

“Style and Substance: Are Traditional, Contemporary, and Blended Legitimate Categories of Worship?”¹

By

Roger N. Wiles

I suspect that very few churches in America remain untouched by the battle over worship. The subject of worship may be the most divisive issue facing modern American evangelicalism. The conflict usually arises when factions within a church choose sides with one group leaning toward more formality in church while another group wants less formality and a more casual feel to worship. The traditional folks have a preference for 19th Century hymns with sappy lyrics and music reminiscent of a roller skating rink in the 1950’s. Contemporary devotees share a passion for “praise and worship” songs that often have lyrics filled with personal pronouns (I, me, us) and sound like bad versions of Oldies Radio. And the fight is on – traditional v. contemporary, organ v. guitars, hymns v. praise songs, choir v. worship team and so on. While this may reflect the nature of most church fights over worship this doesn’t begin to reach the real issues of worship at all. The real issues of worship are rooted in theology, what the Bible says about God!

At the outset, the very idea of worship being a preference for contemporary, traditional, or blended expressions should give us great concern for many reasons:

1. Diversity in worship implies the Church can come to God in different ways;
2. Diversity in worship demonstrates the lack of a biblical doctrine of worship;
3. Diversity in worship argues that style is incidental to the worship of God; and,
4. Diversity in worship reflects the false belief that God doesn’t care how we worship Him as long as we are sincere.

It is my contention that theology not culture or preference should shape the elements, content, music, and style of worship. The real “worship wars” are theological. The theological conflict worth fighting for is arguably between historic, biblical, reformed, confessional Protestants (Historic Christianity) and contemporary, spiritual, evangelical, and cultural Believers (Contemporary Christianity). It is important to understand their differences at the outset.

¹ Taken in part from “*When Culture Comes To Church: The Worship of Contemporary Man*”, by Roger N. Wiles (Unpublished).

Historic Christianity rooted in Scripture believes in God who is holy, man that is sinful, absolute truth, law and grace, sin and atonement, justification, sanctification, and glorification. On the contrary, Contemporary Christianity, while paying lip service biblical doctrine, often reflects the culture and speaks in terms of a loving God, relevant truth, grace without law, sin as dysfunction, atonement as an example, and other ideas like mission, purpose, success and self-esteem. Most Christians think these differences are only matters of emphasis and preference. They are wrong. At the core of this debate these differences expressed in worship reflect very different views about God. While adherents of Historic Christianity and Contemporary Christianity both profess a love for Jesus and claim belief in the same Bible, each have a very different priorities, mission, worldview, and theology; differences that may lead to Contemporary Christianity not being Christian at all.

A little history may be helpful here. Two enemies have eroded the scriptural foundation of biblical faith in America: liberalism² and pragmatism.³ The old enemy of the early 20th Century was liberalism and it's still with us today. Religious liberalism gave us a "new" or neo-orthodoxy where the Bible was less than God inspired, Christ was less than God, and man was better than we thought.⁴ The new enemy in the early 21st Century is pragmatism. I am only slightly facetious when I say that the religious pragmatist of today believes if it puts bottoms in the pew, makes people feel better, and generally seems in line with the Bible, it must be God. Liberals deny the Truth. Pragmatists distort the Truth. While both liberalism and pragmatism are deadly to the gospel, the latter is more subtle and deceptive in that it affirms what the Bible says in word but denies the Scripture in deed.⁵

Religious pragmatism has taken hold in our day in things "contemporary" – contemporary man, contemporary music and contemporary worship. Churches in every city, town and community have clamored to get on board with things contemporary. Contemporary Christianity is so popular

² Liberalism – "The theological movement also known as modernism. *Liberalism* denotes the movement's free criticism of all theological claims. In effect, it is freedom from all restraint imposed by any theological *a priori* meaning that any Biblical doctrine is open to be denied." Alan Cairns, *Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Greenville, SC: Ambassador Emerald International, 2002) p.262

³ Pragmatism – "The philosophy that defines truth as that which produces good works. Therefore, pragmatists count as 'true' whatever 'works' or produces effects they judge beneficial." *Ibid.* p. 114

⁴ See, J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1923).

