

Lecture #16 – History of Praise & Worship

I. Introduction

In this lesson we will look at the history and development of contemporary praise & worship. It is amazing to see how in the last 20-40 years how this theology and philosophy has become the dominate style of worship in America.

The primary source for this lesson is the book *A History of Contemporary Praise & Worship: Understanding the Ideas That Reshaped the Protestant Church* by Lester Ruth and Lim Swee Hong. This book that was published in December 2021 is the definitive work on the subject. The information is well documented and researched, but also generally presented in a scholarly, non-partisan manner. Their previous book *Lovin' on Jesus: A Concise History of Contemporary Worship*, published in 2017, is less comprehensive but also valuable.

Ruth and Lim present the development of modern worship as two rivers that converge into one. The first “river” we will look at is Praise & Worship and the second is Contemporary Worship. Though distinct, these two influences converge in the mid-1990’s to produce the music, theology, and philosophy that has overtaken traditional worship in many denominations.

II. The River of Praise & Worship

Pentecostal Origins

Praise & Worship music has its roots in the **Pentecostal movement**. This movement began in America during the late 1800’s. It is often classified as a “**restoration movement**”, or an attempt to restore a true but lost version of Christianity.

Pentecostalism is largely defined by its emphasis on the continued use of the gifts of the Spirit of I Corinthians 12. The spark of this movement was lit by Charles Fox Parham around 1900. One of his students, William J. Seymour, went to Los Angeles where his ministry created the controversial “**Azusa Street Revival**”.¹

The early Pentecostal meetings were marked by upbeat music, spontaneity, participation and leadership from women, exuberant praise, and congregational involvement. The role of the music was very important, as it helped to promote the ecstatic practice speaking in tongues and wild manifestations of praise.

¹ A great litmus test of any writer or speaker is what they say about the Azusa Street Revival. If they speak of it positively then they certainly have Pentecostal/Charismatic beliefs.

Reg Layzell and the Latter Rain Movement

Ruth and Lim identify the almost forgotten **Reg Layzell** as the originator of the key themes of Praise & Worship. In January 1946, Layzell had been invited to speak at a Pentecostal church in Abbotsford, British Columbia, Canada. Layzell was a business and lay preacher that was gaining attention for himself. He arrived to preach a revival in Abbotsford, but the services were dead. On Wednesday, he was praying and begging God for something to happen. **Psalm 22:3** came to his mind: “But thou art holy, O thou that inhabitest the praises of Israel.” He took the verse as teaching that God’s presence would be manifest where the praises of God’s people were lifted up. He prayed and praised that afternoon until the service. That night during the first song (“There’s Power in the Blood”), people began to speak in tongues. “He believed God had given him the key to maintaining revival in the church through the continuous presence of God.”²

Reg Layzell was associated with the controversial **Latter Rain Movement** within Pentecostalism. Many did not approve this groups teachings or practices as they were considered too extreme even among Pentecostals. This movement saw themselves as a fulfillment of prophecy, a restoration of true Christianity before the End Times. They believed that true praise had been restored to the church through them.

Early Practices

The earliest adopters of the Layzell’s Praise & Worship theology were those in the Latter Rain movement and other likeminded, independent congregations. Music played a large role in their services, often taking an hour or more at the beginning of the service. There was a very spontaneous nature to these meetings, sometimes they did not even select a song leader until shortly before the service. Music was generally upbeat with emphasis on the rhythm by clapping, swaying, etc. Short **choruses**, especially those based on Scripture, became popular and would be repeated multiple times. In the earliest days there was also the “heavenly choir”, which was ecstatic and spontaneous congregational singing. The congregation was encouraged to express their praise physically and to display the gifts of the Spirit as they felt led.

Basic Philosophy and Theology

These Pentecostals were convinced that their actions were deeply rooted in Scripture. Psalm 22:3 became the key that was used to unlock praise in other portions of the Scripture. They believed that when men truly praised God that God’s presence would be manifested (usually with sign gifts). When God’s presence was achieved, the emphasis shifted from praise to worshipping God who was in their midst.

