

Contemporary Worship: Civil War in the Church

Selected Scriptures

GTY110

Hi, I'm Phil Johnson, Executive Director of Grace To You and I'm in the studio today with John MacArthur to discuss an issue that may be one of the most hotly debated issues in the church today, contemporary worship. In fact, this whole issue is so contentious in some circles that we've decided to call this discussion, "Contemporary Worship, Civil War in the Church."

John MacArthur has been pastor and Bible teacher of Grace Community Church in Southern California for more than thirty-eight years. And over the years, Grace Church has seen some significant changes, but it's also remained remarkably focused and unified and with that in mind, we thought it would be helpful to bring John into the studio and ask him the questions that have been or are on your mind. My guess is, no matter which side of the debate you find yourself on, you're probably going to be challenged by what John has to say. So, John, welcome.

JOHN: Thanks, Phil, and I'm really thrilled to be able to chat with you a little bit about this because I know many, many people are caught in this civil war. Many people are disturbed and distressed about the trends in their churches and the way music is being done. It does need to be looked at from a biblical and a practical standpoint.

PHIL: John, I love to have you in the studio like this, to talk about these subjects that are controversial and confusing because I know our listeners like to hear your thoughts on things like this. Listeners write in or call in and want your answer to...what are your thoughts about contemporary worship? What do you think of when you hear that expression, contemporary worship?

JOHN: Well I think when people say contemporary worship, they're probably talking about a certain style, the new kind of music. But we need to get over that. We need to get pass that. Every generation of believers in the history of the church has had music that was consistent with that generation. We're not singing chants now. We're not .locked in to minimalist kind of...of hymns with simple 4/4 time as, you know, used to be the staple for the church. Every generation has style changes. And I think to throw away anything just because it's new is to miss the point all together. Every generation needs to express its worship in ways that it's familiar with and comfortable with. And so there is going to be a morphing(?) and a changing of certain styles, while hopefully at the same time holding on to the best of the past which, I think, sound Christian worship has done. I mean, you can go to Grace Community Church on Sunday and you'll hear music written by Keith Getty last year right after you've heard something written by Bach centuries ago.

PHIL: Right.

JOHN: So I think when we talk about contemporary music, that's too broad a term. We need to be

more careful about what we have in mind before we just throw out everything because some very wonderful expressions of worship are being penned today.

PHIL: So you wouldn't say there's only one acceptable style of worship.

JOHN: No. People ask me, "What style of music do you like?" And I say this, if it's music I like all kinds of styles. Now there is stuff today called music that I don't even think is music. But if you're talking about music, I like all kinds of music. And I can express my worship and my praise and my love to the Lord in all kinds of musical expressions.

PHIL: Are there any styles that are not valid for worship?

JOHN: I think you have to be very careful with music, musical form that is inseparably linked to the base expressions of the culture. I just don't think you go there and bring honor to the Lord with that. You say, "Well the words sanctify the music." I don't think so. The music is the power in the expression, that's why it's musical. And I think you have to be very careful using that which is associated with sex and drugs and the baser things as a vehicle to convey the lofty sacred holy serious realities about God and the glory of Christ.

PHIL: But you sound like you're also saying you can't really draw a hard line and this is where it ends and this is no longer appropriate.

JOHN: I think you have to draw some line short of that music in the society which is used to convey the leading edge of sin and wickedness. You can make an argument that there is opera that is base and immoral, and you'd be right.

PHIL: Hum...

JOHN: Some of the story line.

PHIL: That's right.

JOHN: You can make an argument for love songs that there...there are suggestions and insinuations in old love songs that we're all familiar with that have sexual overtones and things like that. So are we going to throw out that kind of music also? Ballad type music which we use a lot of in the church today. And Moody, you know, popularized all that during his ministry.

So it's a hard...it's a hard thing to draw that line. It's a very fine line to walk, but I think we have to stay back just like any other area of Christian liberty. We stay way back, I think, from the edge of what the culture sees as identified with the worst expressions of its immoral tendencies.

PHIL: Now if I hear you right, you seem to be saying that style is not unimportant but what's far more important is the content when it comes to music.

JOHN: Absolutely. First of all, the content is critical and crucial. Music is a way to convey information. It's a way to do it in a memorable sense so that people hear it, remember it and can repeat it. And we

have a responsibility to make sure that what they're hearing, remembering and repeating is the best and the truest. So content is absolutely critical. That's where it all begins. You begin with a content and that's the most important issue. That's the dominating issue. But even at that point you say, "I can't expect this great glorious content about God to survive and convey the right...the right truth if it's wrapped in a vehicle that everybody can't disconnect from sex and drugs.