⁵ "America has increasingly preferred the religion [William] James called 'healthy mindedness,' which replaces sin with sadness as the real enemy of human nature. The modern evangelicals, beaming and healthy successes in the communications industry are exemplars of that religion." Garry Wills, *Reagan's America*, New York: Penguin, 1998, p.235

as to appear as unsinkable as the Titanic. Yet, sooner or later Contemporary Christianity will sink; struck below the spiritual water line by false doctrines and worship innovations devised by the vain imaginations of man. If not built entirely on sinking sand, Contemporary Christianity clearly has cracks in its foundation.

On the surface Contemporary Christianity and Historic Christianity appear similar. Yet, the contrast between the contemporary and the historic could not be greater. Contemporary Christianity creates almost out of whole cloth a contemporary God, contemporary values, and contemporary worship that capture the music, images and message of the 21st Century secular culture. Historical Christianity affirms, “The Bible . . . and not our own innovations, imaginations, experiences, opinions, and representations – is to determine how we worship God.”⁶

An observation of contemporary religious practice prompted one commentator to ask, “Why do people in churches seem like cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute?”⁷ The answer in part is that Contemporary Christianity keeps moving farther and farther away from a discernable understanding of the God of Scripture; from theology if you will. Without a biblical theology as an anchor contemporary religion is often misguided, worldly, irreverent, and sometimes blasphemous. If the subject at issue were not the worship of God we might just ignore as silly the transient and temporal pop-culture that greatly affects our lives. But our subject is the worship of a holy God who demands that we come to Him with “reverence and awe.” Worship not shaped and guided by the Word of God, illumined by the Spirit of God, for the glory of God alone, is nothing less than vain idolatry.

Throughout this talk Contemporary Christianity is set against Historic Christianity; the former found to be generally wrong and insufficiently biblical and the latter being essentially right according to Scripture. But there is one caveat. I do not intend to imply that all things contemporary are wrong and unbiblical or that all things historic are pure and righteous altogether. But I do intend to present Contemporary Christianity as an inherently unhealthy reflection of Christian worship and to defend Historic Christianity as the better way.

⁶ J. Ligon Duncan, *Give Praise To God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2003) p.33

⁷ Annie Dillard, quoted by Tom Schaefer, *Lost: Our Sense of Awe*, Knight Ridder Newspapers

Let's talk about the style and substance of music in worship! Consider the "Christian Rocker's Creed."

"We hold these truths to be self evident, that all music was created equal – that no instrument or style of music is in itself evil – that the diversity of musical expressions which flows forth from man is but one evidence of the boundless creativity of our Heavenly Father."

All music is *not* created equal. Neither is worship style neutral. In contemporary circles it is commonly held that style, particularly in music, is incidental to worship. "There is no such thing as 'Christian music,'" says Rick Warren "only Christian lyrics."⁸ Contemporary Christianity (spiritual, evangelical, cultural) assumes that if the content is true style doesn't matter and cultural preference should determine how worship is done. Terry Johnson disagrees, "Behind this thinking is the insistence that all music, language and format are created equal, an aesthetic relativism, if you please."⁹ We have to ask, "What are we communicating in the way we worship?" Does our worship reflect the glory and character of God and His gospel or the "felt needs" of people? I once heard R. C. Sproul say, "All form is an art form and every art form communicates something." It matters what we do in worship because it reflects what we believe about God.

