

# Spiritual or Aesthetic Worship?

## The First Broken Principle

By Dr Peter Masters | Contemporary Christian Worship  
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The ‘contemporary Christian music’ style of worship has now captured countless congregations of every theological hue throughout the world, though not without many a battle. At times the controversy has become so heated it has been dubbed ‘the worship wars’. As a rule the chief strategy employed by the advocates of new worship has been to reduce the entire debate to a matter of taste, style and generation.

‘Traditionalists’ are sometimes charged with a selfish refusal to adjust to changing culture. They have even been called the Pharisees of the 21st-century church, who are guilty of obstructing a great forward-movement of God’s people and forcing division over non-essentials. For all this, large numbers of churches still hold out against the new ways, believing that great principles are at stake.

The trouble with the rhetoric of those advocating new worship is that they seem not to recognise, let alone discuss, historic, biblical principles of worship. It is as if there is nothing much about worship in the Bible. It is as if the Reformation never reformed worship, articulating great concepts about how we should approach the living God. It is as though the bedrock definitions held over centuries have become invisible and non-existent. Where have these priceless and vital principles gone? Why are they hardly ever discussed? Do the advocates of new worship wilfully avoid them, or are they genuinely unaware of them? Certainly, it is an astonishing scene to find them passed over so easily.

The sixty-plus generation of believers remember that these principles were still being taught in their youth, but not any more. New definitions of worship have appeared which would never have been accepted as recently as fifty years ago – definitions which smash down the central principles of evangelical, Protestant Christian worship, taking us back to medieval and Catholic thinking. These chapters will identify three major deviations from biblical standards (as recovered at the Reformation) typical of the entire modern worship movement. (A fourth serious deviation appears in chapter 13.)

Churches that have adopted modern worship songs and music to only a limited degree must take account of the deeply significant errors which govern the writers and composers of the new genre. Moderate users of new worship plug into a radically deviant philosophy of worship and so train their people (possibly unwittingly) to accept pre-Reformation ideas, and eventually, the full-blown contemporary scene. This is not a complex and theoretical matter: it is straightforward and vital. We must know what worship is supposed to be, and we must assess the new style in the light of God-given principles.

Three broken principles Our first major deviation is the espousal of aesthetic worship, in preference to the Lord’s requirement that worship must exclusively be ‘in spirit and in truth’ (see *John 4.23-24*). ‘In spirit’ makes worship a product of heart and soul. Aesthetic worship, by contrast, is the idea that things that are beautiful, artistic or skilfully executed should be offered up as an expression of worship to God. It is based on the notion that we worship not just with spiritual thoughts from our minds and hearts, but also with the creative skill of our minds and hands.

### **I – Spiritual or aesthetic worship?**

Aesthetic worshippers believe that genuine praise needs a ‘physical’ dimension greater than mere unison singing. It assumes that God is an ‘aesthete’ – sitting in the heavens and looking down with

appreciation at the skill and beauty that we bring before Him. We may bring Him thrilling music, clever arrangements, brilliant instrumentalism and fine singing, and these will please Him. We may worship (it is thought) not only by meaningful words, but by wordless offerings.

This is of immense importance, because the aesthetic idea of worship is totally opposed to the Saviour's standards, and is the very essence of medieval Catholicism. The Church of Rome, with all her masses, images, processions, soaring naves, stained glass windows, costly and colourful robes, rich music, Gregorian chants, and complex proceedings, makes an offering of worship by these things. All her theatricalism is an act of worship believed to be pleasing to God. The spiritual giants of the Reformation turned back to the Bible, unitedly embracing the principle that true worship is intelligent (and scriptural) words, whether said, thought or sung, winged by faith to the ear of the Lord. It is true that little bits of Roman 'theatre' remained in the episcopal churches, but generally speaking the rites, ceremonies, images and everything else that represented a virtuous offering were swept away.

We believe that the Lord trusts us with music and also with instruments to accompany the singing of praise, but these cannot actually convey worship. They are secondary. They are not in the image of God, nor do they have souls, nor are they redeemed. Modern hymnwriter Erik Routley was way off the mark when he penned the lines (which he meant to be taken literally) –

*Joyfully, heartily, resounding!*

Let every instrument and voice . . .