PHIL: Hum...

Now before we get too far away from style, let me ask you a couple of lingering questions here. Are there certain musical instruments that would be off limits for worship?

JOHN: I think...I think any musical instrument can be used like any other tool for good or for bad, you know, for the best or less than the best. I don't know that any musical instrument as such in itself, you know, is inherently wrong or useless. I think you could based upon the Psalms, you know, where we're told to take every musical instrument just about in existence and use it to praise God, I think anything can be used in that way.

PHIL: All right, there are some people who try to address this issue though by saying, "Okay, we're not going to permit percussion instruments or guitars on our platform." How...

JOHN: Well I was...I was hammered and vilified years ago by some critics who tried to condemn our whole ministry at Grace Church because we had guys playing guitar. By the way, I think the church that criticized us for that now has guitars...so...I mean, that was never a legitimate biblical issue. I...I...I can understand, they were trying to stay away from things that they saw as...as worldly. And that's why I say that's a hard line to draw. But certainly the guitar in itself is a magnificent and beautiful, beautiful instrument and it can be played to the glory of God, as it should be played.

PHIL: Are different styles more appropriate for one culture than for another? Or is there a biblical approach that ought to be universal?

JOHN: No. I think styles do differ from culture to culture to culture. I've been in a lot of different cultures around the world but what I've noticed whether I was in the Andes mountains with a bunch of Indians listening to them sing their own version of "What a Friend We Have in Jesus," with their own primitive instruments and it was absolutely beautiful, or whether I'm in Asia listening to Asians sing or wherever I've gone in the world or India listening to any...the common thing I hear when Christians sing is harmony and beauty and symmetry in the music. Even in Russia, and I've been there many, many times, for years the church sang in the minor key and the minor key, I think, was the expression of the oppression and the persecution that the church had. But it still had harmony and beauty and in more recent years the church in Russia sings now more in the major key because, you know, life has changed to some degree. So everywhere I've gone in the world, I found that Christians gravitate toward harmony and beauty in music, not noise and racket and dissonance.

PHIL: Now worship is about lots more than music. That's a point that's often lost these days. You...you see a church and they say, "This is our worship leader," and what he really is is the music guy.

JOHN: Yeah, and music is not worship. Worship may include singing in music, the two are not

synonymous. Worship is an attitude of the heart. And for me, this is what I want in worship, I want someone to come alongside me and help me lift up my heart in praise. That's why I go to worship. How is that done? I'll tell you how it's done. First of all, it's done by the writer of the song or the hymn, or a chorus who is saying in a beautiful and a magnificent and memorable way better than I would have said it standing there trying to make it up on my own so...so that he gives me song to sing. That's what I love about great songs, great hymns. Somebody else helps me to...to lift my praise before the Lord in words that are rich and beautiful and meaningful and better than I could come up with spontaneously on my own.

Secondly, I want to worship with all of God's people. That's what...it's such a thrill for me to stand with three thousand people in one service and three thousand more in the second service on Sunday morning at Grace Church and be lifted up in my own worship by the collective praise and the beauty of that. The instruments play, the organ plays, the orchestra plays, all the elements of music come together to enhance my own ability to express what's in my heart. And I sing at the top of my voice. I...I can't hold my song back because I'm aided by the congregation, by the musicians, by the writer of the song to give...to give expression to what is literally boiling over in my heart because of my love for the truth. I don't need somebody to whip me up. I don't need somebody to say, "Now come on, let's sing out on the third verse." I don't need anybody to motivate me superficially. I don't even need a certain style to move me. All I need is the words and the people of God and the musical accompaniment and my own heart bubbles over my own heart overflows in worship to God so that the worship is not the music, the worship is simply the expression of these glorious truths for which I am eternally thankful being offered to God from my lips the means of music.

PHIL: Now you didn't say this so I will. In our worship services, the thing that would lift my heart up to the Lord and express my praise in words better than anything most often is the sermon. So would you see the sermon as part of the worship as well?