Regardless of whether one is a proponent of contemporary or traditional worship the content of worship according to Scripture is non-negotiable. Unbiblical "worship" is not acceptable to God period! So let's assume truthful biblical content. We should then ask, "Can the manner or style of communication distort the meaning of truth? What we will discover is that manner and style can adversely distort the truth. Consider a situation where one friend is teasing another friend about a particular quirk in his personality. Let's say one friend makes fun of the fact that his buddy blushes when made the center of attention and the "blushing" friend says with a smile, "You shut up!" What if the buddy who blushes when made the center of attention is mocked by someone not his friend in a hurtful and cruel way and the response "You shut up" is made in anger with fire in his eyes. The words "You shut up" are the same but the meaning is changed by the manner those words were spoken.

⁸ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, p.281

⁹ Terry L. Johnson, *Worship That Is According To Scripture*, Reformed Academic Press, Greenville, 2000, p. 11

When Moses encountered God at the “burning bush” he received the greatest revelation of God to that point in redemptive history. Moses learned that the God of Abraham, Issac, and Jacob was “I Am Who I Am.”¹⁰ God revealed Himself to Moses as the self-existing and self-defining Being. The “I AM” commonly rendered “the LORD” or “Jehovah” we understand to be fully revealed in Jesus the Incarnate Son of God. Jesus Christ is the full revelation of the mind, character, and purposes of God the Father.¹¹ So when an immature youth pastor says to impressionable kids “Jesus is an awesome dude” or “Jesus Rocks!” he is not communicating the “I AM”. He inadvertently communicates a lesser god even though his intention is to communicate the God of the Bible. The same distortion occurs when the atonement of Christ is reduced to a T-shirt mimicking a beer commercial that says, “This Blood’s For You.” Another example happened a few years ago when a “Christian” advertising campaign sold T-shirts, bumper stickers, and coffee cups printed with the slogan “Jesus Is My Homeboy.” This is not just bad taste and immaturity it’s blasphemy. Trivializing the character of the true God communicates another god - a false god.

An improper style can also take something inherently serious, present it with frivolity, and change the meaning. Let’s take a page out of ordinary life to illustrate. It is not uncommon at birthday parties to have helium filled balloons. Most of us have taken a balloon and breathed in the helium gas only to laugh hysterically as our voices jump a couple of octaves sounding like Elvin of The Chipmunks fame from the 1960’s. Everyone at the birthday party then sings “Happy Birthday” sounding like chipmunks which is clearly appropriate to the joy and lightness of the occasion. But let’s say that those same people decide to load up on helium gas and sing together “Holy, Holy, Holy” like one great chorus of chipmunks unto the Lord. Singing like chipmunks, even sincerely, would demean and distort the adoration heavenly beings declare in worship before God. That’s an extreme example to prove an important point. This great attribute of God defined by the three fold declaration “Holy, Holy, Holy” cannot be communicated by humor and silliness. Improper communication in manner, means, and style can change and distort meaning. Without question, the manner of worship, the means we utilize to worship and worship style do affect the seriousness, understanding and definition of what is intended to be communicated. Therefore, the proper manner and style of worship can only be determined by who God is as revealed in Scripture.

¹⁰ Exodus 3:14

¹¹ John 14:9-11

Let's look at communication another way. Notice that Contemporary Christianity has replaced sanctuaries with family life centers, pulpits with podiums, chancels with stages, formality with informality, sermons with talks, preaching with sharing, discipleship with psychology, congregational singing with special music, words with images, psalms and hymns with praise choruses, decorum with casualness, sin with dysfunction, bibles and hymnbooks with overheads, choirs and organs with praise teams and bands, corporate worship with individual experience, doctrine with feeling, theology with anthropology, God's glory with man's need etc., etc., *ad infinitum ad nauseam*. Why? The stated reason is to communicate the gospel to this generation and win souls. But what do these changes actually communicate to people? When you change things that shouldn't be changed or that are, in fact, unchangeable you imply that the God who never changes does change. Consequently, our generation is witnessing a redefinition of biblical faith by Contemporary Christianity, inadvertently for the most part, communicating a different god, a different gospel and a different goal than the Scriptures teach.

