

CONTINUITY AND CONTEMPORARINESS IN WORSHIP

by
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Introduction

This paper is a slightly modified version of a presentation given at the 2001 Carey Ministers' Conference on the subject *Conservative and Contemporary Values in Worship*. When Jonathan Stephen was advised to reduce his extra-church commitments, and was unable to present his own work on the subject in hand, the BEC Conference committee approached me asking if I would be willing to submit this article as a basis for dialogue. I am conscious that if I were starting from scratch, addressing the issue referred to in the BEC paper title more directly, the finished article would look quite different, but given the tight time constraints, it was felt that a modified paper would be better than no paper at all. I commend this to you not as a final word, or as a polished paper (for the Carey paper was given as an address not as a publication), but something to stimulate our discussion together.

There are four preliminary points about the present climate of the debate surrounding this matter, followed by a description of four biblical principles that I think go to the heart of the issue.

1. Worship

Ron **Man** rightly challenges us to regain a proper perspective in the so-called 'worship' issue when he asks, 'What aspect of the worship debate is so weighty that it deserves even mentioning in the light of his ineffable glory?' ⁽¹⁾

If we start our discussions with an argument about the 'what' and 'how' of worship rather than a response to the 'who', we miss the centre and are merely circling around the circumference. John Armstrong comments, 'We argue about drums and guitars, casual dress or formal attire, and choirs versus praise bands. At the same time we give very little or no attention to the actual meaning and purpose of congregational worship.' ⁽²⁾ And he warns us that, 'We must not tamper with the God-centred focus and direction of worship and ultimately destroy what the church is all **about**.' ⁽³⁾

Underlining this Dr Tozer, speaking in 1954 said, 'In my opinion, the greatest single need of the moment is that light-hearted superficial **religionists** be struck down with a vision of God.. We are **left** to our devices and forces to make up for a lack of spontaneous worship by bringing in countless cheap and tawdry activities to hold the **attention**.' ⁽⁴⁾

Pleasing God, adoring God, glorifying God, surely any discussion must emphasise this first, lest we descend into the sharing of our opinions, as if our opinions can stand anywhere alongside God's glory. And, of course, this is the great reality that provides true continuity and true contemporaneity. We worship the one, true God with all believers down through the centuries, and

¹ *Reformation & Revival* ed J. Armstrong, vol. 9, no.3, p. 13 (hereafter *R & R*).

² *Ibid*, p.7.

³ *R&R vol. 9, no. 2, p.10.*

⁴ *Ibid*, p.?

we do so because his amazing grace has rescued us from our ungodliness and has brought us into a new and living relationship wherein we can approach him boldly though our Lord Jesus Christ.

Holy joy, awesome gladness, tender fear, mark all authentic worship – the work of God’s Spirit that cannot be replicated by human effort. Conservative traditionalism masked in human **sternness** may be passed off as reverence; and over-familiar light-hearted trendiness may claim intimacy, but only God can create a true spirit of worship as we focus upon him, his work and his glory.

That **objective** emphasis – the great and glorious God who is really there – before the **subjective** issue – how do I feel in response?- must be sounded. Powerful, narcissistic pressures of our culture weigh upon us. But if we do not underline the objective, we will be in great danger of finding that, as Kent Hughes describes it, ‘People worship at their work, work at their play, and play at their **worship**.’⁽⁵⁾

We long for Spirit-warmed hearts, and rightly so, but on this issue we must also keep clear heads - Why?

2. Warfare

There is warfare because Christians fall out over everything and, I am afraid, because ‘they don’t fight clean!’ Sadly the contemporary scene provides ample evidence of continuity with the past on this front. In a recent article Mrs. Sharon James reviewed three and a half centuries of Calvinistic Baptist church history in regard to worship, particularly the matter of singing. They angrily fell out over every possible angle on the issue that one could imagine. She summarises the huge amounts of heat radiation emitted in the debates like this:

At different times church meetings have divided (and she shows just how bitter that was) over whether congregations should sing *at all*, whether they should sing hymns *at all*, whether to use hymn books *at all*, whether there should be any musical accompaniment *at all* and if so what it should be.’⁽⁶⁾ (*Italics added.*)

Those controversies now continue with very strong disagreements about the use of modern technology to show words on a screen at all, whether some instruments **can** ever provide acceptable or edifying accompaniment, whether older hymns and songs can ever be modified to make their sense more accessible, and whether singing should be as prominent a worship activity as some perceive that it is (and no doubt you can think of a few other minefield zones as well)! Too often battlefield language marks the tone of the debates amongst Christians. Am I exaggerating in saying this? Sadly, I am not. Here is a selection of quotations from recent material taken from viewpoints right across the spectrum on this matter of contemporary worship.

Mike Pilavachi, (mentor to the popular, contemporary songwriter Matt **Redman**), says, ‘In the “war” between pastors and worship leaders, it is the musicians who always come off worse.. musicians on the **fringe** of the church carrying so much **pain**.’⁽⁷⁾

⁵ *R & R*, vol.9, no. 3, p.8.

⁶ S. James, ‘Musical Discord,’ *Evangelicals Now*, January 2001, p.14.

⁷ I. Boughton, ‘Musical Battles,’ *Christian Herald*, 25 November 2000, p.20.

In contrast here are some views of someone who would be self-consciously conservative. John Thackway's opening sentence in a recent pamphlet reads: We live in days when battles must be fought! And he goes on to describe others' choices of worship songs as 'largely puerile.' He says, This is a **burning** issue now', and an 'explosive issue'. In a review of a new hymnbook emanating from a conservative evangelical stable he talks of hymns 'sacrificed upon the altar of modernity' and in it he claims that the 'psalms (are) almost massacred.'

John Armstrong surveys the way in which Christians in the USA are debating these matters. He notes, 'The "worship wars" have continued almost unabated..', 'a battle,' 'a raging debate,' 'charged passions,' 'liturgical skirmishes,' and 'a storm showing no signs of abating.'

Not only is there a 'mark your enemy' mentality, there is **also** the warning to watch out for the fifth column in the midst. Mr. Thackway fears that 'many of God's ministers, once esteemed "steadfast and immovable" have turned aside and failed this generation... they join the ranks of modifiers who have succumbed to the pressure for change... Even last year's staunch brother is not bound to be the same today... Why do good men go this way?' One of these once-esteemed ministers has, Jonah-like, 'gone overboard' and has been involved in a 'treacherous betrayal.' He talks of. The compromises made by once trusted men and churches..⁽¹⁰⁾

All of this is serious, and it is sad. John Frame reminds us **of just** how serious such charges are in the following quote, which was given in response to an article that criticised a disliked worship style:

'Words like "deform" and "**trivialize**" are very serious terms in theological discussion. Normally to speak of deformed worship is to speak of alleged worship that is not worship at all. I hope that X doesn't mean to make such a strong point. But either his rhetoric has gotten away from him, or he is condemning a whole branch of the church of Jesus Christ for no good **reason**.'⁽¹¹⁾

Ron Man underlines the sorrow it all must cause in the following remark, 'If God is looking above all else for faces turned heavenward toward him in adoration and worship, how it must grieve him when instead he sees us facing off against one another in our provincialism, our **territorialism**, and our narrow-mindedness.'⁽¹²⁾

I am not presenting this to seem to be above all that, but to emphasise that this issue is *the* one amongst conservative **evangelicals** that is causing a great deal of strong feeling, and perhaps ill-judged or excessive comments. The tone strikes me as too 'hot'. If we are to make headway we must think and speak carefully.

3. Waffle

Mrs. James comments, 'Nonconformist discussion of music and hymnody has all too often been characterised by a lack of proportion, wild accusation against fellow-believers, misrepresentation of motives and dire predictions of "slippery" *slopes*. It seems that *those who have proposed change of any kind* have always been accused of betraying the status **quo**.'⁽¹³⁾ (Italics added.)

⁸ J. Thackway, *Words of Truth and Words of Truth* 3, (The Bible League Trust), various pages.

⁹ *R & R*, vol. 9, nos. 2 & 3, various pages.