JOHN: Yeah, I think...I would even back up from that. Before we really get into our worship, I pray a prayer, as you know, and it's really a priestly prayer, it's a prayer to bring the congregation before the Lord, it's a prayer for the confession of sin, it's a prayer for cleansing. It's a prayer for repentance, admitting my sin, the greatness of God, the glory of Christ, the wonder of the gospel. And I go through all of that pretty much every Sunday in that prayer because I want people in their hearts, first of all, to celebrate the greatness of God and the goodness of God and the grace of God and all of that. And then once we've gone before God and opened up our hearts to Him, we come out of that confession, out of that repentance, out of that intercession and we're ready, our hearts have been lifted up and we're ready to sing. The sermon then comes to inform the foundation of all worship, and that is the truth. If you're going to worship in spirit and in truth, you have to know the truth. I think, and there might be some people who disagree with me, but I think the sermon, the truth, is the most important ingredient in worship.

PHIL: Hum....

JOHN: Because it is that truth about God that makes me want to worship Him. It is His glory revealed in Scripture that makes me want to worship. I...in some ways I wish that the sermon came first and then all the worship came at the end. But I understand that the way we do it, it does culminate. The people have prayed, confessed, they have praised and sung and glorified the Lord and now with their hearts lifted up to Him, it's time for them to hear Him speak and inform their worship even further with the richness of His truth and ready them for an increased worship. But I don't think

worship ends when the service ends. Hopefully that gets a catalyst for a heart and a life of worship.

PHIL: You're also suggesting that there are two parts to our response in worship, both cerebral and emotional. You're talking about a response that moves you, that deals with your emotions. But if I hear you right again, you're...you're stressing the fact that that response insofar as it's legitimate is a response to the truth and therefore it's truth as it's filtered through your intellect first and then taken to your emotions.

JOHN: And that's exactly what Jesus says, "The Father seeks those who worship Him in spirit and in truth." There are lots of people who get worked up in what they call worship, who...the emotional part. And it's sort of isolated. It's just out there on its own. That's not what the Lord wants. He wants worship in spirit, that is with full expression of the will and the emotion based on an understanding of the truth.

PHIL: And raw emotion divorced from any connection to the truth wouldn't be worship at all.

JOHN: No, it's not worship and it's a way people get manipulated, this kind of quote/unquote stuff is used to manipulate people's wills and minds and to get them emotionally irresponsible in some ways. I think the true and pure worship, the worship that is worship is that which is a direct response to with all the powers of our being a direct response to the glory and the wonder of the truth.

PHIL: You're stressing also worship is something we do for God, not something that's done to attract people so you get a big crowd.

JOHN: Yeah, I think there's a...there's a couple of things to say at this point. God didn't design music as an evangelistic tool. That's just not biblical. If you go back to where you get the first introduction into this which would be the book of Psalms because they're collected from the whole history of Israel, so this would be part of their whole history, we continually are told in the Psalms that the word "song" is connected with the adjective new...new song, new song, new song. In fact, more than anything new in Psalms is the new song. And it's the song of the redeemed. The world doesn't have the song to sing so God's design for music for believers is to give them the opportunity to express their praise in this wonderful way which just uses all their emotions to express this. So I think we have to understand that music was designed, worship music, as an expression of praise by the saints to sing the new song, the song of redemption, the song of the redeemed, as the Old Testament calls it. It's never an evangelistic tool in the Old Testament. It's not an instrument of entertainment, supposed to lure people in.

In the New Testament, speaking to yourselves in Psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing, making melody in your heart to the Lord is clearly an experience of a Spirit-filled person, a believer. This is anything but entertainment. And so the church when you think about music in the church shouldn't be thinking about what kind of music should we do to make non-believers like us. That's completely foreign to Scripture. There's only one question to ask in the church and that is this, what music will be most faithful to the truth of Scripture and bring most joy and exhilaration in praise from the people of God who know that truth and love that truth. That's the only question to ask.

PHIL: All right, back to the issue of style, and now we're talking about style in a broader context than just musical style. Some people would say because worship is our praise offered to God, it always

should be...there should always be a formal element to it. And some would even say worship is best when it is highly formal, even liturgical. Others say no, worship can be totally informal. Whatever makes me comfortable makes me worship best. Where do you fall on that spectrum?