Interpreting the Old Testament typologically was also a source for much of their doctrine. Much emphasis was placed on interpreting the Tabernacle and the “**Tabernacle of David**” as guidelines for

² *A History of Contemporary Praise & Worship*, p. 11.

true worship. Using this approach, they highlighted a connection between music and prophecy.³ There was great emphasis on praise as the foundation for worship. They also viewed their doctrines and practices as fulfillment of prophecy in restoring true worship to the church before the End Times.

Beside systems of typology built on the Old Testament, other teaching methods were developed to spread their beliefs. One common one that is still prominent today is doing **word studies** on Hebrew words used for praise or worship in the Psalms. They often will also recite lists of **proof texts** to defend their positions.⁴

Charismatic Movement

Pentecostal doctrine and practice began to spread interdenominationally by the 1960's. The burgeoning nondenominational movement was a major catalyst for the propagation of this. By the 1970's this **Charismatic Movement** was widespread and powerful movement within Evangelical Christianity.

Ruth and Lim write: "The significance of these developments from the mid-1960's to the mid-1980's should not be underestimated. At the beginning of the period, Praise & Worship existed. By 1985, it was a *thing* – something that was regularly taught and transmitted to others."⁵

Further Developments

The theology, philosophy, and practice of Praise & Worship continued to develop beyond the concept of a connection between praise and presence. "**Flow**" is an important concept that developed during this time. Flow refers to the structure of the music to build to a crescendo of praise then ease into worship in seamless transition.

Four core beliefs can be identified: (1) God's people can encounter and experience the divine presence through praise; (2) Praise and the subsequent liturgical activity, worship, are primarily musical activities; (3) When and where God's presence is manifest, God is active among the people, who should be thoroughly active to God in return; (4) This whole approach to Praise & Worship is God's gift to the church, as can be seen and understood in the Bible.

³ I Chronicles 25:1 is a standard example they used.

⁴ These are often from the Psalms and ones that mention raising hands, dancing, shouting, etc.

⁵ *A History of Contemporary Praise & Worship*, p. 45.

Further Growth

The use of Praise & Worship exploded throughout the 1980's and 1990's. Charismatic "revivals" in places like Toronto, Canada, and Brownsville, Texas, brought attention to the music used in them. Interdenominational endeavors, such as Promise Keepers, helped to expose a wider audience to Praise & Worship and facilitate its adoption in churches. Also the role of record companies and commercialization of the music cannot be dismissed.

III. The River of Contemporary Worship

Pragmatic Origins

There is no one person or group that we can point to as originating the ideas behind Contemporary Worship. It is instead born of philosophy of pragmatism⁶ that has found expression countless times in the history of the church. Many point to Charles Finney as a founder of this approach to ministry but there is ample evidence in just American history that he was not its originator. Lim and Ruth point to such figures as Catherine Booth and Aimee Semple McPherson as examples of pragmatism in practice in the decades around 1900.⁷

Practically, pragmatism has two primary applications in Christianity. The first is in getting results in evangelism. If a new technique or method produces results (salvations), then it must be good and acceptable. The second is in making Christianity more palatable or relevant to the world around it.

Since this is a practical approach to Christianity, there has been little attempt to develop it from Scripture. The one verse that is used repeatedly is I Corinthians 9:22: "To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some."

Reaching the Youth

One of the first major applications of pragmatic worship is in reaching young people. New social theories in the early 1900's led to the division of society into groups that hitherto had not been identified. One of these was the teenager. As society and advertisers took aim on this newly classified section of society, so did Christianity.

But there was a perceived problem in reaching the youth: that these were seen as a different generation than the rest of society and had to be treated differently. It was assumed that this generation gap had to be bridged by approaching the youth on their terms.

⁶ "The central idea of pragmatism is that truth is proved by whether or not the idea in question 'works,' meaning it produces the expected or desired results." - GotQuestions.org

⁷ *A History of Contemporary Praise & Worship*, p. 174-178.