Nothing has contributed more to the redefinition and distortion of biblical truth in our day than Contemporary Christian Music. Consequently, the ground zero of the "worship wars" is contemporary music. I think it is safe to say that Contemporary Christianity moves to the rhythm of music more than any other medium. Music as the content, manner and style shapes Contemporary Christianity like nothing else. I'll say it again, "All music is not created equal." Aesthetically, musical comparisons should be made against the classical and biblical standard of what is true, good and beautiful. Things which are *true*, *good* and *beautiful* belong to God. Notice I didn't say that which each individual person thinks is true, good and beautiful is acceptable to God. There are objective standards regarding truth, goodness and beauty as applied to the fine arts. Anyone with musical training knows that Bach is superior to the Back Street Boys or that Mozart did better work than Madonna. Yet it is argued everyday in churches across America that what is true, good, and beautiful to one person is not true, good, and beautiful to another. Music is where the relativism of the world has almost completely compromised the worship of the Church.

The very first question to ask about worship music is: "**Is it true?**" All truth is God's truth. Truth is the only acceptable content for worship music. The source of all religious truth is in the Bible. Therefore, worship music must align with the theology, doctrine, and commands of

Scripture. Most contemporary music, what Robert Godfrey calls “God is my girlfriend”¹² music, is sadly lacking in the themes, proportion and weight of the biblical Psalms. But let’s be fair, the problem is not exclusively with contemporary music. Many traditional hymns and gospel songs are little more than sappy romanticism. I remember my father and mother singing a southern gospel song when I was a child entitled “Lord Build Me Cabin.” Catch these words -

“Lord build me just a cabin in the corner of glory land. In the shade of the tree of life that it may ever stand. If I could just hear the angels sing and shake Jesus’ hand. Lord build me a cabin in the corner of glory land.”

I’ve seen people wave handkerchiefs and cry with emotion at the singing of that song. Apparently, it didn’t matter that people don’t live cabins in heaven nor will anyone casually walk up and shake His nail-scarred hand. This song was imagined out of the experience of southern folk religion and not from Scripture. Yet, because it relates to the cultural upbringing of those hearing it the song invokes a strong emotional response from its target audience. People assume emotions that move them deeply must be from God. Wrong! Wrong! Wrong! This also means that it is worthless if not blasphemous to sing such a song in worship. Why? Because it’s not true!

Many contemporary songs create the same cultural emotional response as this silly little song and are just as void of biblical truth. Consider these lyrics of a popular contemporary song –

“I can only imagine what it will be like when I walk by your side. I can only imagine what my eyes will see when your face is before me. I can only imagine.”¹³

What does this lyric tell you about God? What does it truthfully tell you about you? Almost nothing. Yet, I can see a contemporary crowd swaying with eyes closed filled with emotion imagining God and themselves in His presence. The reason this has emotional appeal to them is that they determine what it means. It is their moment personally imagining God. Contemporary Christianity loves worshiping God in their own inimitable way. By the way, one doesn’t have to imagine heaven - it’s in the Bible. One can turn to Isaiah 6 or Revelation 4-5 to know what God is like, how God has imagined heaven, and what His people do when they get there. Let me say it

¹² Robert Godfrey, *Pleasing God In Worship*, Crossway Books, Wheaton, IL., 1999

¹³ Mercy Me, *I Can Only Imagine*

again, imagining God personally touches people's emotions and people assume emotions that move them deeply must be from God. Wrong! Wrong! Wrong! As stated before, this means it is worthless if not blasphemous to worship with these type songs.