JOHN: I don't think we have a clear-cut confining mandate in Scripture about that. I don't think the Bible limits us to liturgical high church kind of worship. I think probably the early church was very informal. I don't think there were any organs in the early church going from house to house. I don't think there was ever an intention that it would be anything other than speaking to yourselves in psalms, hymns, spiritual songs, singing, make melody to the Lord in your heart. There's a whole lot of variety in just psalms, hymns, spiritual songs and singing and making melody in your heart to start with before the Lord. So I don't think there's any way that we should unnecessarily limit that. I think music can be informal and simple and it can also be lofty and exalted and big. You know, we can have an orchestra or it can come down to a beautiful acappella. Some of the most beautiful music in the world is acappella music and many, many beautiful pieces written in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, acappella pieces are just magnificent pieces of music, harmonies and beautiful music. Very different than huge orchestrations of great music or big organs or things like that. I just don't think the Bible puts any limits on it.

PHIL: That is one of the distinctives of Grace Church, that there...people frequently ask me, "What style of worship do you do at Grace? What style of music?" and all of that. We use a variety of music styles and a variety of different styles of everything.

JOHN: But you know what, there's...there's sort of a bottom-line principle for me when it comes to worship, and it is this. I don't want to do any music that is going to offend anybody who is there to worship. And I know this, that if we did on Sunday morning what a lot of churches do, which is nothing but flat-out contemporary kind of edgy loud banging, smashing, clanging music, it would offend a huge portion of our congregation...huge. I'm not willing to do that. And I think that's part of what we've taught so that our church is primarily young people, as you know, we've been...we've been taking in about 75, 80 new members a month for ten years and 85 percent of them are thirties and under. I talked to one of them the other day who said, "I come because I love the hymns. I weep when the hymns are sung." So I think that when it comes to worship, I want to do a broad spectrum of music, all that's good, all that people will enjoy but nothing that would harm or limit the worship of someone, even if they're a weaker brother. If you're a non-believer, you might not like any of that music. That's not an issue to me. That's not what that's about. You might not like anything about the church. You might not like the sermon either. We're not there to entertain non-believers, we're there to worship. And I think the most powerful thing that could ever happen to a non-believer is to walk into a service of people who are lost in wonder, love and praise, to borrow the hymn writer, and who are exploding in worship to the Lord and to be an eavesdropper on a worshipping community of people. Far more powerful than walking into something that sounds like the last rock concert he went to, and then you have to convince him that what's going on there is something completely different than anything he's ever experienced when what he's experienced is exactly what he always experiences.

PHIL: Would you differentiate between the corporate worship of the entire body and say, "This meeting was maybe just for, you know, high school kids?"

JOHN: Sure...sure. I understand that high school kids have a certain style of music and, you know, within reason. And we're a long way from being on the wild edge of that kind of music. But, yeah, I

think when...when kids come together, you...you can do some things that they'll all enjoy, they'll all like. As soon as you take that and stick it in the worship center on a Sunday morning, then you're going to have half your congregation that are going to say, "Well, this offends me." And the bottom line is this, and this is kind of the principle we've worked on, truth and beauty everybody understands...everybody understands in a good sound church the truth, so they understand the words are conveying the truth. And the second thing, everybody understands beautiful music...everybody does. It's universal. So if you just stick with what is true and what is beautiful, melodic, wonderful harmonics, it's not going to offend anybody. You don't need to play on the edge of that. In other words, you don't...you don't need to say, "Well, we're going to lose our high-school kids if we don't have a rock band here on Sunday morning. I don't think so. I think even kids who are used to listening to rock music hear more of that than they need to hear anyway. They don't need it on Sunday morning. And every one understands beauty. They understand that. And if you do music that is God-honoring, Christ exalting and it is beautifully done, then everyone can relate to that. So I think if you stay in that category rather than trying to run to the edge with the illusion that somehow you're going to win young people doing that, you're going to wind up alienating maybe the in your church.

PHIL: There are churches that have tried to address this whole issue by setting up competing church services so they'll have one service with contemporary music and another service with traditional music and they actually minister to two totally separate crowds that never unite together for fellowship. What's your assessment of that approach?

JOHN: I think it just puts up a needless wall. You know, I was in one of those churches some time back, a huge church, seat about four thousand people and the pastor said, "I've got to tell you, your first service is traditional, the second is contemporary." And I said, "Really?" And he said, "Yeah, I just want to let you know." And I said, "Well, what do I do differently?" You're supposed to give the same message. He said, "Well, take off your tie." And I thought, "Take off my tie? Just exactly what impact does that suppose to have on anybody? Take off my tie?"

"Well, it's a little more than that. We have a choir in the first service and we have a smaller group in the second service."

