

WHAT IS CONTEMPORARY WORSHIP?

At First Church, the newly arrived pastor faced a question over whether to continue holding its evening service, which utilizes a rock band, praise songs, and emphasizes casual dress. To foster discussion, the pastor held a class for church leaders titled, “Worship: Changing to Reach a New Generation.” In class, a woman who attends the more traditional morning service raised her hand. “Pastor, I keep hearing people talk about contemporary worship. What exactly does that mean?”

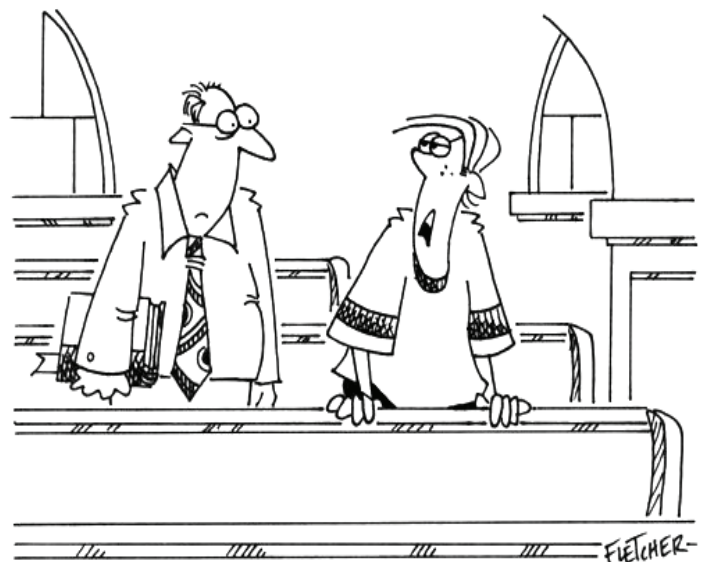
Defining Features of Contemporary Worship

Contemporary worship has its detractors and defenders. But what is it exactly? Swee Hong Lim and Lester Ruth have written a history of the phenomenon, which emerged among independent and Pentecostal churches in the 1970s and 1980s and was later labeled “contemporary worship” when it was adopted by Mainline Protestant churches after the mid-1990s. They identify at least four qualities that distinguish this style of worship.¹

To explore these features, imagine stumbling upon an alternative style of worship service with no prior experience of it.

Entering the church building through its fellowship hall in search of the sanctuary, you are surprised to find others drinking coffee at café tables as they wait for the service to begin. Musicians with guitars, a keyboard, and a drum set perform a microphone sound check. When an electronic countdown board reaches zero, the band launches into a heartfelt song praising God and Jesus. “Your love is amazing, steady and unchanging, Your love is a mountain, firm beneath my feet.”² What follows is a set of three songs, each one heartfelt and focused on personal devotional experience. The song’s musical style seems reminiscent of popular songs heard on your favorite digital audio stream.

Music. An innovative use of music is a key quality of contemporary worship. Composers rely on styles drawn from current types of popular music, such as rock, jazz, and folk. Music leaders typically seek to create a sense of flow by playing a set of songs back to back without interruption. The personal, devotional tenor of much contemporary music is unmistakable. Lim and Ruth analyzed the most popular songs on Christian Copyright Licensing International (CCLI)’s list of top twenty-five songs from 1989 to 2016. They found that a majority of songs took the form of a prayer or expression of adoration, and that prayer requests tended to be self-directed, with almost no intercession for others.³ This focus on the devotional fits with what Lim and Ruth identify as the “Pentecostal genetic code” of contemporary worship as it emerged in the decades since 1980.⁴ Finally, another musical characteristic has been the tendency to place the musicians, not the pastor, front and center in the worship space, designating one



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musician as the “worship leader” who handles most of the worship service apart from the sermon.

As the music set ends, the worship leader, dressed informally in jeans and no-tuck shirt, with a guitar strapped to his neck, offers an informal greeting. His language seems informal and conversational, as if you had encountered each other on the street.

Informality. A strong preference for informality in dress, speech, and leadership style is another key quality of contemporary worship. This worship trend emerged from the Calvary Chapels, an association of independent churches serving beach communities in California and the Vineyard Churches in California, before spreading to independent megachurches in the 1980s and Mainline Protestant churches in the 1990s. Leaders are expected to adopt a dressed down appearance and a relaxed style, and in some congregations, drinking and snacking may be encouraged. At The Gathering, a rapidly growing United Methodist church in St. Louis, members stop in the foyer for a cup of coffee to take with them into the sanctuary.⁵ Lim and Ruth call this “a truly novel development in the long history of Christian worship.”⁶

Relevance. Adapting worship to the people, rooted in a “sense of anxiety” about “inherited forms of worship” is another feature of contemporary worship.⁷ Such concerns are not new. In the mid-twentieth century, many churches began developing a strategy of targeting youth through ministries that “meet them where they are.”⁸ Later, influential megachurches such as Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Illinois began targeting “seekers” without prior church experience. At the same time, church growth advocates urged leaders to adapt worship times to the “life rhythms of those one hoped to attract” by shifting from Sunday to days and times more convenient to work schedules and family recreation time. In this view, churches that use the lectionary and follow the Christian year are creating their own “distinctive world” that unchurched people “cannot easily break into.”⁹ This idea undergirds the widespread use of the sermon series to shape the worship experience.

The sermon begins. The preacher, standing behind a portable music stand, offers a brief sermon based on the Scripture lesson, 1 Corinthians 13, Paul’s famous passage on love. As she speaks about love, still images

are projected on the screen: grandparents and grandchildren playing, lovers kissing, and a friend consoling someone in distress. The service ends with a set of songs, their words projected on the screen.

Technology. Dependence on electronic technology is ubiquitous in contemporary worship. This includes everything from amplified use of electric guitars, keyboards, and drums to the employment of LED projectors and screens for song lyrics and video clips to the live streaming of the service to remote campuses. Jettisoning the hymnal in favor of projection allows worshipers more freedom to be expressive, but it comes with its own irony: each technological advance moves worship leaders toward a closer management of time, and less spontaneity.¹⁰

What Shall We Call It?

Worship is changing and will continue to change in response to the world around us. Is “contemporary worship” the best label to designate what’s happening with worship today? Independent churches that were the early adopters in the 1980s simply called what they did “worship,” while a number of worship consultants working today prefer terms like multisensory or multimedia worship.

Clearly, no simple division exists between “contemporary” and “traditional” worship, which are each fed by many sources and streams.¹¹ Whatever it’s called, church leaders must continue to grapple with new ways of engaging in this ancient practice called worship.

1. Lim, Swee Hong and Lester Ruth, *Lovin’ on Jesus: A Concise History of Contemporary Worship* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2017).

2. Brenton Brown and Brian Doerksen, “Hallelujah,” Vineyard Songs (UK/EIRE).

3. Lim and Ruth, 95-96.

4. *Ibid.*, 32-33, 123.

5. Doug Moore, “At This Fast-Growing Church, Everyone Is Welcome. No Asterisks,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. July 15, 2018, https://www.stltoday.com/lifestyles/faith-and-values/at-this-fast-growing-church-everyone-is-welcome-no-asterisks/article_f18d1db9-8ef8-5510-8232-3a25f43740f9.html.

6. *Ibid.*, 7.

7. Moore, 4.

8. *Ibid.*, 16.

9. Lim and Ruth, 29.

10. *Ibid.*, 38.

11. *Ibid.*, 9-12.