¹⁰ J. Thackway, *ibid*.

¹¹ J. Frame, *Contemporary Worship Music: A Defense*, (Presbyterian & Reformed), p. 113.

¹² *R & R*, vol. 9, no. 2, p.95.

¹³ *Ibid*, p.14.

In my opinion too many of the debates are still like this. Even without a lawyer's razor sharp analytical skills that devastatingly cut through waffle, I could easily **find** in one short, influential pamphlet on continuity and contemporaneity examples of very poor argumentation, specious reasoning, obvious 'straw man' tactics, highly selective and unbalanced historical illustrations, overextended and globalising generalisations, the employment of various forms of the naturalistic and psychological fallacies, unanswerable comments of the 'all spiritually minded people would.' type, the tactic of emotively appealing to group loyalty and the outlining of threats to group identity. All of these tend to confuse rather than illuminate the issue at hand. This particular pamphlet may not be representative, but Frame describes, 'the shoddy arguments and the sheer stubbornness of.. critics. They often seem locked in concrete on this issue, even when the rational considerations obviously support the other **side**.'⁽¹⁴⁾

Frame puts his finger on two particular problems that regularly surface in the way that people think and argue their case over continuity and contemporariness. One is what can be called 'conceptual lumpism'. In referring to the USA he says:

I confess unhappiness with the methods used by critics... *They draw all sorts of things into one big conceptual lump* - the health and wealth gospel, the Church Growth Movement "follow the directions" approach to church planting, goal-centred ministry, contemporary worship, and contemporary worship music. Then **they** present **these** as one large and deeply flawed religious movement that one must repudiate in **toto**. Contemporary worship music becomes the scapegoat for everything bad in modern Christendom. In my view this kind of argument represents poor logic, theology and ethics. It is not valid, edifying, or fair to tie everything together in this **fashion**.⁽¹⁵⁾ (Italics added.)

What you might put in the rubbish bin here in the UK may vary **from** the other side of the Atlantic, but the same tendency of guilt by association is prevalent here. The guilt **may** be a reality, but **often** it is not argued through or proven to be so. It is largely merely charged with being **the** case, as if the charge is **sufficient** in itself to justify the criticism. Such a method of argumentation tends to confirm the already convinced and rarely persuades those who disagree.

A second, related, problem is an apparent blindness to the employment of a method of historical description that some employ to bolster a case. A few biblical quotes may be given, but the primary points are justified **from** historical generalisations. In doing this people may be convincing themselves they are being more biblical than they really are. Frame comments again:

In my opinion, the critics have frequently condemned contemporary worship music, not on the basis of biblical principle, *but because they judge it to be part of a historical development of which they disapprove...* (their method) violates **solā scriptura**.⁽¹⁶⁾ (Italics added.)

This method can cut in **all** kinds of ways, from the 'God is at work today especially in blessing this contemporary practice' through to, 'This is a thing from cherished paths **that** God has blessed in the

¹⁴ J. Frame, *ibid*, p. 142.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, pp.70,71.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p.175.

past.' Both groups then justify what they want to do now on the basis of their reading of blessing in history. But may we be in danger of being more confident of our historical analysis, than really listening to the Bible's teaching?

From my academic historian's background I know that their danger is to say little that is clear and **confident** about the past; all is carefully qualified generalising. But as preachers we may go to the other extreme and proclaim with equal fervour not only our understanding of the biblical text but also our grasp of the past and analysis of the present. It may be worth reminding ourselves of the response by the canny Chinese to the question of what they thought about the French Revolution; 'It is too early to say'! That may help us to be wary of the line we cross when we move from solid biblical exposition to historical commentary and learn not to rely on the latter to prove our case.

4. *our weakness*

Surely having a blind spot is never only the other man's problem! A trained eye will easily spot the very same weaknesses in this paper that I have seen in others. What a problem this is when it comes to debates about worship past and present. Michael Hamilton comments, 'Every complaint about worship music, no matter which style, claims to be rooted in theological principles. Yet in every critique, the theology aligns perfectly with the critic's own musical **taste**.'⁽¹⁷⁾

Ron Man adds, 'We acknowledge that worship is primarily for God; but then assume that our particular taste in music just happens to exactly coincide with God's taste in **music**.'⁽¹⁸⁾

It is hard to acknowledge and confront the personal axes that we grind so readily. John Witvliet is right to say, 'many of today's discussions about worship are less about worship than about power, politics, and personal taste.'⁽¹⁹⁾ (Could he have added personalities too?)

Some of us may be a psychologist's or a sociologist's dream. We convince ourselves that we are acting out of the best of biblical motives, but may we be masking our own motives **from** ourselves? Others, who know us well, may well be able to see what we don't want to. They may identify that our early upbringing, our temperament, our need for approval from those we admire, greatly **influences** the kinds of arguments that we will be more open to, the reasoning that we will more readily reject, the cultural values that we feel comfortable with, or the group identity that *make* us feel more secure in a confusing world (There I go! • opting to employ the psychological fallacy, questioning the motives of why person A holds to practice X, rather than asking if practice X is biblical!)

We cannot ignore this factor. It takes great Christian maturity not only not to be blown about by our ever-changing world, but also to be above the need for human approval of any kind and to live securely just pleasing God. So many of the issues to do with continuity and contemporaneity seem *to* me to be closely related to our personal and cultural inheritance as well as to directly biblical themes. We react to what we don't like, we approve of what we do. We hope that our likes and dislikes are informed by the Bible; we are sure it is so. But others look at us and see far more about our background influencing our position than we think is fair! At a recent conference I attended I could easily spot the upper middle class, posh speaking, public school, Englishman and just know that denominationally he would be an you can fill it in for yourself! Could others look at you and me and do the same? Probably.

¹⁷ *R & R*, vol. 9, no. 2, p.100.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p.95.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p.20.

It is almost axiomatic amongst historians that in the nineteenth century sociological phenomena (class, education, culture, location) hugely influenced church and 'denominational choice. Quakers were the highest nonconformist social group. Then you go down through respectable Wesleyan Methodism, past Baptists to the lowest social horizons of the Primitive Methodists. Thankfully, much of this has changed. But the point is this: we are all, individually and collectively, a product of our cultural environment as well as being moulded by biblical values. Knowing this it should lead us to some level of humility and make us more careful to ground our reactions to 'Continuity' and 'Contemporariness' debates much more overtly in biblical teaching.

So let us now turn to the Bible, the Word of our Lord Jesus. This is a huge subject. I can only extract **what appear** to me as some important biblical principles. There are many more to be taken into account. These ideas are merely suggestive, not exhaustive.

1. The principle of regulation

The principle is stated clearly in the Second Commandment (**Exod. 20:4**) in which God makes it clear that not only should he be our only God, but also that he is to be worshipped in the way that he says. The Westminster Standards summarised the point like this:

The acceptable way of worshipping God is instituted by himself and is limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshipped according to imaginations and devices of men, or the **suggestions** of Satan under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture.@'

Earlier Calvin had described it in similar terms:

Moreover the rule which distinguishes between pure and vitiated worship is of universal application... we may not adopt any device which seems tit to ourselves, but look to the injunction of him who alone is entitled to prescribe... I know how difficult it is to persuade the world that God disapproves of all modes of worship not expressly sanctioned by his **Word**.⁽²¹⁾

As we turn to the word of one greater than Moses, the emphasis on the nature of true worship is underscored. John **4:24** is one of the key passages. It puts its emphasis on 'who?' and the real nature of the 'how?' For the 'who' the answer is that worship must be thoroughly Trinitarian.

John Piper emphasises this: 'Jesus is the true Temple. In himself he will fulfil everything the temple stood for, especially the place where believers meet God. So here again he is diverting attention away **from** worship as a localised thing with outward forms to a personal, spiritual experience with himself at the centre. *Worship does not need a building, a priesthood, and a sacrificial system It needs the risen Jesus.*⁽²²⁾ (Italics added.) Man also adds, 'Beyond questions of style and formality, the question always before us in this: does this act of worship bring praise to God through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit?'⁽²³⁾ The centrality of God-centred worship is thought-provokingly pointed at **in** this further quotation **from** Piper:

²⁰ Quoted in J. Thackway, *Words of Truth*, p.24.

