

Worship Expression: From Low to High

*You worship God with your head.
We worship God with our whole being.*

ZIMBABWEAN PASTOR

THIS CHAPTER ATTEMPTS TO DESCRIBE the differences we find in worship. The past fifteen years or more have found many congregations in the United States either moving from traditional worship styles to contemporary or adding a contemporary worship service to the traditional one. This transition has caused considerable stress as people have tried to look at it from a theological and a cultural perspective.

DIFFERENCES IN WORSHIP STYLES

While we use the word *contemporary*¹ in the United States, other groups stateside and around the world have utilized contemporary forms of worship for decades if not centuries. If you enjoy a very traditional form of worship, you may be confronted with a very contemporary form in your cross-cultural journey. Or you may worship best in a contemporary style, but find yourself in a deeply traditional worship style, as I was recently in Haiti. In either case, I am hoping this chapter will help clarify these two expressions of worship as different, allowing you to accept that which is not part of your tradition. In fact, I hope you will be able to appreciate and affirm that which is not like you but is acceptable to the Lord.

Considerable controversy surrounds the way people worship. Everyone has a preference and tends to believe that their way is the best way to worship God. Quickly deciding that one form is right and the other wrong should be avoided. We might rather say, “It is the best way *for me* to worship God.” Not everyone approaches God the same way. We do it in a way that allows us to most meaningfully express our adoration and devotion.

CONTEMPORARY WORSHIP

Many churches in North America have struggled with the issue of a contemporary worship service. Contemporary worship usually means the music is more modern or contemporary. It may mean the addition of drama. Often it includes a more relaxed form of dress and seems to appeal to the younger generations. There are other differences too. In much of the contemporary worship there is a higher level of participation among the worshipers. For example, one often sees hands being held up, stretched out or slowly waving during the singing. Some express their whole being freely in worship with hand clapping, body swaying and other body movements. Responding verbally to the speaker, standing while most sit and even individual dancing in the aisle are acceptable worship expressions in many churches.

Emotions are evident in the form of joyful smiles, celebration, singing with feeling and volume, tears, hugging, faces pointing upward with eyes closed and other signs of deep feelings of worship to God. Frequent shouts of “praise the Lord,” “hallelujah,” “amen” and other verbal encouragements usually show that people are actively engaged in the event—high expression, high participation. The pastor may use considerable voice range, volume, physical movement across the platform and forms of drama in preaching the Word. People sitting behind the pastor and choir members may alternatively stand and sit depending on the point the pastor is making and the emotional response they want to make. Sometimes people may twirl their bodies or dance, not unlike

King David in the Old Testament (2 Samuel 6:14; Psalm 149:3).

Because one does not put a time limit on God or how he moves on people in worship, services may go longer than an hour. In some parts of the world they may last three hours or more. Time, being on schedule or keeping things moving are quite irrelevant in this style of worship. Concern is for the quality of worship, meeting with God, feeling his presence and expressing one's being in worship to him.

THE ISSUE

At the end of each chapter on differences we may encounter in another culture, I have placed a continuum from 1-10. That continuum suggests one may place oneself anywhere between 1 and 10. Keep in mind that I am suggesting there is a range between high and low expression in worship. Many people and churches have chosen the degree of expression they are comfortable with in worship, while others are still undecided. Often people choose or reject a church depending upon how it fits their own preference. Of the expressions I have noted above, you may practice few or many. That is not the issue. The issue is to know where you place yourself on the continuum and how you respond to others who place themselves at a different point on the continuum. Since these are differences, we can accept those who place themselves at different points along the continuum rather than stand in judgment of them.

TRADITIONAL WORSHIP

In traditional worship, at least among the Caucasian traditions I am familiar with, the worship participants express limited participation. That is, they stand/sit, sing/remain silent, read responsively/remain silent. Sometimes there may be testimonies, but for the most part the worshipers have limited participation in worship.

