

## Alternative Worship

In the last chapter of the book *Church Morph*, Eddie Gibbs writes about the Alternative Worship movement, which emerged in the United Kingdom in the 1980s and spread to the United States around the year 2000. He describes how its transcendent worship emphasis challenges the modernist notion that we humans can renew the church through our own strategic thinking and technical expertise. Its stress on creative participation challenges the twin heresies of consumerism and individualism that are so prevalent in our culture.

A spate of new songs of worship has accompanied every significant period of renewal within the church. In addition to drawing upon the rich heritage of hymnody from previous centuries, each new generation must find the forms of expression that enable it to worship the Lord in ways that are appropriate in its time and place. It represents not only a rediscovery of ancient forms that speak in fresh ways to our generation but also a passion for creative embrace of the arts to couple truth with impact.

The Alternative Worship movement seeks to relate the gospel to a segment of the population profoundly influenced by the culture of postmodernity. Many people have embraced its tenets through the embedded assumptions of popular culture, without necessarily realizing where they have come from.

Worship services provide participants an opportunity to listen and learn from one another, believing that our understanding of the nature of God, and of the gospel made known through Jesus Christ, is bigger than our ability to grasp. This leads to attitudes of tolerance and humility, and to the recognition that the theologies we construct are all tentative, due to our human limitations, resulting in much ambiguity and mystery in matters of faith. Changing contexts raise new questions. They are committed to biblical theology, while being suspicious of systematic theology. They believe that God is bigger than any theology and that God is first and foremost a story-teller, not a dispenser of theological doctrine and factoids. Theology for them, therefore, is conceived as an ongoing and provisional conversation. Consequently, they tend to be theologically pluralistic, bringing together leaders from diverse backgrounds – from Reformed to Pentecostal, from liturgical to those more at home with spontaneous expressions of worship.

They place greater emphasis on right living than on right believing, that is, what we *show* we believe rather than what we *say* we believe. The mental framework is more *centered* set than *bounded* set, more concerned with the direction in which people are moving than whether they are “inside” or “outside” a doctrinal barrier. Many are concerned to birth faith communities that not only reach out but also reflect the culture in which they are embedded. They realize that the relationship between gospel and culture is complex. A naïve contextualization results in baptizing the culture wholesale, whereas a critical contextualization adopts a more discerning approach, distinguishing those elements in the culture that evidence the affirming and redemptive presence of God from those that are a denial of the value of the reign of God inaugurated by Jesus.

The Alternative Worship movement is prepared to accept the fact that you cannot have mission without mess, because the church itself consists of forgiven sinners, not perfected saints, and that those to whom they offer hospitality will come with their own cultural baggage and unresolved issues. There is a dispersed community that lives amidst the rough and tumble of everyday life, so a premium is placed on togetherness, on journeying with and alongside others.

Alternative Worship must not be construed as an evangelistic strategy to make the Christian faith relevant to a particular generation or culturally defined group in order to appear “cool and fashionable”. It is first and foremost the Christian community’s expression of worship that identifies with its generation and social network.

The Alternative Worship movement is in part a protest against consumerism and the importation of songs, many of them with trite and self-focused lyrics. They seek authenticity through faith expression that truly represents the people who make and take part in it. Worship entails creative participation. Creating worship events is not the preoccupation of a few, resulting in the marginalization of the bulk of the congregation. It is an activity in which each person is invited to contribute and is thereby validated, recognizing that everyone is made in the image of God and made to express the creativity that God has bestowed. So, everyone is encouraged to participate at his or her own level of ability, which clearly entails a certain amount of toleration and affirmation. While highly creative, Alternative Worship also draws upon ancient forms and liturgies without being bound by them.

What is the Spirit of God up to in this Alternative Worship movement? Are there things that we can learn from it? What questions does this raise for you?