²¹ Quoted in J. Thackway, *Words of Truth* 3, p.24.

²² J. Piper, *Gravity & Gladness on Sunday Morning*, (Desiring God Ministries), p.7

²³ *R&R*, vol. 9, no. 2, p.22.

Mission is not the ultimate goal of the church, worship is. Missions exist because worship doesn't. Worship is ultimate, not missions, because God is ultimate, not **man**.⁽²⁴⁾

As to the 'how?' the emphasis is twofold. It is to be 'in spirit' – our spirit in that it must be sincere, heartfelt, and **real**, but of course for that to happen *the* Spirit must be active. We are to worship in a way that is, as **Schaeffer** used to say 'moment by moment dependent upon the work of the Holy Spirit based upon the finished work of Christ'. Worship is truly empowered by him, and dominated by what pleases him – bringing glory to Christ.

It must also be in truth, and thus Word-based **Stott** stresses the movement of grace to us through the Word, before ever we can respond properly, 'God must speak to us before we have any liberty to speak to him.. The worship of God is always a response to the word of **God**...' ⁽²⁵⁾ Frame makes the same point, 'The nature of worship, then, is to offer God worship **from** the depth of our inner being.. . always baaed on his revealed truth. The person.. must have a faithful commitment to the Word of God. Worship does not happen by a zap out of heaven that makes us fall down. It is the overflow of our understanding of God as he has revealed himself in the **scriptures**.' ⁽²⁶⁾

This emphasis on the Word provides another key element in the continuity issue. Not only do we worship the same God as our forefathers, but we are also submissive to the same final Word. This is where we start, with an active obedience to all that he has commanded for his people throughout the gospel age. All practices, cultures, traditions, tastes are to be brought to the bar of this Word

The text **from** John also pinpoints worshippers. The regulative principle here freed people to worship God together without having to look for others either to worship properly for them, or to mediate that worship in some way or other. The one Mediator brought all who trust in him to that amazing privilege of being willing and enabled to respond to God with a new spirit. It was a privilege for all believers. Runia comments, 'The general conviction of the Reformers is that the worship of the congregation must **witness** to the priesthood of all believers. Worship is not a spectacle, executed by special class of people, but it is the corporate task of the Christian **community**.' ⁽²⁷⁾

This principle underlines the contemporariness of worship; it is we who are alive now who worship the living God, as well as our forefathers. Combined to the 'truth principle, it leads to issues we must grapple with.

One issue stemming **from** this, for example, is the matter of intelligibility of worship. Though the Bible won't be clear to all readers immediately, hence the need for teaching, these principles lead to an emphasis upon an intelligent response. Just as a child will grow and broaden its vocabulary and deepen its grasp of words' significance, so that will happen with Christian infants. But we don't want any child to pretend to use words it doesn't grasp. The child can speak its own words, especially to its 'Abba'. From the editor of a recent compilation of older hymns who feels the force of the biblical emphasis that worship must be understood if it is to be true and **truthfully** done, come these comments: 'We feel that language has changed far more in the 125 years since Spurgeon's hymnbook than during the 150 years which separated **Spurgeon** form Watts. We are **now** confronted with numerous quaint and jarring words or phrases which ought to be edited.. Editorial

²⁴ J. Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad*, p..

²⁵ J. Son, *The Contemporary Christian*, (IVP), p.174.

²⁶ J. Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth*, (Presbyterian & Reformed), pp. 125,126.

²⁷ K. Runia, 'The Reformed Liturgy in the Dutch Tradition', in *Worship: Adoration and Action*, ed. D. A Carson, p.105.

changes have aimed at achieving instant comprehension wherever possible, thus enabling worshippers to honour the apostolic principle - 'I will sing with understanding **also**...' ⁽²⁸⁾ He even felt that the following issue needed addressing as it affects hymnody: 'Another modernisation will be seen in our treatment of the words "man" or "men", together with male pronouns, where these convey the unintended impression to a new generation that all Christians are male. This use of language occurs to an excessive degree in older hymns, and in most cases a way has been found to eliminate it.' ⁽²⁹⁾

Of course that leads to a classic tension point. A lowest common denominator approach is not what is called for, because then all would be constrained by the baby Christian vocabulary. Clearly there has to be an educative process even as we worship, challenging all worshippers to grow in depth and knowledge. But it would be a sad family that expected all conversation to flow at an adult level, thereby excluding the less advanced, leaving them floundering, or where adults made it very clear that they looked down despising what is now below them. It is one of the great challenges of church life to make sure that **all** that separates people in the world - race, class, colour, education, age, sex, social status, is overcome in a new community where we worship the one God, and edify one another.

It is after all these emphases have been made - Christ-mediated, God-honouring, Trinitarian, spiritual, truthful and corporate, then we are in a position to discuss what often takes centre stage, namely issues of form, structure and style. Piper wants us to feel the pressure of this before those that so **often** preoccupy us: 'In the NT is a **stunning** degree of indifference to worship as an outward **form** and a radical intensification of worship as an inward experience of the heart, . . . **not that** it will be wrong for worship to use outward forms; but, rather, he is making explicit and central that this (place and forms) is not what makes worship, worship.' ⁽³⁰⁾

We must remember this. We must let the Bible set our agenda. We must answer the questions it asks us, rather than first go to it demanding responses to our set of problems.

Now in connection with form, structure and style - that which tends to dominate in any discussion of contemporariness and **continuity** in worship - I want to expand on three points about the regulative view as it addresses them.

First, regulation or prescription is not over specified. In one sense one could say that the New Testament is not detailed enough if we are looking for a 'service programme' that would fit all places at all times. Rather it gives us the big things which free us from superstition and which unite all true Christians, but doesn't give us in any one passage all of the details. Indeed it is almost a pastiche of elements that we have to put together **from** a variety of passages to come to our conclusions. No one prescriptive or descriptive passage has got it all. Due to this you will find no full agreement about the detailed particulars of order, structure and even emphasis in all the writing on worship from godly people down through the centuries of church history. Some of the elements are left only broadly described. What **exactly** does 'decently and in order' mean in **the** specifics? We aren't told, but only given pointers. To fall out over **the** precise outworking of things is not what the regulative principle is about at all. Indeed there is a very real danger in imposing too much detail upon others- that is to commit the problem of over-specification, and that is a serious mistake to make. In **Bannerman's** great work on the Church of Christ, in sections dealing with the rule of elders, he stresses that they must not order less than God requires and has proclaimed, *but, equally,*

²⁸ P. Masters, Preface to *Psalms & Hymns of Reformed Worship*, (The **Wakeman** Trust), 1994,

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ **J. Piper**, *Gravity and Gladness*, pp.5,7,8.

to add to these prescriptions is a serious denial of true Christian *freedom* and is an imposition upon the conscience where only King Jesus has crown rights. All church leaders are faced with making either one or both of these errors and must tread with care and sensitivity and beware of assuming they are right in all particulars.

Second, the regulative principle as outworked by our forefathers left open great areas that were left to Christian prudence, the so-called ‘things indifferent’ or ‘adiaphora’. These were the matters of ordering a meeting that in themselves carried no spiritual significance; that is they neither brought the worshipper closer nor further away from God. So where Christians meet, when and how long they meet for, what the particular order of elements is to be, some detailed content of conducting a meeting were all ‘adiaphora’. It can be hard to pin down sometimes the difference between a prescribed element and an ‘indifferent’ practice, for in reality, and very sadly, it tends to be these kinds of things people argue over. Indifferent things can get invested with spiritual significance over time. The test of whether we are still treating them as such is whether we can change them – for by definition they should not bring us closer or send us further away. Yet ask a minister what happens when he tries to change (even with the *best* of reasons) any of these things!

