many beautiful tunes, and we are allowed to sing with accompaniment, but these must be kept within reasonable bounds, so that we never depend on them to engineer our feelings. The new worship, however, is all about music and song being intentionally and blatantly used to have a direct and major influence upon the feelings. John Wycliffe, the ‘morning star of the Reformation’, was strongly critical of the use of song to ‘stir to dancing’, or to arouse the feelings in worship. He warned his contemporaries in the words of Augustine – ‘As oft as the song delights me more than that which is sung, so oft I confess that I sin grievously.’ Music is a wonderful gift from the Lord, but it must never rival or drown worship offered in spirit and in truth.

The same point is made by John Wesley in his advice to hymn singers written in 1781. He wrote:

‘Above all sing spiritually. Have an eye to God in every word you sing. Aim at pleasing Him more than yourself or any other creature. Attend strictly to the sense of what you sing, AND SEE THAT YOUR HEART IS NOT CARRIED AWAY WITH THE SOUND, but offered to God continually; so shall your singing be such as the Lord will approve of here, and reward when He cometh in the clouds of Heaven.’

To clarify the issue, let us try once again the simple test question put at the close of the aesthetic worship chapter. Why would any church want to increase its customary, traditional instrumentation, and change its style of worship? The answer may be along these lines: ‘Because this will lift us up, warm and excite us, and we will then feel the Lord more.’ Such an answer would show that rational worship is being set aside, and ecstatic worship is taking its place. There can be no greater enjoyment than to respond with spiritual appreciation to great spiritual blessings. Why should we need more instruments to improve on this? Any group, band or orchestra will be likely to introduce an ecstatic element to praise, and this is against the principles of New Testament worship.

It is undeniable that the new worship sets out to stir emotions externally and artificially. It is all so like Catholicism in this respect. Their worship, we have seen, is an aesthetic offering. It is also

processions, chants and so on. The old Latin mass was not about understanding but making an impression on the senses. Touching requiems were composed to move people emotionally. The mystery plays of Rome were calculated to appeal to and move the feelings. The medium was considered to be more enjoyable and emotionally effective than the message, and we are back to this in present-day evangelicalism. The tools are certainly different, but there can be no doubt that contemporary Christian worship shares the same theatrical and earthly ideas as Rome.

One of Britain's pioneers of new worship outlined his own pilgrimage in a magazine article. His story was alarmingly revealing. He recalled how, as a young man, he once wearily rose in his pew at the beginning of a service –

‘ . . . resigned to a miserable morning, and thought to myself how dreadful it was that the hymn we were singing had so many verses. Most of the lines made no sense to me at all. Worse still, there were three more hymns like this before the meeting was finished! The whole thing was dreadfully boring.

‘I tried my best to inject feeling into the “worship”, but it was like squeezing a shrivelled orange for the last drop of juice, only to be disappointed when nothing came.

‘Worst of all, I kept thinking over what the pastor had said at the start of the service. He told us that we would spend eternity engaged in worship. I couldn't think of a more dreadful prospect. Surely that would be eternal endurance, not eternal life!’

The writer was very frank. He was not complaining that the service was unsound or poorly conducted. He was disparaging any traditional worship service. He went on to say that he discovered enjoyment in new songs and music, because these stirred his passions and allowed him liberty for the uninhibited expression of his feelings. But why could he not identify with the great hymns of the faith in the church of his youth? Why did the directing of sincere thoughts and words to God fail to touch him, and even bore him to distraction? The answer is that for him, emotions had to be worked up by external aids and uninhibited actions. Feelings had to be manufactured by rhythm, repetition and physical action. This is just what we mean by ‘ecstatic’ worship. Tragically, no one told this young man what he was getting into, and its artificiality and pandering to the flesh. No one helped him – assuming he possessed real spiritual life – to love the Lord with the heart and with the mind.

We can understand how necessary the techniques of ecstatic worship are within the charismatic movement. Here, because of the shallowness of preaching, large numbers of people are not genuinely converted. They therefore need artificial emotional stimulation for without this there would be nothing for them to enjoy. Similarly, in some of the so-called mega-churches of the USA, where the true challenge of the Gospel is greatly watered down so as not to offend those who attend, large numbers of unconverted people depend on the external emotional impact of musical-song productions. If people are brought to easy professions, and not truly changed by the power of the Spirit, they will not be capable of spiritual appreciation, which is the basis of true worship.

Leading exponents of new worship often speak against hymns as too cerebral and complex. They say that ‘meaning’ obscures ‘feeling’! They want mainly choruses, because these, with their minimal truth content, do not get in the way of the music and its effect upon the emotions. They have been charged with ‘dumbing down’ worship, and the charge is true.

A word must be said about the extreme exploitation of -ecstatic worship, which really amounts to mystical worship. This happens when the emotional impact of music and song is designed to give the impression of a ‘direct touch’ of God, or an extraordinary sense of union with Him. In non-Christian mystical religions this sensation is produced by such techniques as contemplation and repetition of thoughts. In charismatic worship it is worked up by powerful musical manipulation, participants

swaying with closed eyes, upturned faces and outstretched hands, yielding themselves wholly to the impact of repeated words, and music. The sentiments of their choruses and hymns often claim a direct touch from the Lord, or a strong sense of His surrounding arms. Instead of approaching God by faith, and reflecting on His sure Truth and His -wonderful work, such worshippers manufacture a 'direct' impression of God's presence.

Mystical worship represents the extreme flank of ecstatic worship, but it now has an immense following around the world. The understanding is unfruitful, but this hardly matters. Spirit and truth are outmoded. Artificially induced feelings are king. Is this mystical extreme now getting into non-charismatic circles? The alarming answer is that it is, as a statement by a non-charismatic American seminary professor shows. Here is his widely accepted definition of worship.

'Worship is an encounter in which God's glory, Word and graces are unveiled, and we respond, in songs and prayers of celebration. Worshippers seek an encounter with the glory of God, the transcendent power and numinous mystery of the divine.'

Notice the word 'encounter'. Is it an encounter by faith? No, it is nothing other than a mystical encounter with the glory of God. Are we reading too much into this? No, sadly, because it is also described as an encounter with the transcendent power of God! Surely the language is far too powerful to describe anything other than a felt, mystical sensation. The use of the words numinous mystery are conclusive, because numinous refers to the awesome presence of divinity. This theologian seriously believes that worship is a felt encounter with the glorious presence of God in a fully mystical sense. He goes on to show how this is produced by the contents and trappings of a service.

We must take warning that the old definitions are being discarded with indifference and sometimes even contempt, and new ideas are being propounded which are totally contrary to biblical and reformational teaching. The new worship is firmly ecstatic (and also largely mystical) rather than rational and faith-reliant. Bearing in mind those who feel that an element of new worship songs may be safely adopted by 'traditionalists' – can it be wise even to sip from this ecstatic stream?

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