

# Consumer Worship

*By Brent Helming*

Several months ago a friend and I engaged in a conversation about worship. Specifically, we talked about the recent “contemporary worship” explosion occurring worldwide. It seems that just about every church now offers some form of “contemporary or modern worship” in their weekend services. Even mainstream bookstores like Barnes and Noble and Borders carry a selection of Contemporary Worship. In fact, in recent years, the demand for contemporary worship music, worldwide, has grown at such an exponential rate that the Time-Life Warner Worship Series (sold through TV ads) has become their number one selling series of all time; surpassing Elvis and the Beatles.

The Church’s active embracing of “Contemporary Worship” has brought a great amount of new found spiritual life into many congregations and fueled resurgence in the Arts as an acceptable and desirable form of worship. However, this new found acceptance of contemporary/modern worship has not come without its dangers and distractions.

One of the most prevalent dangers within modern/contemporary worship is a growing attitude of what I call “consumer worship” among church attendees. Simply stated, “Consumer Worship” occurs when members of the congregation get caught up in the “show” of the worship band and begin to view the worship time as an event. Much the same way music fans view a concert of their favorite artist or band. When this happens, the congregation steps away from actively participating in connecting with God and instead moves toward a spectating and evaluating mindset.

The obvious question is how does a “Consumer Worship” mindset develop and how can we as the worship leading community guard against it?

It is important to state right up front that there is absolutely nothing inherently wrong with “contemporary/modern worship”. Quite the opposite! The ability to play, create and enjoy music (all types of music – even modern styles) is an incredible gift that God has given to mankind (Gen 4:21). This gift of music is so precious that at the end of time, when the Lord returns, we will sing, play and enjoy music (worship) for all of eternity. However, there will be no music in Hell (Rev 18:22). Incredibly, part of the curse of eternal separation from God will include the absence of music.

I think that a case is easily made that God’s gift of music, has an incredible and powerful ability to touch us at the deepest level of our being. Music stirs the heart and emotions like nothing else. It also embodies the ability to motivate the behavior of those listening. This is not by accident. God intended for music to have the ability to touch us deeply. However, in our brokenness and humanness, we can easily misplace the deep affections and emotions that music (even worship music) stirs in us. When this occurs during worship, we often end up focused on objects other than God; namely the worship leader, the worship band, and/or the engaging melodies of our favorite songs. It is this type of misdirected attention that nurtures a “consumeristic worship” mindset by creating the

impression that the time of worship is simply an enjoyable music event (the “show”) instead of a life giving interaction with Creator God.

Can you see the awesome responsibility that God has given to those of us who create, play and lead others with music? We have an incredibly powerful tool at our disposal. One that is capable of deeply affecting those who hear it. Worship Leader/Songwriter David Ruis, has termed this responsibility the “Sacred Trust” of leading worship. We as worship leaders and musicians have been entrusted with the precious gift of music and it is our commission to wield this gift responsibly.

Practically, this means that the worship team must endeavor to play skillfully (I Chron. 25:7) without pulling the attention of the worshipper away from the main focus of the worship itself... namely God. I do not know how this directly relates to you and your worship band while leading the congregation, but I do know that it requires musicians who are humble and grounded in who they are in Christ. It also requires that the Worship Leader and Team be committed to serving the heart of God, for his people, in the midst of each and every worship set. Again, this does not mean that we shouldn't strive to be excellent musicians or utilize specific “tools of the trade” such lights, stage risers, backdrops, candles, stage decorations and like as, part of the worship environment. These types of enhancers, and others like them, can be useful tools that help to create the appropriate atmosphere for authentic worship. However, every time a worship team steps onto the platform they must be aware that part of their mission and role in leading worship is to avoid actively participating in the cultivation of “consumerism” by allowing worship to become a “show”. We need to be clear that the object of our affections and worship is Jesus.