There is a huge confusion over the regulative principle and proper worship and the elevation of indifferent things into that same category of meaning, so that in practice many see a direct assault upon true worship just because something indifferent is being changed or a church down the road varies its practice from our own. People feel they are fighting for the honour of God, when it is might just be their habits that are being questioned. Those habits have become so associated with worship that they cannot tell the difference between true prescriptions and areas of Christian freedom.

Thirdly, in saying this I am not smuggling the normative principle in by the back door. The *normative* principle states that you are free to do what you like and **find** helpful so long as it is not forbidden, whereas *the regulative* view states that a positive endorsement, command or principle needs to be given. It is part of the regulative view to say that God has deliberately left areas of decision in worship contexts. He *has prescribed* freedom within prescribed forms and it is part of what it means to respond in love to him to make choices as an expression of our commitment.

The regulative principle will leave us with some challenging issues. Frame reflects upon them like this: ‘Are traditional forms “prescribed by God”? Are they the only legitimate way for worship to “conform” to God’s revealed **truth**? Well, God has certainly prescribed that we do certain things in worship: praise, prayer, preaching, sacraments, and so on. But he has not prescribed that we do these things in precisely the way that (denomination X) have done them throughout their history. God does not prescribe that hymns use four part choral harmony in stately rhythm. He does not prescribe organs instead of guitars. He does not prescribe old music rather than new. He does not prescribe formal language rather than informal.’ ⁽³¹⁾

The principle then gives us continuity with the past, for like all Christians we should continuously bring our practice to the Word of the Lord we worship. But it will also make sure we are contemporary. We have to judge all we do now in the light of it, not in the light of tradition or trend. It may leave us feeling that hallowed paths aren’t sufficiently safeguarded, but it is the Word that governs, not even the good traditions of men. It is the only way to make sure that neither past nor present pressures keep us from what the Lord wants. There is more to be said, though we can now turn to the issue of freedom just mentioned.

³¹ J. Frame, *Contemporary Worship Music*, p. 113

2. The principle of freedom and choice

Passages such as Philippians 1:9; 2 Thessalonians 1:1; 1 Corinthians 14:26b; Romans 12:1ff. lead to the following comments and observations, ‘There are many areas in which God’s prescriptions allow freedom to choose from a range of options. The current discussion is not, I think, mostly about matters that God has actually prescribed; it is mostly about areas in which we are to make our own choices within the limits of the larger principles of **scripture**.’⁽³²⁾ Calvin comments like this about the issue of form and freedom, principles and choice:

The Master.. did not will in outward discipline and ceremonies to prescribe in detail what we ought to do (**because** he foresaw that this depended upon the state of the times, and he did not deem one form suitable for all ages).. Because he has taught nothing specifically, and because these things are not necessary for salvation, and for the upbuilding of the Church ought to be variously accommodated to the customs of each nation and age, it will be fitting (as the advantage of the church will require) to change and abrogate traditional practices and to establish new ones. Indeed, I admit **that** we ought not to charge into **innovation** rashly, suddenly, for insufficient cause. But love will best judge what many hurt or edify; and if we let love be our guide, all will be **safe**.⁽³³⁾

It is important to say that love will be the guide, not pressure group, forceful personality, or spiritual blackmail from wheresoever it comes. It is not a case of ‘everyone having their turn’ or ‘let’s try a bit of everything’. Piper stresses this: ‘God must mean to leave the matter of form and style and content to the judgement of our spiritual wisdom - not to our whim or tradition, but to prayerful, thoughtful, culturally alert, self-critical, Bible-saturated, God-centred, Christ-exalting, reflection, driven by a passion to be filled with all the fulness of **God**.’⁽³⁴⁾ Man adds, ‘The lack of specific instruction on worship in the NT would seem to allow for considerable freedom in terms of the actual expression of our worship... The fact is that worship is for God... and all decisions about style and taste.. must be made in the light of the fact that worship must be utterly God-centred.. it will truly reflect and magnify the glory of **God**.’⁽³⁵⁾

In Jay Adams’ helpful and highly stimulating book *More than Redemption*, there is a discussion about the ‘decision making matrix!’. Each time we choose we must take into account what is right, what is good, what is wise, and what is best. Although his discussion is to do with personal guidance there is much suggestive material to help make decisions in worship meeting contexts. ⁽³⁶⁾

Let’s take just one area by way of illustrating how we need to think carefully. Let me ask you, ‘Why do we sing? Could we not just pray, for a hymn is but a sung prayer?’ There must be something about music that stirs us and helps us respond in love for the Lord, and above all God has gladly sanctioned it. But note **that** ‘of **the** nature of music performed by the Hebrew musicians we have no knowledge **whatsoever**.’⁽³⁷⁾

Yet how hot people get over music, an area where there is no detailed prescription, and in which we must use wisdom to make choices. People can’t be getting hot over the regulative principle being broken for the Bible doesn’t prescribe how loud, how long, how slow, how vibrant

³² *Ibid.*

³³ J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol.2, ed .J.T. McNeill, (The Westminster Press), p.1208.

³⁴ J. Piper. *Gravity* m d G l o , 3 7 .

³⁵ *R & R*, vol. 9, no3, pp.14,15.

³⁶ See pp.23-34 of Adams’ book.

³⁷ *Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, (IVP), part 2, p. 1035.

and so on. It must be about choices people are making that others don't approve of, don't like, or **think an** insult. If the words are true, it must come down to what we think of the fit of the music to the context. But we aren't told what a 'right fit' is for all people in all places!

Notice how balanced and **nuanced** the following comment is from the editors of a hymnbook when they make suggestions about how hymns should be sung, for they know there are no clear-cut prescriptions: 'Generally speaking, a congregation that is able to sing its hymns in four-part harmony will find - *other things being equal* - that its worship is richer and more satisfying than if it is able to sing only the melody of the hymns.'⁽³⁸⁾ But even here it is worth asking for whom 'richer and more satisfying' - to God or to us? If it is to us, then as we are subject to changes in taste, ability, preference and aesthetic sensibility, the kind of music that is 'richer and more satisfying' will change as well.

Lewis also rightly asks us to remember: 'Both musical parties, the Highbrows and the Low, assume far too easily the spiritual value of the music they want., *Our music is valued for the intention, not the act: our Father doesn't 'need' our music to please him, but is like a human father who values a worthless but beloved child's present.*'⁽³⁹⁾ (Italics added.) We are prone to hide behind the rationalisation that only people like us have enough **discernment** and spirituality to choose.

Does what we have learnt so far give us answers to the questions about what emphases there should be on continuity from the past and contemporaneity in the present? Only in part, and that's why we need to turn to a third principle.

3. The principle of tolerance

Given the last principle this one needs emphasising, for inevitably choices made by individuals and churches will differ. In a classic passage (though admittedly in a section dealing with the massive biblical-theological issue of the change of covenant administration), Paul addresses some of these matters in Romans 14 and 15. In 1 Corinthians 16:12 we also see the apostolic model of how to handle a difference about a decision with a fellow believer who thought differently. Some comments can be made. First, tolerance of others' point of view is a grace not a weakness. John Witvliet comments, 'Discerning people are always willing to give a person., a movement, or a worship style a fair **hearing.**'⁽⁴⁰⁾

Most of us admire the fair-mindedness in Spurgeon's thoughts about choosing appropriate hymns to include in his hymnbook: 'Whatever may be thought of our taste we have used it without prejudice; and a good hymn has not been rejected because of the character of its author, or the heresies of the church in whose hymnal it **first** occurred; so long as the language and the spirit commended the hymn to our heart we included it, and believe that we have enriched the collection **thereby.**'⁽⁴¹⁾

Second, strong preferences are all right as long as they are not contused with absolutes or commands (note Paul's strong feelings about what Apollos should do, but his willingness to concede). Tolerance doesn't mean blandness or a lack of strong convictions (as it so **often** does in to&y's post-modern culture). It is perfectly good to have strong likes and dislikes, to have good reasons for holding to them, and to try to persuade others to share your views. C. S. Lewis didn't like

³⁸ **Preface** to *Christian Hymns*.

³⁹ C.S. Lewis, 'On Church Music', in *Christian Reflections*, ed. W. Hooper, (Collins, Fount Paperbacks), p.96.