The 2nd Commandment is completely lost on this contemporary generation. The issue wasn't that Aaron simply *built* a "golden calf," but that the idol was how Israel "imagined" God. Their understanding of God was shaped by the gods of Egypt. Or said another way, Israel's understanding of God was shaped by the culture of the world and not according to God's Word. Nevertheless, Israel was moved with great emotion by the god they created. They sang, danced, made a joyful noise, and gave offerings as unto the Lord as they imagined Him. It was lost on Israel that God had expressly told His people He would meet them only by His Word and not by image. A spiritual, as opposed to scriptural, imagination produces feelings that cannot be trusted to determine what is true or whether God is pleased with worship. "Christian worship is not true only when Christians are moved. Rather, Christian worship is true when it conforms to Scripture, whether worshipers experience it or not."¹⁴ Israel disobeyed and built and worshiped a god of their own imagination and God was angry! You've heard people say, "I like to think of God like . . . or, "I just believe God loves . . ." or, "I feel God in my heart when . . ." People will always be moved emotionally by the god they imagine. Were it not for the clear revelation of God in the Bible we would all be children of a lesser god.

Compare subjective imagination of a poor gospel song and an equally weak contemporary song with this Isaac Watts lyric –

"Alas and did my Savior bleed and did my Sovereign die. Would He devote that sacred Head for such a worm as I."¹⁵

In just two sentences you find the incarnation, atonement, sovereignty and redemption of God and an unworthy sinner; objective truth about God and man. Which is more appropriate to worship - songs rooted in personal imagination or hymns and songs that tell you precisely who God is and what He has done for you? New songs or old songs alike must be judged by the same standard of truth; God's revelation of Himself in Scripture.

¹⁴ D. G. Hart, *Recovering Mother Kirk: The Case for Liturgy in the Reformed Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 103

¹⁵ Isaac Watts, *Alas and Did My Savior Bleed*

The second question to ask about worship music is: **“Is it good?”** In addition to worship music being true it also must reflect what is good. When Contemporary Christianity attempts to create the excitement and emotional experiences of the secular world in the house of the Lord it is not good. It is popular. It does draw a crowd. But it isn’t good. When God meets His people in worship it evidences the good purposes of the Lord; His grace, His goodness, His *otherness*. God has commanded that our worship not be like the world.¹⁶ Those without hope and without God in attendance on Sunday morning must see our good God as different in language, message, and music from the god they worshiped on Saturday night. Worship is not a sanctified show, concert, or happening. In worship God meets with His redeemed people on His terms and for His glory and not ours. And it is very good!

The third question to ask about worship music is: **“Is it beautiful?”** Beauty glorifies God! Not all music styles are equally beautiful. Therefore, certain styles of rock, country, blues and rap music, to name a few, are simply not acceptable musical forms of worship. Stylistically they cannot convey the beauty, transcendence and holiness of God. When Paul made his appeal to the Philippians to think about “Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things,” his challenge to God’s people was to universal virtues; what James Boice called “moral and aesthetic absolutes.”¹⁷ Beauty is certainly one of those aesthetic absolutes. Christians were shocked several years ago when a crucifix in urine and the Virgin Mary covered in dung were presented to the world as art. Where were truth, goodness and beauty? They were replaced by the personal preference of the artist. Gone were any standards of what acceptable art should be and in the absence of those standards were ugly, derogatory, and blasphemous contemporary artistic expressions. Yet, Christians readily accept contemporary musical expressions of various genres that reflect the same personal preference of the artist. Apparently, since our intention is to honor God the absence of truth, goodness, and beauty doesn’t matter.

I think it’s fair to say that contemporary popular music attempts to capture the feelings, passions, desires, hopes, and preferences of people. Pop-music hopes to reach every ethnic and cultural group and sub-group in order to use music to move people emotionally, reflects their values, and

¹⁶ God commands His people to be separate.

