

The Threat Of Worship

Are we being misled by the "worship movement" that's sweeping through many churches?

LUKE TATTERSALL looks at some underlying issues on the topic of worship.

The history of the church has been marked by some very strange movements and trends that have come and gone. There have been times when you'd have to say that people got carried away with all kinds of misguided ideas. Sometimes they were just plain wrong. At other times they have just put too much emphasis on minor things and been sidetracked by them.

Some of the misguided trends of the past few years have been things like the Toronto Blessing. There were plenty of people and churches who were drawn into that. They thought that it was some great movement of the Holy Spirit - but it failed to deliver what people were hoping or looking for.

Some of the Holiness Movements are good examples of too much emphasis in the wrong place. They often end up holding to some idea of perfectionism - thinking that we can live a perfect life if we just try harder or pray more or fast.

I am certain that no church is immune to getting things wrong or placing the emphasis on the wrong things. The problem is that we often we can only see how misguided we or others were after the trend or movement has come and gone. It is normally when you are cleaning up the problems that have been created that you see how **WRONG** it was.

There is one movement that is creeping through churches at the moment that I think is a best it is somewhat misguided and at worst has the potential to lead people away from Jesus. It is a movement that appears to be more strong in the USA and England - but it is starting to have an influence here in AUSTRALIA.

What I am talking about is the **WORSHIP** movement. Many churches today are placing great emphasis on the idea of worship.

Now don't get me wrong. I am all in favour of worshipping God. But what worries me is the emphasis and importance that some groups are placing on the idea of worship.

More than that, I am worried when I see what they mean by worship. It worries me because I think they are wrong in many of the things they are saying about worship. It worries me because I think that much of what passes for worship is in fact misleading.

Let me share some of my concerns with you and also have a look at what the Bible has to say about worship.

SO WHAT IS MEANT BY WORSHIP?

Over the last few years it is clear that there has certainly been a great emphasis on worship among a variety of churches. You can see it in a number of different places. Let me give you a few examples.

For the last 3 or 4 years I've received an invitation to attend a conference in this area that's simply called "Praise". They claim get the "best worship leaders" from Australia and AROUND THE WORLD to teach you how to lead worship. They encourage you to send along the worship leaders from your church to learn how to be "better worship leaders".

Every month or so I get sent at least 2 Praise & Worship catalogues so that I can have what they call "the latest worship resources". They are mostly advertising CD's and music that you can sing in your church but they call them "praise & worship resources".

And it is not just those catalogues. The whole idea of WORSHIP has become big business. I was in Sydney in July and I went to visit one of the largest Christian book shops in the city where they have a whole section devoted to "worship resources".

When these people talk about "worship resources" what they seem to mean is music. Now that might be stating the obvious - but it is important to note.

Many big churches now employ full-time worship leaders. Two of the speakers at the "Praise" conference are "full-time worship pastors" in churches in Sydney and Brisbane. Now that in itself is not a bad thing. I would be nice to have a full-time music director in your church. It would certainly mean the music would be good.

On the face of it that is what "worship leaders" seem to be - people who lead the singing. But in many churches today the "worship leader" has become the most important person. Church will stand or fall on the strength of the "worship leader".

So what people mean when they talk about "worship" is usually singing - singing modern songs where by we worship God. And this is where the "worship leaders" come in. That's why they are running conferences to train worship leaders. That is why they have catalogues with "worship resources." Can you see what is meant by "worship"?

WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

So WHAT IS WRONG with this idea of WORSHIP? If this worship movement was just on about SINGING then I don't think it would be a PROBLEM. But there is more to this idea of worship - and that is where it starts to get unhelpful. They claim to or attempt to do something more than just "lead the singing".

WORSHIP LEADERS TRY TO...

I think that one of the dangers of this idea of worship is that "worship leaders" can try to work on your emotions. We attended a church one time while we were on holidays where the junior pastor was the worship leader. He was leading the singing, and then at one point he led us in a prayer time. While he prayed, the pianist was playing some nice background music. But then I noticed that the music was rising and falling with the intensity of his prayer. As he got more passionate in his prayer the music got more intense. Now I know that you're not supposed to open you eyes when you pray - it says that in the Bible somewhere I think. But I just had to open my eyes and see how he was doing this. To my surprise I saw that the man praying was actually conducting the piano player. As he got to a impassioned part of the prayer he would signal for the music to get louder. And finally when he finished praying he signalled the piano player to END.