⁴⁰ *R&R*, vol. 9, no. 2, p.18.

⁴¹ **Quoted** in the Preface to *Christian Hymns*.

innovation and caustically commented about changes in his local church, ‘The command was to feed my sheep, much less teach my performing dogs new tricks!’

Third, it is to be noted that learning to live with others’ differing choices can be a real cause of spiritual growth. Lewis went on to say about music in his church, ‘I disliked very much their hymns which I considered to be **fifth** rate poems set to sixth rate music. But as I went on I saw the merit of it. I came up against people of quite different outlooks and education, and then gradually my conceit just began peeling off. I realised that those hymns (which were just sixth rate music) were, nevertheless, being sung with devotion and benefit by an old saint in elastic side-boots in the opposite pew, and then you realise that you aren’t fit to clean those boots. It gets you out of your solitary conceit.’⁽⁴²⁾

He didn’t pretend that the poetry or music was other than what it was (to his very developed sensibility), but he learnt that others could use them as a true vehicle of worship and he could still profit spiritually from it.” He adds, ‘the problem is never a merely musical one.. Discrepancies of taste and capacity will, indeed, provide matter for mutual charity and **humility**.’⁽⁴⁴⁾ Where this is absent divisions and recriminations can soon erupt if we want our own way - whoever we are! John Frame notes, ‘When sophisticated members of the church insist that worship only employ the most sophisticated music of their own culture, what **has** happened to their love for those who are poorly educated or of a different cultural stream?... When advocates of contemporaneity want to set the traditions of **the** church completely aside and replace them with something largely meaningless to the older generation, are they acting in love?’⁽⁴⁵⁾

Too often people elevate their own preferences to the level of principles that are self **evidently** good. Meanwhile they categorise others’ choices as wrong or even wicked. But handling diversity like that is not good nor wise, and we need a better way. It seems that God planned these differences between us all. There is greater glory because greater grace is needed for a community that is diverse. Dawn comments, ‘Community in the biblical sense is more open to the realities of differences, more openly gracious to all, more deliberate, an act of the will. It does not depend upon feelings of affection. In fact, sometimes (perhaps always?) God seems to put us in a community with people whom we don’t like so that we learn the real meaning of agape • that intelligent purposeful love.’⁽⁴⁶⁾

A healthy church with a strong understanding of true tolerance can live with very real differences on ‘**indifferent**’ issues. We don’t like this, for we feel we would like more clear-cut positions. We want to know where we stand and not let in anything deviant. We can spot the radical hot head, or the reactionary conservative, and we want them to know that they can’t rule and get it their way. As nonconformists, we want others to conform! But these principles keep showing us that unless what they advocate is sinful, forbidden and with no warrant in God’s Word, then we must learn to be part of a family which has great diversity even if at times we feel more uncomfortable **than** we would.

Continuity can come to the young in the faith by listening and learning **from** the more mature, from those who have learned to discern. The best can be preserved by the distilled wisdom being passed down. The young have a privilege in learning to listen to this wisdom.

Contemporaneity can be achieved by the mature realising that there is always so much to **learn** – about God, his Word and about Christian graces. This will mean in part that the mature will

⁴² C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock*, (Eerdmans), pp.61,62.

⁴³ See other wise words about music and blessing in Lewis’s *Christian Reflections*, p. 127

⁴⁴ C. S. Lewis, ‘On Church Music’, *ibid*, pp.96,97.

⁴⁵ J. Frame, *Contemporary Worship Music*, pp.25,26.

⁴⁶ *R&R*, vol. 9, no.2, p.67.

help the young to think things through for themselves in a very changing world. The mature will also be a model of tolerance towards differences and new **things**.

The glory of this is that it will allow a gracious balance between continuity and contemporariness. In an atmosphere of mutual respect, there will be space for those who appreciate the old paths and also for **those** who are at the cutting edge. The working of the body of Christ that is my local church may not be what some members want all of the time. But it will be kept from any one taste dominating all others. It could descend into blandness. It could rupture into factional infighting, or the anarchy of everyone doing what is right in their own sight. But it need not. As God's Word is taught and these principles become established and modelled, maturity develops and the best of the present and the past can be experienced together for the good of all.

While we are on this issue, it is worth noting Piper's comments about the spectrum of people, **that** grade between what he calls fine and folk culture. He says, 'By "fine culture" I have in mind the pattern of life that puts a high priority on intellectual and artistic expression, that require extraordinary ability to produce and **often** demand disciplined efforts to understand and appreciate. By "folk culture" I have in mind the pattern of life that puts a high priority on expressions of heart and mind that please and help average people without demanding unusual **effort**.'⁽⁴⁷⁾ Piper notes that one tends to snobbishness and elitism, to performance not participation, and the other towards lazy, slipshod, ill-disciplined, short-circuiting of the mind. *But* the one can help the mind think clearly and stir a sense of beauty and excellence, while the other meets people where they are, is very shareable and accessible. We are all on that continuum and need to be ourselves, *making the most of the strengths of each*.

4. **The principle of pragmatism**

This is very definitely principle 4, not 1, 2 or 3! It means that whatever we decide to do, we do to help one another and help outsiders. We do our best for the Lord and each other. Within **this** principle we can talk of meetings of two natures; one where edification of Christians is dominant, and those where evangelism is **primary**. These are not mutually exclusive, watertight compartments, but are broad emphases. Von **Allmen** alludes to this in the following quote:

"Let the Church seek • and to&y more so than ever • to reach contemporary man, to go out to meet him, to go with him two miles rather than one; that is essential. But it is not through the cult [i.e. the worship meeting] that it must try to do this. The cult is something quite different; it is the sphere where finally, step by step, the Church will bring together in adoration, praise and thanksgiving those whom it has reached by evangelisation.. In the cult the primary concern throughout is to enable the Church to find its orientation towards God and to live it out. That is why, not in its worship, but alongside it the Church has an absolute obligation to pursue an evangelistic **effort**.'⁽⁴⁸⁾

When we think of meetings primarily for believers where we worship God and are built up in our holy faith, we still need to take pragmatic decisions, Piper states, 'Worship has a horizontal effect while being vertical in focus. All the people should think of how others are helped to experience God

⁴⁷ J. Piper, *Gravity and Gladness*, p.37.

⁴⁸ J.J. von Allmen, *Worship: Its Theology and Practice*, pp.77-79.

by their **Godward** hunger and demeanour.. **all** the circumstances - sound, light, music, welcome, heat, ushers, parking should not distract from a focus on God.' ⁽⁴⁹⁾

We want to do that which doesn't distract or disrupt, and that which can help. That is, we are bound to be making pragmatic decisions about what is best for most people. **Many** of these things are indifferent Biblically but can be wise/unwise culturally. For example, take seating provision. Nothing is prescribed, so what helps most/distracts least today (and given other constraints such as cost for instance) is what should help inform our decisions. Here contemporaneity counts a great deal. Too much continuity with past practices in these area may well mean that instead of 'what helps most to&y' (i.e. the principle if pragmatism), other things are seriously skewing choices. As culture changes the older practices and habits stand out, clashing with what would help people today. What used to **magnify** the Lord has now stagnated, as **Schaeffer** pointed out.:

There are no simple 'one answer tits all cases' and we may **find** pragmatically that what has worked well for ages may still work well, but we may **find** a radical overhaul is long overdue and changes need to be made. If it furthers the goal of helping a lot of people why not?

In our meetings it is also important to remember that we are still saying to outsiders, 'Come and see'. Christians worshipping God intelligibly and truly can have a powerful impact meeting (see 1 Cor **14:24**). What they find easiest or best may not be what firstly (or secondly, thirdly or fourthly) informs our decisions here, for they are coming to a meeting where we worship God the way he says. But at the same time, because we are humans, we tend to find that what they **find** helpful and non-distracting may well be the **same** kinds of things that help us too; issues of sound systems, lighting and seating have already been mentioned. Receiving a warm welcome, being given adequate information, and being engaged in friendly conversation after meeting are what human beings generally find helpful, whether they are believers yet or not. So it is good to listen to what may distract or help them too.

