

Traditional vs. Contemporary, and the Myth of Blended Worship

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Contemporary worship is all the rage in the church today. It seems that as you drive down the street, every third church marquee is advertising a "Contemporary Worship Service", sometimes on Saturday night, sometimes on Sunday morning in addition to a traditional service, and sometimes in place of traditional worship altogether. Maybe your church is contemplating a move to a more "contemporary" worship service. Or maybe you're already there and are wondering why it's not all you'd heard about.

I believe that there is a fundamental misunderstanding about what contemporary worship is. Traditional and contemporary worship are not made up of what songs you sing in your worship service. In fact, it is not impossible to put together a contemporary worship service using nothing but songs written 100 or more years ago. Some of the aspects that make a worship service "contemporary" may be more difficult to coordinate using older songs, but it is none-the-less doable. We will look more at these aspects later in this article.

First, let's dispel the popular idea of what contemporary worship is. Many music pastors and music department heads think that if you add guitar, bass and drums, swap out the choir for a few back-up singers, and do songs written in the last twenty years, you are doing contemporary worship. While this church may be singing contemporary songs, contemporary worship is made up of entirely different qualities.

To depict the differences, let's take a look at a possible order of service in a traditional worship setting. It may look something like this:

10:00 AM *Greeting*
 Opening Chorus
 Announcements
 Congregational Song
 Choir Special (Congregation to be seated)
 Intercessory Prayers
 Congregational Song
 Offering (congregation to be seated for Choir Special)
 Sermon

Maybe there will be one more congregational song at the end of the sermon. Note that I didn't say what songs were being done. They could be hymns, they could be contemporary choruses. This is mostly superfluous when gauging traditional vs. contemporary worship.

I would use two words to characterize "contemporary" worship and distinguish it from "traditional" worship. These all-important descriptors are "flow" and "connection."

Flow

"Flow" is used to describe the way the worship transitions from one activity to the next. It is also somewhat dependant on the two activities being strung together. In the example above, the congregation is constantly being moved from one type of activity

to another – singing to listening, sitting to standing. Flow depends on a continuity of activity, with more gentle transitions.

This is not to say that a service must strictly consist of just the music, then the intermediaries (offering, announcements, etc.) and then a sermon ended with a closing prayer. There is room for variation. I have lead worship services where the announcements and offering came after the first song. However, that was followed by an uninterrupted 20-30 minutes of worship. It worked because after the first song the congregation was not yet in “full-on” worship mode. Some had come in a little late; ushers were still seating people; conversations were winding down; essentially there were distractions – people were still getting centered.

This opportunity to get centered on God is the fundamental difference between contemporary and traditional worship. In the “traditional” worship illustration above, the congregation was never allowed to get into “full-on” worship mode. It takes more than a single song for most people to get there. (An exception to this is when the congregation comes on Sunday, having spent the week in personal worship, which will be the subject of a future article.) However, the practice of scheduling the worship service such that the bulk of the congregational singing flows back-to-back, with as little down time between songs as possible, will help to establish the flow that is a benchmark of contemporary worship.

A second practice that aids or hinders flow is the way in which a song list is constructed. As a rule, congregations react best to starting with exuberant praise and gathering-type songs that are higher tempo and energy. “High Praise” as it is sometimes described, is a very corporate activity. Talk to people who are in the habit of worship at home, by themselves, and you will find that most of them spend most of their time in more intimate, quieter worship.

Once this excited “high praise” has run its course, congregations are generally ready to move to a quieter, more intimate time of worship. This time can be closed out with a time of prayer, or moving back into a more exciting song of praise. It's also a good time to transition into a time of intercessory prayer. It's the jumping back and forth that should generally be avoided. Again, these are not hard and fast rules, but rather general guidelines that work in many, if not most situations.

Connection

This now brings us to the second, and more important, characteristic of “contemporary” worship. It is during this time of quieter, more intimate worship that people make a connection with the Divine. It is this communion, in the fullest sense of the word, that is THE ultimate goal of worship. God did not create man just to praise Him, although that is one of the highest callings of man. God created man to live in fellowship with Him. It is in these times of spiritual intimacy that we have the fullest example of this state in this life.

It is also in these times that God the Holy Spirit performs surgery on our hearts. He comforts us, convicts of sin, calls us forward, reveals His love and sometimes even His plans for us. Most of my major life decisions have been made during or just following a time of corporate or personal worship.

One other vital function that this time of corporate worship serves is teaching new believers how to worship. It is by watching others worship, in a time of deep spiritual intimacy with the Father, that they learn how to achieve that intimacy themselves.

So, all that being said, the appropriate flow within the worship time is helpful, if not vital, in bringing the congregation to make that connection with God. We've investigated that this flow and connection are what differentiate "contemporary" worship from "traditional" worship. So what do I mean when I say the "blended" worship is a myth?

Blended Worship

There are teachers and leaders in the church today who are promoting blended worship. I contend that if you define "contemporary" and "traditional" worship and I have above, there is no middle ground between the two. The popular definition of "blended" worship means taking elements from each of the two forms of worship – say some Hymns and some modern choruses, or maybe adding a time of extended worship (2-3 songs) in the middle of a more traditional service.

However, any breaking of the flow negates, or at least makes more difficult, the intimate connection that is the chief goal of contemporary worship. When this flow and resulting connection are broken, the most contemporary of musical styles is still traditional worship.

This is not to say that Traditional worship does not have a place in contemporary society. Almost any religious gathering outside of a Sunday or Wednesday where the goal is not specifically worship will find an effective venue for traditional worship. This is especially true of interdenominational or para-church gatherings.

The Songs

Please note that in all my descriptions of contemporary and traditional worship I have not differentiated between hymns (be they 50 or 500 years old), camp songs, or traditional or contemporary choruses. I will make one quick differentiation now.

"Traditional" worship songs very frequently make proclamations about God – His "Amazing Grace," or He is "Holy, Holy, Holy," or because of Him "It Is Well With My Soul." These are important sentiments, and have a vital place in worship. The Psalms are replete with examples of this sort of proclamation. Contemporary songs such as "Tradin' My Sorrows" and "Days of Elijah" continue this great tradition. Such proclamatory songs serve two powerful functions. Not only do they exalt God, which is a worthy end in and of itself, they serve to prepare the heart of the worshipper for that more intimate time of communion with the Lord.

One more point concerning songs need to be made. The most contemporary worship band, doing the most worshipful songs for a congregation that is just sitting and listening because it is a "band special" is not contemporary worship. It can be worshipful, but the flow has been broken. Again, I say this with the caveat that these are principals, and not cast in stone. I have been a part of a worship service that very effectively used a "band special" to move the worship forward. In that case the song followed a moving testimony, and the congregation joined in on the last verse, flowing into more congregational worship songs. This is to say that once the spiritual maturity and sensitivities are in place, many variations are possible.

So, armed with this knowledge, and knowing that song style is more a matter of stylistic taste than of contemporary vs. traditional, step out into a more powerful, more life-changing worship in your church. Start with a regular format until you are comfortable with it, and then start experimenting and branching out. One more characteristic of contemporary worship is that it is living and dynamic, and not the same every week.

God Bless.