¹⁷ James Montgomery Boice, *Whatever Happened To The Gospel of Grace: Rediscovering The Doctrines That Shook the World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001) p.57

make them feel better. For example, there is a reason why “rock” music is not a style conducive to thinking, contemplation, or reflection. “Rock and roll” music is created and performed to reflect sensuous hedonism. It’s hard, edgy, in your face, individualistic, immoral music. The “rock and roll” style effectively fits with the message to the target audience. “Country” music reaches another demographic with a “God Bless America” old-fashioned hedonism. Drinking songs, cheating songs, the “man” has done me wrong songs, are all within a music genre that reaches people who see themselves in the mainstream of American life. Again the style is designed to communicate the message to a particular group. The style works to convey the message to the target audience. Singing the “Blues” relate to the down and out. “Hip-Hop” and “Rap” with its noisy degeneracy plays to the base instincts of man. Regardless of the style of pop-music each genre touches the senses and sensuality of the people they want to reach with their message. The message is almost always immoral and hedonistic. The style of music fits the message. In other words, the message and style of popular music reflects the hedonism and the self-centered preoccupation of fallen man.

We have a real problem when the Church adapts a pop-music entertainment model of worship driven by music, rhythm, and feelings to communicate the glory of God and His gospel. Contemporary pop-music is designed to reach the emotions of people, reflect cultural values, and strike chords of relevancy in the experiences of people that hear the music. On the contrary, Christian worship is about God’s covenant people meeting with God through His Word. Worship according to the Word requires music conducive to the communication of words; not just feelings or emotions, but words. “The written word, and an oratory based upon it, *has a content*: a semantic, paraphrasable, propositional content.”¹⁸ Christianity cannot be read, spoken or understood apart from words. Most contemporary music worship styles are not conducive to Word based worship. To paraphrase Coleridge, contemporary worship music is like water everywhere with nothing to drink.

Somewhere along the way, Contemporary Christianity decided take popular musical styles that effectively deliver messages almost entirely contrary to God’s Word and use those same styles to try and communicate the message of the gospel. This is why virtually no difference exists in the performance, visual impact, and music style of a pop-concert and a contemporary worship experience. Turn the sound off while watching a “rock” concert or contemporary “worship” experience and see if you can tell what you are watching. Even with the sound on you may not

¹⁸ Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves To Death*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1985) p. 49

be able to discern the difference unless you catch the name “Jesus” or “Lord” here and there. What is more telling is the similarity between the actions and responses of those listening. The appeal to the sensuous and sensual is evident. In another generation, women would jump and down, cry tears filled with emotion, and lift their hands in the air to Elvis. People today respond the same way and people jump up and down, cry tears filled with emotion, and lift their hands to Jesus. Yet, if you take away the rhythm, the lighting, the volume, and the personalities from either the “rock” concert or the contemporary “worship” experience and the emotional responses will diminish if not cease altogether.

Taken to the farthest extreme, contemporary worship music will simply adapt secular music to religious practice and forget the attenuated connection to things Christian altogether. Why not? The more attenuated the music is from the Truth and the more the style gives expression to the emotions people the more music relates to this generation. So why not use the Rolling Stones version of “I Can’t Get No Satisfaction” and tie it to “Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven”?¹⁹ Far fetched? Not in our “Christian” contemporary world. Recently, about 150 Episcopal churches have used the music of Bono and the band U2 to celebrate the Lord’s Supper. At one service the opening hymn was U2’s *Pride (In The Name of Love)*. Later as worshipers came forward for communion the congregation heard “Let it go/Surrender/Dislocate” from the song *Bad*.²⁰ The justification for Bono and U2 at the Eucharist is the same rationale always given by Contemporary Christianity: “The U2 Eucharist is simply another form of music used to celebrate the Lord’s Supper and bring people into the presence of God through worship.”²¹

Seldom are “slippery slope” arguments effective. But I will make one anyway. What harm does the little evangelical church with a culturally mandated contemporary service actually do? So what if the praise team and band occasionally play and sing music imitating the culture? The issue is compromise; a decision that pleases people first rather than first pleasing God. This is where transient contemporary worship ultimately leads. Consequently, unless a doctrine of worship rooted in theology from God’s Word alone replaces culturally driven worship styles and experiences, biblical worship will be unrecognizable in contemporary churches in a generation.