But the church also needs to think about meetings whose emphasis is on outreach., meetings in which there is dominant evangelism. In following the 'Go and tell' commands we want to take seriously the Apostle's passion, to remove barriers and to build bridges with his **hearers**.⁽⁵⁰⁾ The only offence we want people to take is that caused by the word of the cross.

Here we may be much more consciously contemporary. Our aim is not to get them to worship according to God-given forms first, but to hear and to respond to the gospel. We have to work much harder to make it plain. We must not erect unnecessary **barriers** emerging from a Christian subculture. We don't expect sanctification before justification in these meetings. In such meetings we have more liberty, and need to be more consciously pragmatic. What works with one age group or social type may not work with another. The continuity will be in the gospel and its demands, but the focus will be very contemporary as we seek to engage people and win them to Christ. Any church should feel the powerful pull of these two and have to think carefully about how the four principles we have looked at bear upon different types of meetings.

It may be that dominant edification and dominant evangelism both take place in meetings on the Lord's Day. But recall that Scripture gives us great freedom with the latter to explore ranges of options to communicate the gospel. The regulative principle isn't violated because we aren't primarily meeting for 'vertical worship' (although any Christians evangelising will be honouring God and worshipping within their hearts), but we are trying to use God-honouring methods to reach

⁴⁹ J. Piper, *Gravity and Gladness*, p.34,

⁵⁰ 1 Cor. 9.

the outsider. There is freedom here to use what is helpful *to them*. We will exhibit passion, principle and pragmatism in this endeavour.

Conclusion

Let me close with two quotes from Frame:

Simply opposing the modern world at every point is an entirely inadequate approach. I say that for theological reasons. I certainly wish to be counted among those whose thoughts and actions are based on principle, not pragmatism. But I confess to find myself, on the basis on biblical principle itself, **very** often siding with those who are considered pragmatists rather than those who are regarded as the most principled among us. The fact is that when we seriously turn to Scripture for guidance, that guidance usually turns out to be more complex, more **nuanced**, than anything we would come up with ourselves.. Certainly scriptural principle is more complex than any mere negation of existing cultural **trends**.⁽⁵¹⁾

It would be arrogant for any contemporary generation to think that just because they are alive at the moment they are the people that really count, brushing aside all that is past, and ignoring that which is to come. Particularly, it means that we must see that we will learn more wisdom if we stand on other's shoulders and have the humility to listen to what has passed.

Contemporaneity does say, however, that we are the people and that we do count. We are challenged to make sure that we serve the Lord in our day and reach people alive now with the gospel. And it also means that we need to think responsibly about what we are passing on to a quickly arriving new generation and ask ourselves, 'Is what I pass on worth inheriting?' It will tend to put any tendency for faddishness into perspective. Above all we want them to know the great reality – the knowledge of the Lord and his Word. As Frame puts it:

Sometimes following Scripture makes us appear conservative in the context of society, sometimes it makes us appear liberal or *radical*. *The important thing is that we follow God's Word no matter what people **think**.*⁽⁵²⁾ (Italics added.)

⁵¹ J. Frame, *Contemporary Worship Music*, p.?

⁵² *Ibid*, p.113.

DECIDING BIBLICALLY WHAT WE MAY SING ⁽¹⁾

Worship should reflect the character of God, his majesty and eternal unchangeableness and the fact that he speaks and rules today. He is the unchanging God of our spiritual forefathers, He is also the God of today. In our worship we should be like the teacher of the Old Testament law, instructed in the kingdom of God, 'who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old' (Matt. 13:52). We should include the best from the past and the present. Everything - old, as well as new - must be assessed by what the Bible teaches about the spiritual worship of God.

Some traditional hymns will scarcely pass the test of Scripture. But the problem has become acute in this post-modern age where the 'feel-good' factor is what matters. For many Christians feeling happy and having a good self-image have replaced the biblical priorities of doing right and living in the fear of God. Christians often assess a church by the feel of its worship, not by the biblical soundness of its teaching and practice.

Many of the contemporary worship songs come **from** the latest wave of the charismatic movement with its emphasis on the restoration of the **gifts** of the Holy Spirit that are seen as hastening the Second Coming of Christ. For such Christians worship is a matter of feeling above everything else. Worshipers are sometimes encouraged to empty their minds and submit to whatever feeling - or spirit - comes. The feelings that are induced are not the result of responding to the Word of God. They are the immediate effect of an experience, like the so-called Toronto 'blessing.' Music is used to induce feelings, and to produce a pre-hypnotic state in which people are easily manipulated. The hymns and choruses of this movement have been written to promote this kind of feeling. In their books some of the composers of these songs reveal the agenda about their introduction into evangelical churches. They are seen as a fitting accompaniment to the growing use of spiritual gifts and to the restoration of the Kingdom. A spiritual movement is being propagated by music and song, even in churches where these things are not being taught. This is very serious *because Christians learn most of their theology from what they sing!* We remember and believe the simple truths - or errors - that are included in the hymns and choruses that we sing!

Faced with a hidden agenda behind many (but by no means ah) of the modern items in *Mission Praise* we have to ask important questions about the things we sing, both new *and* old.⁽²⁾

Questions to ask about the things that we sing in worship

1. ***Does it help us to use our minds, so that in our worship we understand why we are responding to God with our whole being?*** - Worship is the response from the heart of redeemed sinners to God - to what he is like, what he has done, what he requires of his people. Our whole being is affected. We express our love for the Lord, we grieve over our sin, we rejoice at his forgiveness and grace in Christ - to mention only a few of the feelings belonging to spiritual worship.

¹ We **are very** grateful to Ray **Evans** for **standing in** at the very last moment for Jonathan Stephen. His paper is adapted from the one **originally** given at the Carey Ministers' Conference early this year. **The** purpose on that occasion was to **encourage** ministers to have the **right** pastoral attitudes **in** dealing with **differences** over worship. With Dr Evans' encouragement we include this postscript to his paper. It suggests **the** kind of detailed questions we might ask **in** deciding which musical items **old and** new, are appropriate in God-centred worship.

² The material offered here is **from** the introduction to an index **of Mission Praise** Combined Music **Edition**, Marshall Pickering, 1990. The **hymn numbers** in the **text** refer to this edition.

Praise is not a feeling generated by a tune or a particular style of music. It is not a vague, romantic feeling towards God. It is not like falling in love, and finding ourselves unable to give any reason for the experience. Praise is an intelligent response from the heart to the truth of God declared to us. We must know why we are praising him, why we are confessing our sins, why we must obey him, why we can trust him, etc. Worship must be Word-centred. The attributes, the deeds, the promises and the commands of God must be proclaimed in our worship - in prayer, scripture readings, preaching and song. For rational beings the way to the heart and will is through the mind.

What we sing must have meaningful content if it is to help us to worship with our minds in a way that affects our hearts and wills. The **first** verse of Psalm 147 says that it is good to praise **the** Lord, but the remaining nineteen verses give **reasons** why it is good to praise him. Praise in the Bible is based on stated facts. We see this very clearly in the psalms.

2. *Does it focus our attention on what God is like and what he has done?* - To worship God, to praise him, to obey him, we must be reminded of what he is like (his attributes, his characteristics) and of what he has done (his great works in creation, redemption and his government of the world, his providential care of his covenant people). The Ten Commandments begin with a reminder that God has brought his people out of slavery and bondage (Exod. 20:1-2) - this is why we are to obey him! Psalm 106 lists the saving acts of God - this is why we are to praise him! Isaiah 40: 18-26 tells of the omniscience and **almighty** rule of God - this is why we are to rely on him! Similarly, the great hymns tell the facts about the greatness and glory of God and of Christ. This is what draws out our hearts in love and adoration. One of the bidden gems of Mission Praise is 'Thou art the everlasting Word, the Father's only Son' (693). With verses of sublime succinctness and a wonderfully reflective chorus it sets the glorious facts of the eternal Son before us.