Okay, and just exactly what effect is that supposed to have on somebody? I don't even understand that. I think...I think it's pointless. You know, we...we...we want to structure worship that is common to all our congregation. We want them all to enjoy the same experience. We want them all to feel united with one another so that if you came in the Sunday morning early hour or came in the second hour, you're going to get the same thing. Everybody's on common ground. People are talking about the same things. You can pick a different service one week and nothing's going to change. I just think anything you do to unify your congregation is beneficial. Anything you do to isolate and marginalize and divide is counter-productive.

PHIL: John, lots of times in the worship wars, the battle does come down to these cosmetic things. And there's been a lot of emphasis in recent years on this. Pastors are told, you know, you're not really with it if you're not preaching in a Hawaiian shirt or if you wear a tie or whatever. Do you think the sort of downgrading of formality is having a detrimental effect on the church?

JOHN: Very serious. I watched a Christian pastor, had good things to say on television on my vacation and he was wearing jeans, really scruffy shoes, a scruffy shirt and he might have had a hole

in his jeans, and I thought, “You know, I don’t care what you say, you’re treating God and things dignified and sacred and holy, holier and more dignified than anything else, the truth of God, the presence of God, the honor and glory of God in a flippant, superficial way.”

Look, our culture understands that if you wear a suit and a tie, the occasion is formal...the occasion is serious. There’s a certain dignity. I don’t think there’s anything more serious or more dignified than coming before the Lord in worship. Look, I wear a suit and a tie because I want to portray seriousness, dignity, certain sober mindedness. When you call people together for the purpose of worshipping God in the collective church and you’re going to open the Word of God and speak, that you need to maintain a decorum and a dignity and a respect that comes from looking like you treat this as a very, very special occasion.

I think the most dignified occasion that you will ever engage in in your life is to come before the presence of God in worship. And I’m just not willing to down-grade that to wear the same thing that I wear when I go the 7-11 to pick up milk.

PHIL: Right. Now it’s a complex issue, so I want to be sure I’ve asked you all the questions because someone out there is going to point out that in James, James says, “Look if somebody comes in to you assembly and he’s not dressed in all his finery, you don’t show preference to the person who is better dressed than the guy who maybe...maybe he’s poor. Maybe the shorts and flip-flops are all the guy can afford. What do you do in a situation like that?”

JOHN: Well obviously we’re talking about a completely different issue there.

PHIL: Right.

JOHN: If you’ve got a poor man, then you respect his poverty and you embrace him in his poverty and you do all you can to deliver him from his poverty. That’s...that’s describing...that’s describing a person who has no choice. And I’m sure that in the biblical world, the world of James, the New Testament era, the daily dress and the formal dress weren’t that different cause life, at least publically, was more formal. Men wore robes to the ground. Women wore robes to the ground, and so forth. But as society has gotten less and less interested in covering itself up, which is a whole other issue we didn’t talk about, I think it’s important for men to dress up, hopefully, so that women will follow that lead and see this as a formal occasion and not an occasion for them to dress like they were going to the beach.

PHIL: Hum...

What does...what would your advice be to a person who’s in a church where the formality and the seriousness of worship has just been totally thrown out the window and now everything is entertainment and jollity for the sake of the people who are there? What do you advise a person like that?

JOHN: Sure. Well and the short answer to that question is, if that’s the way they do in the beginning, then the message must be pretty superficial. So you’ve got to ask the question, is this not simply a reflection of the theology here? And if there’s a better option for sound truth, sound teaching, you need to find that.

PHIL: It comes back to the definition of worship.

JOHN: Right. I don't need anybody to whip up my worship. I...I drive in my car, you know, around and I sing hymns and I praise the Lord and I thank Him and I lift up my grateful praise to God for His goodness in my life. I love it when the congregation surrounds me and the musicians surround me in that environment. But worship is just a way of life. It's that way for me every day on every occasion. I view the whole world, I think, with worshiping eyes. I see everything as a revelation of God and His mercy and His goodness. And so it is informed by my understanding of God and the better I understand Him, the more prone I am to worship all the time. And then when I go to gather with God's people, it's the ascendancy of that worship in the congregation of the righteous that is so rich and exhilarating. And I think it needs to be exalted, lofty, transcendent, dignified, respectful in every sense.

PHIL: Thanks, John, that's a great start and we'll come back and take this issue up again, I promise.

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