¹⁹ Matthew 5:3

²⁰ Gary Stern, <http://www.usatoday.com/news/religion/2006>

²¹ *Ibid*

Ironically, most so-called contemporary Christian music is not really contemporary at all. More often what is called “contemporary” is often a throw back to the music of the 60’s and 70’s thereby appealing to the baby boomers and the narcissism of their generation. Notwithstanding the musical and theological weakness of much contemporary music, this throwback music that make baby-boomers and others feel comfortable with God cannot be compared to the really contemporary cutting edge alternative *Christian* music of the day that is ungodly and not suitable as music much less as worship. If parents were to listen carefully to what current contemporary music offers their children as *worship* they would find nothing more than crude, guttural, man-centered and blasphemous noise.

The Bible isn’t equally clear on all things regarding worship. Godly judgments by necessity must be made in determining the acceptable way of worshiping God. The question isn’t simply “Is this permissible?” The more important question is “Is this proper?” I once heard Dr. J. Ligon Duncan III make reference to the fact that “Amazing Grace” could be sung to the tune of “Gilligan’s Island.” There is nothing in Scripture that prohibits singing “Amazing Grace” to the theme of “Gilligan’s Island.” But it wouldn’t be proper, even for children, because of the serious message of grace communicated so powerfully by that old hymn. When confronted with doing what is permissible versus what is proper the Westminster Confession of Faith gives biblical guidance – “There are some circumstance concerning the worship of God . . . common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to *the general rules of the Word*, (emphasis mine) which are always to be observed.”²² Therefore, even in matters of judgment and discretion the Word of God regulates the worship of His people.

The highest goal in the worship of God is always *solī Deo gloria* – to God alone the glory! Worship should begin and end with God’s glory. Who God is according to Scripture, not preferences or culture, determines the appropriateness of our worship. “Worship is not a matter of taste; it is a statement of theological conviction about who God is and who we are as his covenant people.”²³ We say we believe in *solī Deo gloria*, but do we mean it? Does our worship reflect it? “Cultural style is never wholly divorced from theological substance. This is why God, taking His glory so seriously, took His worship so seriously as well.”²⁴

²² Westminster Confession of Faith, *Of The Holy Scripture*, Chapter 1.6

²³ D. G. Hart, *Recovering Mother Kirk: The Case for Liturgy in the Reformed Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 79

²⁴ Michael Horton, *A Better Way*, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002, p. 166

A choice must be made as to whether the most biblical and God pleasing worship is to be found. “It can be exhilarating to belong to a church that is 550 years behind the times and sublimely indifferent to fashion; it is mortifying to belong to a church that is five minutes behind the times, huffing and puffing to catch up.” Joseph Sobran

RECOMMENDED READING AND SOURCES

The Assembly of Divines at Westminster, *The Directory For The Public Worship of God*, 1649

Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL., 1995.

Terry L. Johnson, *Reformed Worship: Worship That Is According To Scripture*, Reformed Academic Press, Greenville, SC, 2000.

Michael Horton, *A Better Way, Rediscovering the Drama of God Centered Worship*, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002.

Jeremiah Burroughs, *Gospel Worship*, Soli Deo Gloria Publications, Morgan, PA, 1990.

Horton Davies, *The Worship of The American Puritans*, Soli Deo Gloria Publications, Morgan, PA, 1999.

Philip Graham Ryken, Derek W. H. Thomas, J. Ligon Duncan III, *Give Praise To God: A Vision for Reforming Worship*, P&R Publishing, Philipsburg, NJ, 2003.

Hughes Oliphant Old, *Worship: Reformed According To Scripture*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2002.

Terry L. Johnson, *Leading In Worship*, The Covenant Foundation, Oak Ridge, TN, 1999.