

10 Signs We're Making Worship an Idol

Don't get me wrong. I love musical worship. It's been integral to my life with Jesus. I think it is necessary. Note: I address this later.

American Christianity, and likely the church beyond American borders, has suffered a major ideological blow—the confusion of worship and music. Most church leaders would probably acknowledge that worship is a lifestyle, not just music. However, the daily actions of the church say something entirely different. Consider this: How many worship leaders are not musicians? Such a thing seems inconceivable in the current model.

How many times have church leaders referred to the musical portion of a service as “worship time,” somehow suggesting that the rest of the service is not quite really worship? Or what about “we're going to go back into worship for a bit?” These statements reveal a mentality that is plagued by a misrepresentation of the nature and purpose of worship.

A careful study of Scripture reveals that while worship can absolutely be expressed through music, worship is not music; the two are not synonymous. However, by confusing music and worship with our language, a series of misguided religious practices have emerged in modern Christian culture. The effects are countless, but consider at least these 10 within the context of modern worship.

1. Many Great Acts of Worship Are Not Considered Worship

By calling music “worship” in such an exclusive sense, many other acts of worship have been disregarded. The use of music as a form of worship is not without New Testament precedent,

but it is not nearly as emphasized or exclusive as modern culture uses it. Without going deep into the theology behind the countless manifestations of worship, consider these few examples: Sacrifice as a willing submission to God (Gen. 22:5), rest as an acknowledgement of God's victorious sovereignty in the midst of a broken situation (Ps. 95:6), service as a fulfillment of Christ's commands (John 21:15-19), evangelism and discipleship as an expression of praise to unbelievers and a fulfillment of Christ's commission (Mt 28:16-20), study as a desire to know God better (Prov. 25:2).

2. Music Genres Have Become Confused (Praise vs. Christian) (He vs. Me)

There is a great division in the church about what "proper worship" entails. **Much of modern Christian music focuses more heavily on the individual's position rather than directly on God.** In other words, **it focuses on "me" rather than "He."** This kind of Christian music addresses life for us, within the context of a believers worldview, but it may not be more about us (me) than it is about Him (He). For a large portion of the population, this is a betrayal of what worship is supposed to represent. What has happened, in part, is a confusion between genres. Christian music (that is music done by Christians with God in mind) is not necessarily the same thing as praise music (music that expressly praises God).

Indeed **Christian music is worship in the sense that it is God's people bringing glory and focus to a lifestyle and worldview that acknowledge Him and His principles.** However, that does not mean it is necessarily praise. It may be focused on the individual (me) rather than directly on God (He). Consider that both versions may be worship, but that **only when it is directed at specifically acknowledging God does it constitute true "praise."**

Naturally, a sliding scale exists between these two with one end being totally self-centered and the other being totally

God-centered. By not distinguishing between these two genres, both confusion and division has arisen. (As an experiment, when looking for an image for this article, I went to the link that will follow and searched for “concert.” Check it out and see if you can tell what is a concert, what is a church service, etc.?)

3. The Line Between Worship Leader and Rock star is Thinning

The genre confusion has resulted in role confusion as well. Many church congregants and leaders are probably aware that worship leaders have, in some sense, become rockstars/celebrities in many ways. **The difficulty is not in recognizing that the problem exists. The difficulty is that people seem unable to recognize why it is happening and what should be done about it.** Certainly there are many causes for this manifestation. One such cause is the confusion of praise with the broader genre of Christian music as discussed in the previous segment. Consider that as the genres have mixed, so too have the roles. What used to be a Christian pop music concert is increasingly finding its way into churches.

Without a definitive distinction between “worship music” and Christian pop music, it follows naturally that the pop stars and worship leaders would become increasingly indistinct. Two other things for consideration: First, because worship has become tied so closely to music, it makes sense that a worship leader will be a music leader. **If worship can be recontextualized back to a broader recognition of all that glorifies God, then perhaps worship leading will not be restricted to a particularly talented musician. In doing this, focus can be taken off of a musical talent and back toward God.**

4. God’s Presence Has Been Confused with

Atmospheric Experimentalism

There is an obsession (perhaps at times a healthy one) with God's presence in many of the modern churches. However, **when the church has been tricked into believing that music and/or lights are needed to create atmosphere for God, we are diminishing God into a haughty demanding guest rather than a loving God who lives actively within the church (people not the building) at all times. At the same time people begin to confuse God's presence with emotion and experience.**

5. God Has Been Distanced By That Which is Intended to Draw Him Closer

Likewise, as atmosphere has become increasingly emphasized, God has become less accessible. In other words, if God needs certain atmospheres in order for Him to manifest, then this suggests that He is not readily accessible. For some, worship leaders are becoming to Protestants what priests are to Catholics – a necessary intermediary to access God.

6. Praise is Now Often a Performance-Based Expression (As opposed to spontaneous response to God)

This occurs on at least two levels. First, **church leaders now recognize that church growth is in many ways about satiating the tastes of increasingly picky congregants.** As such, the modern model for church growth requires pandering to audiences. Side note: **This problem is exacerbated by the fact that most American churches are growing from shuffling of existing believers between churches rather than bringing in new believers.** Second, congregants themselves have been pushed into a position that can turn praise into performance, rather than a spontaneous response to God. If certain conditions have to be met to gain access to the presence of God, as mentioned in the above points, then each congregant is expected to do their part. **There is a religious spirit that expects proper**

participation to take on certain postural form. As an example, for non-charismatics, dancing and raising of hands are often frowned upon as unruly. However, for charismatics, certain static postures are often rejected as disengaged. On a personal note, I experienced this many times.

