

Sacred or Profane Worship?

The Third Broken Principle

By Dr Peter Masters | Contemporary Christian Worship
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The third major departure from biblical principles of worship is the modern refusal to accept the great gulf between sacred and profane, so that the entertainment forms of the world are imported into the church for the praise of God. This writer, until recently, used the term ‘worldly-idiom worship’ to describe this, but it lacked precision. People would naturally ask, ‘What exactly is worldliness?’ Is a musical style (or instrument) unsuitable for worship simply because the world uses it? No, but it is unsuitable for spiritual use if it is used by the world to promote an anti-God, anti-moral agenda.

The word profane focuses the issue more clearly. To be profane is to treat sacred and biblical things with irreverence or disregard, so as to violate and pollute them. Is classical music worldly or profane? Not in the main. It may be beautiful music, not identified with or promoting an anti-God, anti-moral message or culture. Are old-fashioned folk songs profane? Not usually. Many were innocently sung for generations in the primary schools of a more moral age. (Please note that this last comment is about old folk songs, not the new genre.)

Is the modern entertainment scene profane? Most definitely, because it is the most powerful and determined anti-God, anti-moral, anti-authority culture for centuries. It is profane because it treats moral and sacred things with utmost irreverence and disregard. It actively and militantly decries biblical morality, substituting the opposite. It blatantly and vigorously promotes an alternative society, including the worship of self and of lust as normal, reasonable and acceptable, and that is its undisputed standing in the mind of the public.

For this reason the new worship movement is immensely wrong, and sins against God when it borrows and employs all the distinctive components of today’s popular entertainment culture. Modern worship is a total artistic identification with that culture, contrary to the exhortation of *1 John 2.15-16*:

‘Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world.’

Modern worship equally abuses the parallel warning of *James 4.4*:

‘Know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God.’

The Lord calls for submission to His standards, and He will resist, not bless, those who set themselves above His Word. This is clear from *James 4.6*, where, immediately following the prohibition of friendship with the world, the warning to offenders is given – ‘God resisteth the proud.’

The need to distinguish between sacred and secular, or between sacred and profane, or spiritual and worldly has always been a ruling principle for Christians. The ‘culture’ of the house of God must certainly be joyful, yet at the same time honour the reverent ethos of biblical worship. Until the 1960s most evangelicals believed that the church and the world represented opposing standards and lifestyles and tastes, and so most of the world’s popular jollities were treated with great suspicion.

Spiritual worship was never to be confused or mixed with, or even tainted by, the debased end of the popular entertainment spectrum, because one belonged to the realm of sacred things, and the other to the realm of secular and profane things. All were convinced that Almighty God would be offended, and believed that lost sinners could not be called out of the world by a church that had adopted its lifestyle and entertainment values. It was known by virtually every serious Christian that to employ in worship something that was obviously associated with (or had arisen from) an alternative culture of free sex, godlessness, drugs, and emotional orgies would be worse than inappropriate – it would be sinful.

Christians of the recent past saw that two different worlds and kingdoms stood in stark contrast to one another, the churches being the upholders of God's sovereignty, and holiness. They represented the Holy and the High. They therefore disclaimed the help of a fleshly world and its idiom, relying instead on the power of God, and so they had spiritual power in their worship, not the carnal 'power' of entertainment-emotionalism. As if to test the convictions of believers the hippie and worldly-Christian movements came into being, and initially, most conservative evangelicals were appalled. Quickly, the new trends were picked up by numerous leaders of youth groups, shallow churches, and also by some international evangelists who had come to put earthly appeal before the standards of the Lord.

There are many today who have forgotten that the father of the faithful, Abraham, was called to come out of the culture of a pagan world, and live life in an altogether distinctive way for the Lord. Also, the children of Israel in the wilderness were severely judged for wanting to go back to the foodstuffs of Egypt, even though these were not intrinsically sinful, because God had provided something special for them. The Lord was teaching His church to be a distinctive people. Under the law of Moses the people were taught in many ways to distinguish between holy and unholy, and between clean and unclean, even though it meant the forbidding of things not inherently evil, in order to drill into them the law of distinction and separation. Christians have traditionally believed (as Paul said) that these things 'were written for our learning'.