People preferring worship with less expression usually appreciate more planning, direction, uniformity, order and schedule. Services usually start and finish at specified times. Advance planning has gone into

the service, and the plan is given to each attendee in the form of a church bulletin. The pastor and song leader direct the service telling people when they are to sing, stand, greet others and sit. Congregational activity beyond that which is directed by a leader is generally infrequent and discouraged. A rather solemn but dignified mood characterizes the service. During the sermon people remain quite motionless and voiceless in recognition that the Word is being preached and one must be attentive. Any response is a response of the mind and heart and kept within oneself. This group would cite 1 Corinthians 14:40, "But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way," believing this text supports this style of worship.

BOTH LEGITIMATE

I want to be careful I do not imply that one group worships God better or more effectively or that one group is more pleasing to God in their worship. That is not the case at all. What I am saying is that people can worship differently while still being genuine, meaningful and pleasing to God. Ultimately, worship is the soul reaching out to God in praise and adoration. You may do that differently than I do, but God, who sees the heart, may be equally pleased.

RESPONSES TO WORSHIP CHANGES

Some churches have split believing any change violates some biblical mandate. I always grieve when the body of Christ splinters. Others have gone to two services with one being traditional and one contemporary. This keeps the body together but often separates families and generations. The third option is some form of mixed worship combining both traditional and contemporary. Even though I am from the older generation, I prefer a mixed style of worship because I enjoy being around the emerging generations. We have opportunity to learn from each other and grow together. We need each other. Something important is lost if we do not struggle together to discern what God is saying and doing.

WHAT TIME DOES GOD COME TO CHURCH?

Before we look at worship in the Two-Thirds World, I want to illustrate how culture has formed aspects of North American worship. Only a short time ago, virtually everyone arrived for church at 11:00 Sunday morning. Why? Most of us did not know why this particular time was so sacred. Some churches that dared to have a 9:00 morning service were severely criticized. A few who had Saturday evening worship were considered scandalous. What made 11:00 Sunday morning the sacred, biblical time, so to speak? Quite simply, it was the earliest time that the farmers could get to church in the early days when most people were farmers. Every morning the cows had to be milked and chores done followed by bathing and getting the horses hitched for the trip to church. The time was a matter of convenience, not a biblical principle. The biblical principle was to worship, but the time was flexible. Would it also be fair to say that the biblical principle is worship, and the style should be flexible? It all depends on one's culture and preference? I am inclined to think so though I know not everyone agrees with me.

MISSIONS AND WORSHIP

As missionaries took the story of Jesus into other cultures, they took their worship styles with them. Churches around the world reflect those styles today. However, sometimes worship styles were established that did not reflect the preferences of the local culture. Missionaries who believed their own preferences were the most biblical, instituted those in the local culture. Today we are realizing that worship style is not a matter of right and wrong but a matter of difference, of preference. In many places, styles are changing. In Latin America, those churches which adopted the more traditional worship styles are changing to fit the natural expression of Latino life. The greatest church growth in Latin America is among the churches where there is high expression in worship.

Yet in Haiti, where my wife and I just returned from a seminar with

medical workers, it is mixed. Our host, a medical doctor, was preaching in one of the largest evangelical churches the Sunday we were there. It was very traditional with organ music and hymns. We talked about it afterward, and our host said that he and many others simply could not worship in a more contemporary way. It was too close to the voodoo experiences of his childhood. But I couldn't help wondering if his children, who did not experience the voodoo activities, will continue to appreciate the traditional worship.

Harare, the capital city of Zimbabwe, had a church planted by missionaries in a strategic location. The church struggled but saw little success until the missionaries went home on leave and then it died. For a couple years the padlocks were on the doors until a Bible school graduate caught a vision for that location. He opened the church, cleaned it up and started services. When we visited, it was one of the prospering churches in the country.

What made the difference? I had visited the church during both eras. In my opinion the difference can be explained simply: the missionaries were less expressive, and that became the style of worship. The new Zimbabwean pastor was more expressive, as was the culture, and developed a style of worship that embraced cultural forms. Let me explain by telling you about the last service I attended.