Another proactive way to counteract the growth of “consumer worship” within a congregation is by providing clear, biblical teaching on what Worship really is. Hopefully, we already understand that worship and music are not always synonymous. As Pastor/Worship Leader Bob Kauflin has written, “When Christians worship, *sometimes* music is being played or sung (especially on Sundays). But often it isn't. And when music is being played or sung by Christians, *sometimes* worship is taking place. But often it isn't (even on Sundays).” What Kauflin is getting at is that worship is far more than our Sunday morning time of music. Our use of music and song to worship God is only a small part of the reality of what it means to worship.

In the fourth chapter of the Gospel of John, during Jesus' interaction with the Samaritan woman, He gives us a snap shot of the breadth of the “what” and “how” of worship. Jesus tells the woman that we (true worshippers) will worship “... *neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.*” With this statement Jesus takes aim at breaking down a popular belief that worship must occur in a certain way or in a specific location. His intention is to open us up to the reality that those who truly worship the Father “...*will worship in spirit and truth...*” John 4:23). Worship is not tied to a specific the location or specific outward activities; although specific times or locations and certain activities can certainly help to deepen a worship experience. Worship is primarily about the heart and right relationship with God. Jesus said that true worship is “in Spirit”, meaning that the internal activity of our spirits is guided by the Holy Spirit residing within each believer. He also said that worship is “in Truth” in that we focus on the objective truths about God and how our responses to those truths are guided by God's word. These simple statements by Jesus

quickly open the door to the obvious reality that worship encompasses all areas of our living, thinking and feeling. In other words, Worship involves a lifestyle.

The purpose of this article is not to lay out a detailed teaching about worship. However, exposing the congregation to simple truths, such as I've stated above, and teaching them about how the worship of God engages all that we are and all that we do (Rom. 12:1; I Cor. 10:31), will go a long way in curbing our tendency to drift toward a "consumeristic" mentality in regard to the Sunday morning worship experience.

However, the responsibility to avoid a "consumeristic worship" mentality does not rest solely with the worship team or church leadership. Each individual worshipper has a definite role to play in guarding their heart against "consumerism". Simply showing up on Sundays, singing (Ps 63:3), dancing (Ps 149:3), closing our eyes, shouting for joy (Ps 66:1-2), lifting up our hands (Ps 134:2) and listening to biblical teaching will not ensure authentic worship. Each of us must consciously and purposefully meditate on the words we are singing and/or the Word of God being taught.

This is not always as simple as it may sound. We can be easily distracted by the many things demanding our attention (even on Sunday morning). Luckily God did not leave us without help. He sent the Holy Spirit to help guide and direct us. This is what Jesus was communicating to the Samaritan woman in John 4:14 when he said, "... *whoever drinks of the water that I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become a spring of water welling up to eternal life.*" This living water or spring of water that Jesus was talking about is the Holy Spirit (John 7:37-38) and one of the primary roles of the Holy Spirit is to remind us of the work of Jesus (John 14:26) and "... *to guide you into all truth.*" (John 16:13-14)

To help combat our fleshly tendencies to gravitate towards a consumeristic attitude in worship, we need to specifically ask the Holy Spirit to open our ears, hearts and minds and help us to fully engage in the wonder of Worship. I would even suggest that the Worship Leader periodically begin the worship time by specifically leading the congregation in praying for the Holy Spirit's help and guidance during the corporate worship time.

If a worship team endeavors to faithfully execute the "sacred trust" of leading worship, week in and week out, and the church leadership purposes to cultivate a full, biblically based understanding of worship, then the roots of consumeristic worship will have a hard time taking hold. I'm not sure that we'll be able to fully eradicate consumerism from our churches, but a deeper, more fully enriched relationship with God through the vehicle of worship awaits those who say yes to pursuing authentic worship.

*Brent Helming has been involved in Pastoral and Worship Ministry for over 16 years. He has traveled both nationally and internationally leading worship and teaching at Churches and conferences. He has written numerous worship songs such as "Your Beloved", "Jesus Lead On" and "God of All Splendor", along with an interactive work book titled "Hot Tips for Worship Leaders". Brent is currently developing a Coaching and Consulting Ministry for Worship Ministries and Leaders (WorshipDevelopment.com) and lives with his son in Escondido, CA.*