*God is the centre of worship in heaven. What we sing should present the truth about him so that he is **at** the centre of our worship here on earth.*

3. *Does it **express** a personal response to God?* - In many traditional hymns the element of personal response to God is weak or even absent. Modern hymns and choruses **often** express love and adoration in the **first** person - such as 'Jesus is King and **Z** will extol Him' (366). A chorus like 'O come, let us worship' (492) is typical of many. It offers worship in a personal way, while being weak on doctrine. It may be used with a scriptural introduction, such as Psalm 95: 1-8a or Philippians 4:5-11. 'As the deer pants for the water' (37) can express personal longing for the Saviour as we come to hear him speak through the preaching of the Word. The reasons for the response expressed in the song can often be supplied by a scripture-reading or a *brief* (and thought-out) comment, and by the position of the song - looking forward to the sermon or scripture reading, or responding to it afterwards.

4. *Does it **promote** a sense of awe before God and an understanding of his holiness and sovereignty?* - God is holy. He is a consuming fire. His people were afraid when they heard his voice from Mount Sinai. When he comes, his servants are overwhelmed by a sense of awe and of his holiness. They fall down on their faces before him - like Moses, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Paul, John on the Isle of Patmos. Worship, and what we sing in worship, must express the majesty, sovereignty and awesome purity of God. **Sinners** cannot survive in his presence unless protected by the blood! Words and music must express the seriousness of God. There is a most wonderful joy for the child of God. But it is a joy always tinged with the solemnity of the God with whom we have to deal. Not all that we sing can express this awe before God - but nothing should promote a superficial, unthinking joy. Something like 'Make way, make way' (457) or 'Therefore the redeemed of the Lord shall return' (685) can easily degenerate and lose all sense of reverence before a holy God.

When we choose what to sing at the beginning of the service, it is good to have something that focuses on the grandeur of God. Such hymns remind us of our frailty, smallness and sinfulness. Some speak of the pardon that we must seek and that he offers - something like 'Great God of wonders, all Thy ways' (197).

5. *Does it uplift the person of Christ, so that we see what he is like and appreciate what he has done?* - Not all hymns focus on the person of Christ, but those that do so should present him as he really is - the eternal Son of God, the suffering Saviour, the glorious Conqueror and King. 'Almighty God, we bring You praise for Your Son, the Word of God' (27) is a modern chorus that sets out briefly the person and work of Christ for our adoration. On the other hand 'I receive Your love' (290) does not define Christ's love. It expresses a romantic love rather than the love of a **sinner** for his Saviour. God's love is sentimental and undefined in 'So freely, flows the endless love You give to me' (603).

6. *Does it encourage us to listen to the voice of God speaking through Scripture?* - Some hymns are an explicit prayer for God to speak and are particularly appropriate before the sermon (or the scripture reading). 'Master, speak! Thy servant heareth' (459) is in this **category**. Other hymns make it clear, if sung before the sermon, that we seek Christ through his Word. Such a hymn would be 'Here from the world we turn' (228).

7. *Does it teach correct doctrine and give a biblical picture of the Christian life?* - For example, 'Jesus, we enthrone You' 388) says that we set Christ on his throne, whereas Scripture says that is what God has done (Acts 5:31; Eph. 1:20-22). (When God has **lifted Christ so high** nothing we do can lift him any higher!) 'Let Me have My way among you' (407) with its repeated phrase 'Do not strive!' gives an overly passive view of the Christian life. It is true that there are rare occasions when we have to give up all striving and be entirely passive in God's hands, but that is not the normal mode of the Christian life. Usually we have to exert effort to fight and go on fighting! Singing about the exceptional way of behaving is likely to encourage folk not to do the normal thing. People remember and act on what they sing!

8. *Does it encourage a mystical approach to God - a direct meeting with God through the senses?* - Some old and new hymns speak of 'seeing' the Lord. In 'Here, O my Lord, I see Thee face to face' (230) it is a matter of seeing and understanding Christ spiritually in the symbolism of the Lord's Supper, reflecting on the benefits of his saving work. But 'see' is used in quite a different sense in 'I see perfection as I look in Your eyes, Lord' (292). This is not a matter of seeing spiritual truths or benefits. It suggests imagining or **visualizing** Christ's appearance (545). It is not like the visions of people in the Bible who were granted a vision of God or of Christ, when they actually saw in their minds the Godhead.

H. L. Ellison wrote wise words about this: 'It is quite common in popular piety to speak of seeing Christ. In its origin the phrase is probably a combination of certain passages of Scripture with the language of mysticism watered down to mean very little. While it is undoubtedly granted to some children of God to have a vision of the risen Lord, such a vision is always a rare experience, which is bound to have the deepest imaginable effect on him who receives it... However popular the expression 'seeing Christ' may have become with some to express a spiritual awareness of His presence, we would do well to reserve it for experiences comparable with those described in the Bible. Above all it should not be used for the ability some possess of summoning up a mental picture

of their own creating of our Lord. To see God means to be **transformed**.³ We see Christ spiritually as we grasp the spiritual facts of Scripture about him. What we see in our mind's eye is almost invariably a Christ of our own making.

9. **Does it promote the idea of worship as emotional release, rather than as an expression of love, obedience and submission to God?** - In 'Lord, come and heal Your church' (427) the Holy Spirit is asked to 'release our hearts to praise You.' 'Set my spirit free that I might worship You' (595) is a song desiring charismatic release. It is dangerously experience-centred because it is not a response to God's truth. The Christian life is one of self-discipline, rather than of emotional release from inhibitions.

10. **Does it promote a false kind of triumphalism - a wrong view of the role of the church in the world today?** - A number of hymns in **Mission Praise** express the Restorationist belief that through the bestowal of the charismatic gifts in these days the church is moving into a new, victorious phase. We can march victorious through the land and expect God to do great things immediately. This kind of thinking is found in 'I hear the sound of rustling in the leaves of the trees' (274). There is the idea of a new day dawning - 'We'll walk the land with hearts on fire' (743) and 'An army of ordinary people' (32) with its chorus, 'A new age is dawning, a new age to come.' The biblical view is that while the Church will be victorious at the end, she is persecuted by the world and protected by God throughout her history (Rev. 12).

11. **Does it express a false view of the kingdom of God, where authority lies with the subjects rather than with the King?** - This is another wrong idea from the Restorationist movement. It is expressed in Jack Hayford's 'Majesty' (454) in the line 'Majesty, kingdom, authority, flows from His throne unto His own.'

12. **Is it God-centred or man-centred?** - Some of the items in **Mission Praise** are more horizontal (conscious of other worshippers), than vertical (conscious of the Lord). This is true of 'Jesus, stand among us at the meeting of our lives' (381) - the main purpose of Communion is to meet the Lord together, not that our lives should have contact with the lives of other believers. 'There's a quiet understanding' (678) has a similar focus on our fellow-believers. Verse 3 of 'One shall tell another' (541) makes man the one who determines what happens by saying that God 'longs to do much more than our faith has yet allowed.' This is Word of Faith teaching!

13. **Does it promote a wrong view of the spiritual gifts?** - 'Healing God, almighty Father' (226) has an over-emphasis on healing, with Christ equally as Saviour and Healer. Verse 3 of 'The price is paid' (663) includes the idea of healing being in the atonement, and thus available for every believer.

14. **Is the music appropriate to the words and for the worship of a God who is holy and awesome?** - There are problems with 'God is good - we sing and shout it' (185). The tune is bouncy and the words are trite. It does not reflect the **majesty** of God and the feeling there should be in worshipping him.

15. **Does the music tend to produce a mood or atmosphere in which we think we are worshipping without using our minds, or does it engage the mind, heart and affections in worship?** - Some traditional hymn tunes can have great emotional impact. Different people are

³ H. L. Ellison: *Ezekiel, The Man and his Message*. Paternoster. 1956.

affected in different ways, so that this is a difficult and subjective area. Graham Kendrick's 'The Servant King' with its excellent words (162) and 'Immanuel, O Immanuel' (326) have such an easy, rhythmic style that you can be lulled into enjoying the music and forgetting the words. (*It's* always doubtful when people choose a hymn because of the tune.) This is a very personal matter. Items should perhaps not be excluded for this reason if they have good words, but played in such away that the hypnotic effect of the music is not emphasized.