While my wife and I arrived on time, about 35 to 40 percent of the congregation did not. Yet, the music began only a few minutes late. The music was lively with seven song leaders in the front, but they did not start any of the songs. They arose spontaneously from different audience members. As someone began a song we all chimed in as did the finger drummer on our right, the guitarist in the front row, somebody with tambourines behind us and a bass drummer off to the left. These scattered instrumentalists blended in and quickly set the pace while the song leaders sang, clapped, dipped at the knees and swayed to the beat.

As the latecomers arrived and found a place, people smiled, reached out to touch them and verbally welcomed them all while the congrega-

tional singing continued. The musical celebration inspired joy in everyone; some responded with their own dance to God while others stretched their arms out to God and others just sang with eyes closed. The evidence suggested that each was meeting God and God was meeting with them.

About ninety minutes later, after two sermons from two people, attendees began a line and marched outside where each person out the door greeted each who had gone before. All the while people were singing and clapping hands. My guess is that we sang that chorus about thirty times and my hands were beginning to feel numb. No one else seemed to notice. Eventually we were all outside, had greeted everyone else and formed a circle, holding hands. The pastor led us in closing prayer as the heavy pedestrian traffic walked by and took note.

The two-hour service was over, but no one was in a hurry to leave. Visitors were swamped with greetings and good wishes. Everyone was talking, laughing, praying and encouraging. It was a wonderful worship experience and people wanted to linger in its significance. The church that was dead for two years had been resurrected to bear witness to God's grace in a culturally appropriate way.

A CLOSING THOUGHT

Worship styles around the world are as varied as they are in North America. But with each year, the trend seems to be more and more toward the more expressive style of worship described above. Most cultures of the world are more expressive in their cultural celebrations, and they are bringing those elements into the church in a way that makes worship more meaningful to them. Yes, there are dangers. But there are dangers of worshiping God in traditional style, especially if it is stilted and mechanical.

Most of us have a preferred style of worship. In earlier years, the traditional style of worship in North America was based largely on cultural preference. That style, however, was taken around the world and established as *the* way to worship God. It still dominates in some sectors of

North American culture today. Possibly, some of you have rejected, or at least had difficulty with, the worship style of your parents or the church you have attended. If you are younger, my guess is that you prefer a more contemporary style. If you are older, the contemporary style may not be so meaningful for you, and you may have a little more discomfort in some countries where the worship style is quite expressive.

I am hopeful that as a result of reading this, we will be less judgmental about other worship styles. In fact, I hope that we may be more open to it, bless those who prefer it and never let it disturb our unity. After all, we worship the same God through Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit. I hope that if the worship style is different in the new culture you will sense the presence of God anyway and be able to join the others in ascribing worth to our heavenly Father.

FINAL NOTE

This chapter, as with the others in this section on cultural differences, is intended to get you launched in a new culture with some pegs to hang your experiences on. These pegs are a way of naming your experience so you have a way of understanding a situation rather than falling into confusion, which often brings a judgmental attitude. As you spend time in a culture, you will discover more specifics than I could ever begin to name in this book. But, it is my hope that these chapters on cultural differences will be a good starting point as you navigate the new culture.

F O R R E F L E C T I O N

Respond to each point on the following lower/higher expression in worship continuum.

Lower expression in worship					Higher expression in worship				
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

1. Put an X indicating where you fall on the continuum.

2. Put a P indicating where you think your parents are.
3. Put a C for whether your church is lower or higher in its expression in worship.
4. Use any further symbols that are meaningful to you: S for spouse; F for friends, B for boss.
5. Use NC (new culture) to indicate where you think the people of the new culture will be on the continuum. How much distance is there between X (you) and NC?

D I S C U S S I O N Q U E S T I O N S

1. Describe the ways in which your worship service is lower or higher in expression.
2. If you could, how would you change your worship experience?
3. Is it difficult for you to enjoy worship different from your preferences? Explain.
4. What are the dangers of extremes in lower expression worship and higher expression worship?