When I first started attending charismatic churches, I was in a very broken place and cried for many weeks. I was astounded by the freedom of expression that was accepted. I couldn't believe that people were dancing and raising their hands without being made fun of. Unfortunately, once my emotional state leveled out, and I began to worship in my own peaceful way, without particularly emotional response, I was constantly bombarded with questions about why I wasn't "engaging." These **external expectancies exist all over the church and often promote conformity rather than pure relationship with God.**

7. There is Too Much Emphasis on Gathering in Church Buildings

The church is meant to be a light unto the darkness; yet, when corporate worship becomes restricted to corporate gatherings of music, then the idea of church gathering becomes isolated to traditional worship services, thus "placing the lamp under a basket." What if, for example, rather than packing into a comfortable air-conditioned room to sing, the church went and sang at a park, or in front of a struggling apartment complex? What if churches brought food for the poor, or went door-to-door one Sunday offering to help mow lawns, paint houses, fix fences, etc.? **What if, we as the church, got into the habit of calling these things worship?** I understand that churches may do some of these things, but **they are frequently secondary or peripheral events enacted by a minority rather than the collective body.**

8. We Have Justified Financing Ungodly Amounts of

“Worship” Technology

I have heard it said that “the most dangerous thing the church is doing well is ‘worship.’” Excellence is a beautiful thing, but when we become worried about performing for audiences (congregations) and somehow justify this as “worship,” then we open ourselves to an unrighteous emphasis on superficial standards. Rather than praise being about connecting with God, it can become focused on how well the music is performed, how polished things look, and what new equipment we are using. Again, **it’s not that the equipment is bad; it’s just that we don’t really need those things to worship God, but we often act as if we do.** As this has become increasingly important, it has been used to justify spending vast sums of money on technology and stage sets that could probably go toward more honest ventures.

9. Musical Praise Has Been Robbed of Its Unadulterated Beauty

All of these manipulations detract from the beautiful nature of musical worship. **Musical praise has become “too much of a good thing.” The lack of moderation has robbed music of some of its potency and purity.** Consider the message from Amos (God speaking through Amos) when God’s people had been negligent of certain requirements: “I hate, I despise your feasts! I can’t stand the stench of your solemn assemblies. Even if you offer Me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; I will have no regard for your fellowship offerings of fattened cattle. **Take away from Me the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice flow like water, and righteousness, like an unfailing stream** (Amos 5:21-24).” I am not suggesting that the church has necessarily reached this point, but it shows that a precedent exists for God to reject even the praises of His people when worship becomes unduly ritualistic and negligent. So many people have become divided over the confusion about musical

worship for so many reasons. These deviations have robbed God's people of true worship as a lifestyle and in doing so have robbed the music of some of its natural beauty.

10. Music Itself Has Become an Idol

This is the conclusion of all the other points: 1) Idols take attention from true acts of worship, just as music has become emphasized at the expense of other acts of worship. 2) Idols create confusion, just as musical worship has created genres, roles, and more that create confusion. 3) Idols exalt other people and things before God, just as modern worship leaders have become at times emphasized over God. 4) Idols distract from God's true presence, just as atmospheric experimentalism has distracted. 5) Idols distance people from God's true presence, just as the expectancy of atmosphere has created the image of distance. 6) Idols demand performance over genuine relationship, just as praise has become something measured by earthly effect in both the bands and congregants.

7) Idols typically advance physical temples and work to keep God's people isolated from influencing the darkness, just as emphasizing musical worship at the exclusion of community involvement creates the image of the church as an event and location rather than a people and community of light penetrating the darkness. 8) Idols demand gold, just as musical worship (now a worship industry) is heavily reliant upon gold to satisfy and sustain it. 9) Idols manipulate the natural beauty of glorifying God in true worship, just as musical exclusivism (musical worship at the exclusion of other forms of true worship) has actually managed to rob musical worship of some of its own natural beauty. All of this suggests that musical worship, in its present state, has become an idol. (That is not to say that it cannot still be pure, only that collectively it is in need of reform).

BONUS: How to Respond

Recognizing problems is only the first step. If the conversation is left here, it only breeds further discontentment. The Word of God is a double-edged sword. It brings death to lies that must die and life to truth in need of light. As such, a follow-up article will present solutions to help the church grow out of bad habits pertaining to exaltation of music over a lifestyle of worship.

Chris Townsend spent the first 26 years of his life as an atheist. He now leverages that background to help reach the lost and disciple the found. He has studied supply chain management & business information systems at Texas Christian University, theology at Christ for the Nations Institute (CFNI), church history at Liberty University, and apologetics at Biola. Chris is the president of Redeemed Royalty Ministries, a professor at Christ for the Nations Institute, and an itinerant apologist for . Chris has written several books including *Prove It: The Art and Science of Understanding and Articulating Why You Believe What You Believe* and *Ekklesia Rising: The Organization Formerly Known as Church*. Connect with Chris at .