16. ***Does it declare a biblical understanding of the Lord's Supper?*** - Several items are considered unsuitable because their realist language suggest that the bread and wine of Communion are the actual body and blood of Christ.

17. ***Are some songs to be excluded because of their associations?*** - Graham Kendrick's 'Restore, O Lord, the honour of Your name' (579) can be understood in a biblical sense. Nevertheless, it was written to express the unbiblical notion of the restoration of the spiritual **gifts** in the end time. It was intended to express an unbiblical triumphalism, although it can be understood without this wrong emphasis. Should it not be sung because of its associations for some believers who have left the charismatic movement, or because visitors to the church might understand it in its intended, but wrong, meaning? Should items that are acceptable in other respects be rejected because they were designed to promote a charismatic outlook that we reject?

Conclusion: Some thoughts about music and singing in worship.

*The purpose of singing is to enable people to **lift** up their hearts to God.*

a) ***The regulative principle*** - Worship may consist only of what Scripture directly commands, or what may be deduced directly or indirectly from Scripture.

b) ***Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs*** - *The Westminster Confession* states that part of worship is 'singing of psalms with grace in the heart' (2 1.5). The Bible references to support this statement are Colossians 3: 16 and Ephesians 5.19, both of which refer to 'psalms, and hymns, and spiritual songs.' There is some overlap between these three terms. There would be no point in using three different words if they all referred to exactly the same sung items - namely Old Testament psalms, as some would insist. The case for singing only Old Testament psalms in Christian worship can hardly be sustained from these verses. There is great spiritual value of singing the psalms, but I believe we may sing hymns and *choruses provided they are scriptural in content and meaning.*

- i. ***Psalm*** - The traditional Scottish and Irish Psalters contain versions that are often tortuous and hard to understand. *Psalm Praise* has some good things in it, but many are just paraphrases and some tunes are too difficult and the words will fit no other tune. *The Book of Praises* (Carey Press) has some good material in it, but - like *Psalm Praise* - it does not cover all the psalms. The *Complete Book of Psalms for Singing*, the Psalter of the Presbyterian Church of Eastern Australia, is **very** good for covering all the psalms and having versions that are far less tortuous, generally, than the traditional Scottish metrical psalms. *Psalms and Hymns of Reformed Worship* (Wakeman Trust) from the Metropolitan Tabernacle begins with at least one version of each psalm, the fulfilment in Christ being made explicit in a number of them.
- ii. ***Hymns*** - *Christian Hymns* is an excellent selection of traditional hymns. It contains many spiritual gems not found elsewhere, but some tunes are obscure and should be changed. It is easy to choose hymns you do not know, because there are many helpful categories of hymns.

Praise! has a good selection of (moderately) modernised traditional hymns, and some excellent modern hymns from men like Chris Idle and Timothy Dudley-Smith. Commendably it has a version of all the psalms. It has opted for paraphrases of most psalms. This is a pity when there are some good modern translations around.

- iii. **Spiritual songs** ▪ One source is the complete **Mission Praise**, although it contains a number of modern songs that must be rejected on biblical grounds. It's not an easy book to choose **from**, for its categories are too broad. It has many traditional hymns ▪ but not enough to do without another hymnbook. The result is a duplication between **Mission Praise** and any other hymnbook you have.

c) **The choice of hymnbook is governed by different factors:**

Doctrinal content, devotional depth ▪ There is nothing better **than Christian Hymns** for spiritual content. Even hymns that are in language we would not use today can become alive in the **framework** of a worship service addressing the issues of today in the language of today, and when they are sung by believers really **lifting** up their hearts to the Lord.

- i. **Contemporary language and feel** - In some situations this may be felt to be so important that the choice will be something like **Hymns for Today's Church**.
- ii. **These factors also** affect **the choice of Psalter** - **The** psalms offer the riches of God's word for the worship of his people, preferably sung in a version that is readily understood today.

d) **Music should be singable by ordinary people** Complex tunes are out. After a couple of verses of a new tune everybody should be singing. If they are not, the tune is probably too difficult.

e) **The accompaniment should be clear and capable of leading the** singing, so that those who do not know the tune can hear it from the accompaniment. A piano well-played is probably best. An organ is good if it is played so that it gives a clear lead. A keyboard with flute(s) is quite a good combination. A guitar, especially if just strummed, does not bring out the tune clearly, although it may be all right along with other instruments.

A special word about accompanying modern songs and choruses:

- i. Generally speaking, congregations do not sing these as well as they sing traditional hymns. There are two main problems ▪ getting hold of the tune accurately, and singing with the right rhythm.
- ii. In this situation the accompaniment should bring out the tune as clearly as possible, especially when playing it through before people start singing ▪ and in the first verses. The pianist needs to make the tune sing out clearly. The other notes in many modern arrangements must not obscure the tune. Sometimes it is best not to play notes that hide the tune itself. This requires practice if the pianist is not familiar with the tune.
- iii. The accompaniment must have a steady beat and be at the right speed.
- iv. There has to be restraint in the way that some tunes are played. Calm reverence is to be preferred to overexcited joy.

f) **Different ways of using hymns, psalms and spiritual songs. A sung item should normally relate to what goes before or after it in the service:**

- i. The hymn or psalm can prepare us for what we are doing next ▪ a **prayer** as we come to hear God's Word read or preached, or an encouragement as we come to God in prayer, or a reminder of the need to confess our sins, or of God's willingness to forgive our sins when we repent.

- ii. The hymn or psalm can respond to what we have just heard:
 - a. It can drive home the main point of the sermon or reading.
 - b. It can be a prayer in response to the sermon, or worship • e.g. ‘Jesus, I love you’ as a heartfelt response to the preaching of the glory of Christ.

- g) ***The use of contemporary hymns and choruses*** • This needs to be handled positively, but with care:
 - i. *Be sure the song is doctrinally sound.*
 - ii. *Avoid unnecessary repetition and ‘hype’* • There is no place in biblical worship for the frequent repetition of choruses in order to excite, manipulate or heighten the consciousness of worshippers. Once or twice is enough. A very brief word of explanation is helpful as to how we should use the chorus in response to the word preached or read, or in anticipation of the sermon, or as we focus on the Lord in coming to him in prayer.
 - iii. *Do not use modern songs to entertain* • There is a real danger in this. Some songs have very attractive and manipulative tunes. The accompaniment should be expressive, but restrained.
 - iv. *Very often modern songs and choruses **emphasize** the personal approach to God in worship* • They can be very useful in stating very clearly what we are doing in worship. They can be a great help in making worship personal.
 - v. *A ‘slot’ for choruses* • They will normally fit into the service observing the same principles that determine the use of traditional hymns. Sometimes it is right to have a special part in the service for choruses or contemporary songs. This needs to be handled with care. The songs have to be chosen in relation to the theme of the whole service, or to lead to the next part of the service, or to respond to the reading or preaching of the Word. I suggest no more than four choruses. Each chorus needs to be introduced *briefly* to help people to worship **meaningfully** and in a heartfelt way. Do not sing any chorus more than twice. Do not sing all choruses twice as a matter of course.

- h) ***Who chooses hymns and choruses?*** • As we have seen, each musical item should fit into the **service** in a meaningful and spiritually helpful way. Organisationally it is easiest if the preacher chooses and introduces everything that is sung. If he does not, then he needs to let the person who chooses the hymns know the theme of the service, the Bible passage on which he is preaching, as well as the main thrust or points of **the** sermon. The preacher should also pass on this information to the one who is leading the worship, if he is not doing it himself. Sometimes the preacher may not be good at choosing hymns, or he may not know the hymn repertoire of the congregation, or he may have no musical sense or appreciation in choosing hymns. Some organists may be very good at choosing hymns once they know the theme of the service; others may be better at ‘vetting’ the list chosen by the preacher. These, and other factors, will decide how hymns are chosen in any particular situation.