

# Worship: It's About God

By Emily M. Akin

**W**orship wars! That's what the media calls the tension over worship styles affecting churches across America. If God is love and God is the object of our worship, why can't we work it out?

My name is Emily. I am a Baby Boomer, raised on the traditional worship model. As a professionally trained church organist, I prefer traditional worship, but I've always tried to be open to new ideas. My friend John, younger than I, but also a Boomer, plays in a contemporary Christian band. He was raised in the church, attending regularly. He sang in the choir and played in rock and roll bands in his teen years. We both consider ourselves dedicated Christians, but we disagree. We've discussed the issue of worship often, and we've talked to others who have experimented with various worship styles. Our conversations have been stimulating and helpful.

## Traditional or Contemporary?

**Emily:** Traditional worship, as I see it, falls into two categories, liturgical and evangelistic. Although liturgical services vary in the degree of formality, most include hymns, prayers, musical responses, responsive readings, and sermons. In the liturgical service, a choir leads the singing. The evangelistic service is less formal with the sermon as the centerpiece. A song leader directs the singing, often supported by the choir. In both models, an organist or pianist provides accompaniment for choir and congregational singing.

The hymnal is the primary source for congregational singing in both liturgical and evangelistic services. Most traditional hymns are poems set to music, so they are very structured. Some of them have been around for hundreds of years. The traditional hymns repeat the same tune for a number of verses. Other than that, they do not use repetition except for the occasional refrain in hymns such as *Victory in Jesus*.

**John:** Contemporary worship is led by a

praise band with a variety of instruments, including drums, guitars, and a keyboard. The worship leader or song leader may function alone, or with a small team of singers. The songs include a variety of modern musical styles, including pop, rock, and country. Since these songs often are not in the hymnal, the words are usually projected on a screen to help the worshipers participate in the singing. The melodies are simple and the text usually includes a fair amount of repetition, making the songs easy to memorize.

The contemporary service is spontaneous. Worshipers may clap their hands in time to the music, or they may move in time with the rhythm. Some people sing and some don't. Everyone experiences the music in his own way.

## Potential for Conflict

**Emily:** Traditional services provide a connection to the church's heritage. The hymns and rituals are the legacy of Christian writers and artists who still have something to say to the 21<sup>st</sup> century Christian. Maintaining this connection is vital to our worship. As others have said, you can't know where you're going unless you first know where you've been.

**John:** Many young people, especially the unchurched, prefer contemporary services because they aren't familiar with the rituals and music of the traditional service. They have difficulty identifying with the language and music style. The contemporary service speaks their language.

**Emily:** Our hymns have survived for so long because they express universal truths and needs that do not change with the centuries. With a little effort, the younger generation can discover the spiritual treasures of the classic hymns.

**John:** Maybe they will appreciate the traditional concepts and hymns eventually, but we have to be concerned first about their salvation. Some Christians who do not support the

Praise the LORD. Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty heavens. him with the sounding of the trumpet, praise him with the harp and lyre, praise him with the clash of cymbals, praise him with resounding cymbals.

contemporary service don't seem to realize that we're trying to reach people for Christ. It's as if they don't think of our music as true worship.

### Offering to God or Entertainment?

**Emily:** The root of the disagreement between the two camps may be found in the different mind-set with which they approach worship. I think of music in worship as something sacred, an offering to God. It should be my finest effort, the work of recognized artists, both historical and contemporary. If worship is about God, then the music should be about God or addressed to God in praise or prayer.

Some have regarded the music in contemporary services as more entertainment than worship.

**John:** I don't think of my music as entertainment. The music may have its roots in secular styles, but this generation was raised with radio, television, and computer-generated entertainment. We have to speak to them through a medium they understand. That's why we project the words of the songs on the screen, to give them a visual image. We keep it simple and fast moving, because that's the way many young people function.

### Honoring Both Positions

**Emily:** Should we discard tradition and embrace the new? Should we ignore the needs of traditional worshipers?

**John:** No, but you can't ignore the unchurched either. I felt a call from God to use contemporary music to communicate my faith, as an evangelistic tool. It is also a way to reach young people who have left the church.

**Emily:** Some churches hold contemporary services in one part of the building and traditional services in another. Others hold the two services in the auditorium at different times.

**John:** I've done it both ways. Putting the contemporary service in a setting other than the auditorium may send the wrong message.

Often, those who prefer traditional services may support the existence of the contemporary service but will not attend themselves.

**Emily:** What about blended worship? Many congregations have embraced the idea of a traditional service with some music offered by a praise band and some in the traditional manner. It looks like the perfect solution to me.

**John:** The blended services I participated in worked well for the current church members, but they did not attract the unchurched like the purely contemporary services. Again, there are traditional worshipers who want nothing to do with contemporary music.

**Emily:** Yes, people have told me that they see the need for the contemporary service, but they don't want to be involved themselves. If we don't get involved, we can't develop an understanding of the contemporary service. We don't get to know the people, either.

### It's About God

The writer of Hebrews gives us something to think about. "Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our 'God is a consuming fire'" (Hebrews 12:28, 29). Worship is about God and not about us. It is not our job to decide what is acceptable to God.

Music enhances our communication with God. We must be able to work through the differences for his sake. It won't be easy. We'll have to communicate more. We'll have to love our fellow Christians and the unchurched enough to respect their opinions. Hebrews again provides a word of wisdom. "No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it" (Hebrews 12:11).

"A harvest of righteousness and peace."  
Let's put this into practice. ■

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Praise him for his acts of power; praise him for his surpassing greatness. Praise him with tambourine and dancing, praise him with the strings and flute, praise Let everything that has breath praise the LORD. Praise the LORD.

—Psalm 150