Trumpets and organs, set in motion

Such sounds as make the heavens ring.

An earlier Anglo-Catholic hymn (by Francis Pott) made the same aesthetic point in these words –

*Craftsmen's art and music's measure,*

For Thy pleasure all combine.

The recently coined, popular statement that worship is 'a celebration in words and music' also breaches the Lord's key principle that worship should exclusively be – 'in spirit and in truth'. Words and thoughts are everything in worship. Music may only assist at a practical level; it cannot be used to express worship. To believe that it can is to fall into the tragic error of aesthetic worship. The singing of God's people should certainly be grand and glorious in terms of fervour and effort, but it is the words and the hearts of the worshippers that God desires. All unnecessary embellishment is an offence to Him, firstly, because He has not called for it; secondly, because it is an insolent 'improvement' on what God has laid down; and thirdly, because it is a powerful distraction to spiritual worship. Does this sound strange? It may do so today, but fifty years ago – and all the way back to the Reformation – practically every evangelical Christian would have said this most emphatically.

Aesthetic worship has now flooded into evangelical, Protestant churches as people have been persuaded that they should express much of their worship via music and instrumentation, even through dance, other bodily movements and drama.

A notable advocate of the new ways has defined worship as 'a discovery of God's will through encounter and impact'. Not only is instrumental and song performance offered as a meritorious expression of worship, but from the very performance one is said to glean some form of revelation from God. This is seriously believed by some of the main architects and promoters of new worship. Do evangelicals who partially adopt their materials realise the deep mystical errors that lie behind them? To put it bluntly, aesthetic worship is a huge stride back to Rome, and has no place in the true church of Jesus Christ. It challenges and spoils spiritual worship, and is contrary to every praise instruction

in the New Testament. When we evaluate new worship, we must do so in terms of those biblical principles recovered (by God's mercy) at the time of the Reformation, the first of these being that worship is spiritual, and not an aesthetic performance. At the Reformation, simplicity, intelligibility and fidelity to the Bible replaced the impressive mystery and pageantry of Rome. It has been well said that the aesthetically splendid mass surrendered to the understanding soul.

Why did all this take place? The advocates of new worship do not seem to know. They are aware that the Reformation changed doctrinal teaching, but they do not appear to know why it also changed the manner of worship. Do the new-worship men think it was just a 'generation thing'? Do they picture Luther, Calvin, and the Protestant martyrs as the youngsters who just wanted a new culture? Do they believe it was all a matter of taste? The truth is, of course, that the Reformers saw through the sensual worship of Rome and rejected artistic skill and beauty as a valid expression of worship. (They also rejected the 'working up' of supposed spiritual experience by things which entranced the eyes and the ears; but we will speak of these later.)

How has it come about that so many evangelical Christians have adopted the idea that worship includes an offering of beauty and skill? The most obvious reason is that the 'church growth movement' has adopted musical entertainment as the chief method of attracting outsiders, and this music has to be justified as part of the worship. Also, in the USA even the sounder theological seminaries and Christian colleges have greatly enlarged their music departments and courses for 'worship leaders'. Inevitably the role of music and the use of complex worship programmes has increased even in conservative circles. Many churches have acquired ministers of music as well as professional worship leaders, and how could these highly trained brethren function if they did not feel that all their expertise and creativity somehow formed part of an efficacious offering of worship?

In biblical worship, only one offering counts, and that is the offering made once for all by the eternal Son of God on Calvary's Cross. Nothing should be thought of as an acceptable offering, or as having any worship merit, apart from Calvary. Our thoughts and words are not an 'offering', but expressions of praise, thanksgiving, repentance, supplication, dedication and obedience, all made acceptable by Calvary.

Writers promoting new worship actually use language which depicts God as a satisfied viewer of a 'performance' (this is their term). They explicitly say that God is the audience. Some, in their books, provide illustrations of a stadium in which the church, with its choir and orchestra, are placed on the pitch, and the word 'God' is inscribed around the seating in the stands. They seem very pleased with this scenario.