Almost countless examples occur throughout the Old Testament of divine anger at any form of blending with the culture of the nations around for worship. In Nehemiah's time, a foolish and corrupt high priest gave Tobiah the Ammonite a chamber in the Temple. Nehemiah 'cast forth all the household stuff of Tobiah out of the chamber' and thoroughly cleansed the whole area. The same cleansing is needed today in the temple of Christian worship. God's reproof to Israel (*Ezekiel 22.26*) applies particularly to this hour:

'Her priests have violated my law, and have profaned mine holy things: they have put no difference between the holy and profane, neither have they shewed difference between the unclean and the clean, and have hid their eyes from my sabbaths, and I am profaned among them.'

Some glorious words at the end of Zechariah's prophecy speak figuratively of the worship of the New Testament church, and how even the bridles of the horses will bear the words, 'HOLINESS UNTO THE LORD', and the cooking pots in the house shall be as sacred as the bowls before the altar. Nothing profane will invade. Whether we consult the Old or the New Testament, purity and separation are demanded in worship. There must be a marked distinction between sacred and secular. Wherever this world's culture distinctively serves and represents fleshly living, it is to be rejected by believers. Historic, mainstream evangelicalism has always taken this very seriously. The founders and builders of virtually all evangelical churches existing before 1960 held tenaciously to the distinction between spiritual and worldly, and those ministers and evangelists, with their elders and people, would be universally appalled at what is happening today in the places they brought to birth. Were they wrong? Were they biblically misinformed? Were they fools, or in pathetic bondage to mere tradition?

New worship advocates repeatedly wheel out the absurd claim that today's 'traditional' hymn tunes were once controversial novelties which gradually gained acceptance. New-style worship tunes, they say, will soon be an accepted part of the landscape. In other words, defenders of traditional hymns are making a foolish and petty fuss. It is also claimed that very many 'traditional' hymn tunes were originally tavern or music-hall songs. This claim is intended to obscure the fact that Christians in the past distinguished very carefully between sacred and profane. Are these claims, which we hear so often, true? The answer must be expressed bluntly, because misinformation is so dangerous with such an important subject. These claims are historical nonsense. Those who repeat them have trusted some ignorant or mischievous source which was unworthy of their respect. We would like to trace these claims to their origin, but it seems impossible. What matters is that they are entirely incorrect. They are much-retailed myths.

The jibe is heard, for example, that Luther used tavern songs and dance tunes for his hymns. His music, it is said, was heavily influenced by the secular entertainment of the time, and new-style worship is no worse. Did Luther borrow from the secular world around him? The charge is not true. Throughout church history great care has been taken with the use of music. Luther loved music and wanted the people to sing. He introduced congregational hymn singing in his day and he wanted hymns to have fine tunes. Before the Reformation, the Church of Rome had no congregational singing at all. The people just listened. They listened to such things as Gregorian chants, along with other items performed by monks and special choirs.

Luther was a composer himself, and also an adapter of other works. We read in Robert Harrell's work, *Martin Luther: His Music, His Message*, that Luther wrote thirty-seven chorales, fifteen of which he composed himself, and thirteen being derived from existing Catholic church music. Four were taken from German religious folk songs. Only one out of the thirty-seven came from a secular folk song. This hardly justifies the idea that Luther helped himself to secular sources. In the case of the one item drawn from a secular folk song, it is argued that the secular world had stolen that melody from the church, and Luther merely reclaimed it (having adapted and sanitised it).

Promoters of new worship love to quote Luther as saying, 'Why should the devil have all the good tunes?' What they do not tell their hearers is that Luther was talking about Catholic church music, not tavern songs. He was not interested in stealing from the world around him. If, rarely, a secular melody was used, it was very greatly changed, and what else would we expect from the Reformer who wrote:-

'Take special care to shun perverted minds who prostitute this lovely gift of nature and of art with their erotic rantings. And be quite assured that none but the devil goads them on to defy their very nature . . . They purloin the gift of God and use it to worship the foe of God.'

Luther clearly believed that music was to be identified with its source and users. It was the world of those days that stole from the church to obtain a melody line for a bawdy bar song, but not the other way round. Clearly, as we have noted, it would not be a violation of the distinction between sacred and profane for the church to borrow from relatively innocent spheres of secular music, such as the older genre of folk melody. But hymn tunes have never (before now) been drawn from, or fashioned by, any musical idiom associated with aggressive opposition to God's authority and biblical morality. Luther boldly asserted that he had never used a bar song or a dance tune. People charge him with a 'crime' of which he would have been appalled. We repeat, it is a charge not substantiated by history.

