

True Worship

by Robert Stearns

The worship culture of the church has changed dramatically during the last 30 years. Today, we have worship conferences, recording labels focused only on producing worship projects, worship music as a staple in the contemporary Christian music world, and worship leaders with visible status in the church. Many of these changes have brought growth and good to the body of Christ. However, as with any move of the Spirit, there are pitfalls and excesses that must be discerned and avoided.

First, when I minister in churches and conferences across the country, I often observe that though the musical quality of worship teams is improving, the worship response from the congregation is not. Quality musicians are on the stage playing songs from the most recent worship CD, but the congregation is increasingly detached, not worshipping and sometimes not even singing. Commonly, the primary response from the congregation seems to be an obligatory clap offering at the end of the song set.

Second, though I rejoice in the proliferation of new songs, it's easy to fall into a "song of the week" mentality—focusing on the latest "hot" chorus. Often these songs don't have enough substance for people to connect with them in their own spiritual journeys in such a way that they can enter into genuine worship. It's one thing to listen to and agree with a song. It's another thing to have that song in you to such a degree that you are truly able to lift your spirit to God through it.

Finally, many of the contemporary songs gaining popularity focus on the "me" in worship rather than on God. They deal with my pain, my heart, my struggle, my growth, my breakthrough—in essence, what God is doing in or for me. This

may be fine as an element of inspirational singing, but it is not God-focused, Christ-centered exaltation and adulation of the Lord.

I'm concerned that if we're not careful, the burst of growth in the worship movement may cause "worship" to become merely a form of spiritual entertainment. True worship must bring the congregation, individually and corporately, into an encounter with God. Though musical instruments are a great addition to a worship service, they are not central. Central to a worship service are hearts that are open to and in adoration of God.

I offer a few suggestions:

1. Maintain the hymns. Songs that have lasted decades or even centuries have lasted for a reason. There is a richness and depth of spiritual vocabulary and expression in the classic hymns, as well as a beauty and majesty, that is unparalleled. This generation has a responsibility to pass on these songs of faith to the next generation. Incorporate them into your congregation's worship vocabulary.

2. Focus the people. So often, worship services seem to just begin, with no call to worship, no opening prayer, no moment of corporate focus to remind the congregation that they are about to access the eternal realm. Before launching into the opening song, I encourage worship leaders to take a few moments and ask the congregation to stand, close their eyes, open their hearts and bring their thoughts into submission to God. A few moments of corporate meditation on the nature of God can do more to sensitize the atmosphere to His holy presence than a half-hour of singing through the song list while people are still distracted.

3. Remember Scripture. Twenty to 30 years ago, most worship choruses were actually Scripture set to music. Without discarding any new songs or styles, let's remember to also sing songs with solid scriptural content, and to intersperse

the public reading of Scripture as part of the worship service. The foundation of any biblical worship experience must be the primacy of God's everlasting Word.

There is much to be encouraged about as the contemporary worship movement gives release to a new generation of worshipers. But, as with any revelation, that which lasts must stand grounded on the firm foundation of the Word of God and the testimony of past generations. As we rejoice in our newfound freedom of expression, let's also discipline ourselves so that we bring to the Lord not just an offering, but an acceptable offering.