Now in some ways that is fairly innocent. He was trying to create a mood. But when I saw what he was doing I felt like I was being conned. I have no doubt that he was also trying to make us feel like we were close to God. He was trying to make us think that his prayer was special -that this was an experience you couldn't have at home.

But the problems with this idea of worship go deeper than that.

WORSHIP LEADERS CAN TRY TO TAKE THE PLACE OF JESUS

In one of the worship catalogues I was sent, I read an interview with one of the leading "worship leaders" from England. He was talking about how God was using him and his abilities as a "worship leader." What disturbed me from the interview was that he saw that his job as a "worship leaders" was to lead people into God's presence.

Do you see what he is saying? This is more than trying to make us feel closer to God. This is more than just trying to create a nice mood. He is saying that he has the power and the ability to lead people into God's presence.

Now that is frightening. What he is really saying - whether he means it or not - is that he can take the place of Jesus.

The Bible says that "leading us into God's presence" is something that Jesus alone can do. And it's something that Jesus alone has already done. You can read about it in Hebrews 10:19.

Just because the music feels nice or the prayer made me feel good doesn't mean we are any closer to God. The Bible says that there is one way to get close to God - by trusting in Jesus. It doesn't matter what the atmosphere is like. The lighting and the music don't come into it. **If you already trust in Jesus then there is nothing that can bring you any closer to God.**

MISUNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE

One of the other serious problems with this idea of worship is that it is built on misunderstanding of what the Bible is saying.

Many of these "worship leaders" look at passages in the Old Testament about worshipping at the Temple and think that is what is happening in a church. They want to apply all the worship and Temple language from the Old Testament to what they think they are doing. But this also shows a poor understanding of what the Bible says and teaches about Jesus.

In the Old Testament the Temple was considered to be the place where God dwelt with his people. God chose to demonstrate his presence with his people first in the tabernacle, and later the temple. It was the place where the people went to worship him. It was the place they went to pay their respects to God - to give him the honour he was due. It was also the place where they went to make their sacrifices.

But in the New Testament we read that Jesus is the fulfilment of the things we see in the Old Testament. When Jesus comes, he replaces the temple with himself. When Jesus comes, there is no need for a symbol of God's presence with his people - Jesus is God present with his people.

When Jesus died on the cross Mark's gospel tells us that that the curtain in the Temple was torn from top to bottom. The way into the Holy Place - the place that God symbolically dwelled - was now made open by the death of Jesus. Anyone - by trusting in Jesus - can enter into the Holy place. Anyone can draw near to God through Jesus.

It doesn't involve music or "worship leaders" or a special atmosphere or candles or organ music or robes or a special building or someone standing at the front of the church saying "let us worship God." Anyone can draw near to God through Jesus.

You enter into God's presence through trust in Jesus. If you have put your trust in Jesus then you are already close to God. You are close to God when you are sitting in your car. You are close to God when you are doing the ironing. You are close to God when you are at work. You are close to God when you are playing football. You are close to God when you are singing in church.

HOW SHOULD WE WORSHIP?

What does the Bible say about worshipping God? Well the word doesn't come up too many times in the New Testament. But you could summarise what it does say in this:

We worship God by responding to what he has done for us in Jesus.

We worship God by showing him the honour and respect that he is due.
God is most honoured and glorified when people place their trust in Jesus.

The New Testament doesn't seem to consider "worship" as an event at selected times in special places. Worship is something that you do with your whole life. That is what Paul says in Romans 12:1:

"Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship."

Worshipping God is something that we should be doing all the time with our whole lives.

Don't be fooled by the atmosphere. Singing songs may be an important way that we show our honour and respect for God. But it does nothing to bring us closer to God - no matter how nice the songs are.

We need to make sure that we are serious about worshipping God. We are to offer our whole lives to him as a living sacrifice.