This is one of the first identifiable attempts to make worship “contemporary” with the times. Hymnals began to appear that were targeted toward youth. Churches adapted their worship practices to drop “archaic” language that supposedly was not understandable by the young people. A push was made to make music livelier and more interactive. Groups that were started during this time include: Young Life, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, Fellowship of Christian Athletes, and Youth for Christ. Mass media attempts to reach the youth included radio programs such as “The Young People’s Church of the Air”.

A seminal moment in this movement occurred in 1965 with the song “He’s Everything to Me”. The song was written by **Ralph Carmichael**, who would be the most influential voice for making Christian music more contemporary with the popular music of the period. He wrote this song for a movie titled *The Restless Ones* that was produced by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. The song was written in a then popular folk style was the first exposure many had to guitar-led worship music.

Trends and Developments

As we get into the 1960’s the push to make worship more contemporary with the times was a major influence in American Christianity. Music was seen as an amoral vehicle to carry the Gospel. The styles that were pushed were copied from popular secular music. In rejecting “traditional” worship practices, the piano and organ were rejected in favor of guitars and acoustic bands. Worship took a far less formal approach. The “archaic” language of the KJV and traditional theology were dropped in attempt to make the message more relevant.

The basic tenet of Contemporary Worship is that traditional worship is boring. “Experimental worship” became popular in attempting to bridge the perceived generation gap. Some examples include having silent services with no speaking, worship using only acoustic instruments, and having services in non-traditional settings.

The Jesus People

The **Jesus People**, or Jesus Movement, was a movement that mixed Charismatic practices with the counterculture rebellion of the late 1960’s. Chuck Smith and Calvary Chapel in Costa Mesa, California, were leaders in this movement. Though some elements remain, the movement had largely died by the 1980’s.

One of the primary expressions of this movement was its music, sometimes called “Jesus music”. As member of rock bands and hippies were reached, they brought their forms of music in but with Christian lyrics. This music and its popularity set the stage for a further acceptance of popular music styles within Christian music.

The Church Growth Movement

As the 1980's approached the **Church Growth Movement** was gaining steam. This approach to evangelism and church building was based on marketing principles to make the church more appealing to the masses. Robert Schuller is often credited as one of the first leaders in this movement. Others such as Donald McGavran and C. Peter Wagner produced books and materials on practical ways to increase church attendance. Later leaders would include Bill Hybels and Rick Warren.

One of the primary areas the Church Growth movement addressed was that of worship music. They advocated for a contemporary style that was deemed more desirable to the people they were trying to attract. Rick Warren and the CAMEO⁸ church model promoted the "IMPACT" pattern for music: **I**nspire **M**ovement to **P**raise to **A**doration to **C**ommitment to a song to **T**ie it all together. Sometimes this was expressed as "hand clapper" to "hand holder" to "hand raiser" to another "hand holder".

IV. The Rivers Converge

Though there are examples (such as the Jesus People) who used both the theology and practices of both Pentecostal Praise & Worship and Contemporary Worship, it was not until the mid- to late-1990's that the two truly merged into one. From that time to the present there has been a dual emphasis on have a contemporary style that ushers in the presence of God. Most material produced on worship since this time have elements from both sources.

There are many reasons why this convergence happened. Though starting from two very different motivations (one theological and the other practical) they had reached common ground at this point. Music companies were heavily marketing this new style of music as it proved to sell very well. The practical production and technology of both approaches was also at a compatible stage.

One thing that cannot be discounted is that for decades many churches has been attempting to reach the youth with contemporary means. These became to expect all their church experience to be like that of their youth outreach. There was no longer an expectation that church worship should be traditional.

Another element is that during this time the largest and fastest growing congregations were those using Praise & Worship or Contemporary styles of worship. As these looked to each other for ideas, and smaller churches looked to these for inspiration, the use of this music spread with little discernment about its theology or origin.

⁸ Contemporary Approach to **M**inistry, **E**vangeli**s**m, and **O**rganization.