In his book, *England Before and After Wesley*, J. W. Bready tells us that in the Great Awakening of the eighteenth century –

'The popular hymns and choruses contained no trace of ranting jingo or syncopated clamour: they

bore no kinship to the uproar and fury of modern jazz, or to the insipidity of crooning. On the contrary, this new hymnody . . . was expressed in music at once lyrical, dignified, soulful and sweet.’

Does evangelical worship reinvent itself every few decades by adopting new hymn and musical forms, controversial at first, but soon becoming the status quo? Yes, answer the glib advocates of new worship. But let any reader just visit the second-hand bookshop in town, and pick out old hymnbooks. There may be eighteenth-century books there. As you take them up and examine them, you may be surprised to see how many of the hymns are familiar to you. These form the backbone of conservative hymnbooks to this day. If you are familiar with the names of hymn tunes (often printed above the hymns) you will see that most of these are still the majority tunes in modern books. It is remarkable how stable the worship scene has been over very many years. This is because the church of Christ has long had its very own culture of hymns and hymn tunes, formed to suit reverent, intelligent, heartfelt praise, and kept well apart from the world of profanity.

It is true that several new ‘streams’ of emphasis have appeared from time to time in traditional hymnody – such as the affecting, subjective hymns of the late-nineteenth-century American writers. But these have practically always held the line in steering a wide birth from profane, worldly music. They have added to, but never betrayed, the principles behind evangelical hymns. It is immensely sad to see this long-maintained testimony, based firmly on biblical principle, now torn to shreds by slick and dishonest ‘historical revisionism’. The claims and jibes of modern-worship promoters are wrong and even scandalous. It is a terrible shame to see good people being misled by them.

A significant statement appeared in a Christian magazine article about new worship. Thinking of ‘Willow Creek’, a mega-church in the USA noted for its contemporary worship, the writer said – ‘Only a generation that loved Woodstock could love Willow Creek.’ The worship leaders and performing artistes of Willow Creek would have been very pleased to read this, for this was exactly what they set out to achieve. Their worship was designed to close the gap between the church and the world to make the one more acceptable to the other. But according to James, to make the church resemble the world is to make it the enemy of God.

For the third time, we will ask our simple test question – why would a church wish to increase its customary, traditional -instrumentation and change its style of worship? What is the aim? What will be achieved? What can guitars plus percussion accomplish? And what will be added by the inclusion of trumpet, trombone, drums, saxophone and xylophone (now so common)? The answer may come back along these lines: ‘This will commend us to the present generation, drawing them in and showing them that Christianity is not fusty, but right for them, and telling them that they have nothing to fear from us.’ Such a reply will show that the biblical separation of the church from the world is no longer understood and honoured. Both may now unite, and so eliminate the offence of the Cross. We have asked the same simple test question about the elaboration of instruments and change of musical style three times to show that the answers typically given today betray the slide into aesthetic, then ecstatic, then profane policies of worship.

The three deviations described in the preceding pages contradict crucial principles recovered in the blaze of New Testament light that shone so brightly at the time of the Reformation. Worship is to be offered in spirit and in truth, and not by works of skill or artistry. Worship is to be directed from the understanding, our joy being a response to things we sincerely appreciate, not a joy artificially generated and fuelled by ‘physical’ means. Worship is to be kept distinct from decadent and godless worldly culture. These principles must never be dismissed or surrendered. How we worship is not an accident of history – it is the application of principles. It is not a matter of culture or generation, but a matter of obeying and pleasing God the Father, to Whom worship is directed, God the Son in Whose name it is offered, and God the Holy Spirit, Who empowers it and translates it into the ‘language’

of Heaven. Are we clear about the great principles of worship? Are we teaching them, applying them, proving them? These things are essential if glory and honour is to be brought to the Lord, and the people of God truly sanctified and blessed.

Reverence

There is a fourth basic principle of worship which we have detached from the three just reviewed, because this fourth did not need to be entirely rediscovered at the Reformation. Despite the widespread insincerity of the priests of the Roman Church, there was generally a realisation that awe and reverence was due to Almighty God. Professing Christianity has waited until now before deciding that reverence is optional. This fourth essential is the theme of chapter 13 – ‘Reverence Begins in the Place of Worship’.

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