It is salutary to note that C. H. Spurgeon would not have an organ at the Metropolitan Tabernacle in his day, because he saw how some of the larger churches had become carried away by their magnificent instruments, and by the expert capabilities of their organists. They were tickling the ears of the people (as Spurgeon put it) with beautiful musical items other than hymns. He was concerned that people would go to church to be entertained rather than to worship, but even more seriously, he saw how the skill and beauty of the music was itself likely to be regarded as an act of worship, and an offering to God. Today the Tabernacle uses an organ, but we are concerned to keep its deployment within bounds, so that it provides an accompaniment only, and does not become a medium of worship. In this way we express the same convictions about worship as the 'prince of preachers'. We would never say, for example, that the organ 'enriches' worship. It disciplines the singing, and teaches and maintains the tune, but we know very well that in spiritual terms it can contribute nothing.

Contemporary worship, however, is fully aesthetic in purpose and practice. God is the audience and the worshippers are performers. Skilful instrumentalism is part of the offering of worship. We

repeat, that many evangelical churches have, in this way, gone back to Rome, but they have actually surpassed Rome both in intricacy and decibel count. At the dawn of world history Abel's offering was accepted by the Lord because it was the very act God had commanded – a humble offering representing the need for atonement. Cain's offering, however, was rejected, because it presented his own skill, labour and artistry. It was a 'works' offering. To parade before God our skills as an act of worship is surely nearer to the offering of Cain than that of Abel.

Christians who have begun to savour new worship sometimes ask – 'But what shall we do with our gifts if we cannot express them in worship?' Here is the heart of the matter. Worship is not the exercise of our gifts, but the exercise of our hearts and minds. For many people this is the lost genius of worship, the principle which has disappeared from sight – that worship is not the presentation to God of skill or beauty, or of personal gifts, but the communication of the soul with God, through the merits of the Lord Jesus Christ alone, and by the enabling power of the Holy Spirit. Worship is not an aesthetic activity. Incidentally, the desire to 'express our gifts' in worship opens the door to elitism, because not many people have musical gifts to display. Where will it end? If someone's 'gift' is to play the bagpipes, and another's is to play cricket, are we to fit these into the service of worship also?

We ask again, how is it that evangelicals have tumbled into this dramatic change of viewpoint? We have not been helped by a number of practices which have served as the thin end of the aesthetic wedge. We have already noted that a few pre-Reformation features survived even in the reformed churches – remnants of Catholic theatricalism, costumery and show. These have been kept up in Anglican churches (except in the 'low' churches), and they have always had an undermining effect, causing good people to lose sight of a clear-cut definition of spiritual worship.

Over the years, pleasing inconsistencies have also been adopted by nonconformist churches. Beautiful anthems rendered by choirs came to offer an increasingly aesthetic contribution to worship. Solo items in services seemed harmless enough, and edifying if worshippers followed the words. But then the solo often became an instrument-only item, so that congregations were given 'songs without words', and taught to regard these as acts of worship. Such practices have helped nibble away at the biblical concept of worship, so that the Lord's people have gradually lost sight of basic principles. By now, these have disappeared into oblivion, and the judgement of believers has become completely confused. More recently, simplicity has come under full-scale attack, and performing gifts exalted.

It may be protested that worship in Old Testament times was rich in actions and artistry ordained by God, and such worship can hardly be disqualified today. How can we deny the worship-virtue of skilfully executed music and song? But it is not true that Old Testament services included works of beauty and skill as a direct expression of worship. The symbolism in the design of the Tabernacle and Temple, as well as the ceremonial performed by the priests, represented the work of Christ for them. These things amounted to lessons, not vehicles of worship. They were intended as visual sermons, not meritorious acts. They were pictures, given and taught by God, of the way of grace. The people observed and trusted, but their personal response of praise was meant to be spiritual and from the heart. True worship has always been a matter of the heart. We again urge readers to consider this central principle of worship, because how we worship is not just a matter of culture or taste or generation, but a matter of God-given rules. Principles count. The great statement common to the Westminster and Baptist Confessions of the 17th century stands against all that is going on today:

'The acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by Himself; and so limited by His own revealed will, that He may not be worshipped according to the imagination and devices of men . . .'

It may help to conclude these pages on Spiritual or Aesthetic Worship? with a simple test question. Why would a church wish to increase or elaborate upon its customary instrumentation, and change

its style of worship? If the answer is – ‘To enrich our worship and to express our gifts,’ then it will show that the principle of ‘spirit and truth’ has been lost, and the old aesthetic error has got in.

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