

Review

Lester Ruth, Lim Swee Hong. *A History of Contemporary Praise & Worship: Understanding the Ideas that Reshaped the Protestant Church*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2021. ISBN 978-1-5409-6753-4

By Christine Longhurst, DWS

In *A History of Contemporary Praise & Worship: Understanding the Ideas that Reshaped the Protestant Church*, authors Lester Ruth and Lim Swee Hong trace the development of two distinct liturgical theologies that reshaped Protestant worship in the latter half of the twentieth century: the Praise & Worship movement and the Contemporary Worship movement. Although much research has already been done about both movements, the authors suggest that key elements have been overlooked. Also overlooked has been the gradual coalescence of the two movements into “an overarching liturgical reality” (p.3) in the 1990s. It is this complex, inter-related history that the authors seek to uncover.

The authors begin with a brief historical overview, clarifying their motivation and strategy. Their underlying premise is that the liturgical approach now dominating many evangelical and mainline churches – an approach the authors call “Contemporary Praise & Worship” – is the result of a confluence of two independent streams of liturgical development in the last half of the twentieth century, each inspired by a unique theological vision.

The focus on the underlying theological visions of the two movements make this approach unique. Instead of exploring the subject material from cultural, societal, historical, or musical perspectives, the authors focus on the story of two groups of people “grappling with the Bible in order to shape their approaches to congregational worship” (pp.306-307).

These underlying theological visions are characterized in different ways. Early on, the authors contrast Presence (the Praise & Worship movement) with Purpose (the Contemporary Worship movement). Drawing on verses like Psalm 22:3 (“Yet You are holy, enthroned in the praises of Israel”¹) and Hebrews 13:15 (“Let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise – the fruit of lips that openly profess his name.”²), the leaders of the early Praise & Worship movement emphasized the connection between the practice of praise and God’s presence. Praise was seen as the key that unlocked an experience of God’s power and presence.

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The Contemporary Worship stream, on the other hand, focused on the purpose of worship. It was driven by the conviction that there was a growing gulf between contemporary people and the church, necessitating the development of liturgical strategies that could attract and retain people in the Christian faith. The movement found its theological centre in 1 Corinthians 9:22b: “I have become all things to all people, so that I may by all means save some.”³ The result was waves of liturgical innovation aimed at bridging the divide between the church’s worship and people who didn’t attend.

Elsewhere the authors describe the two streams as the Gift River and the Gap River. The Gift River (Praise & Worship) focused on the way in which God was renewing the church by restoring praise as the path through which worshippers could enter God’s presence. The practice of praise was seen as a gift from God, given for the renewal of the church.

The energies of the Gap River (Contemporary Worship) focused on finding ways to bridge the gaps that had developed between the church and people in a changing culture.

Instead of a straightforward chronological treatment, the authors deal with the two movements independently, suggesting that a single narrative approach would not have done justice to either.

Part 1 of the book tracks the history of the Praise & Worship movement from the mid-1940s through to 1995. Its four chapters move chronologically in 10-20-year segments, tracing the movement’s evolving theology and practice. Referencing important leaders, theologians, writers, musicians, pastors, colleges and schools, conferences, publications, worship leading strategies and more, the authors walk readers through the broadening influence of the Praise & Worship movement from its early Pentecostal roots through to Charismatic Pentecostals, the Jesus People, the wider evangelical world, and mainline churches. Along the way, they are careful to correct common misconceptions, among them the over-emphasis on the role played by the Jesus People in the development of Praise & Worship theology and music. In fact, the book deliberately postpones a discussion of the Jesus People movement until the end of the third chapter to set its contributions within the larger historical context. The authors also push back against the idea that the Praise & Worship movement was primarily about “a repertoire of songs, the instruments that accompanied them, and the industry that promoted them” (p.100).

The three chapters in Part 2 trace the history of the Contemporary Worship movement from pre-1965 to the mid-1990s, exploring a separate wave in each chapter. This movement was driven by two compelling impulses: a desire to be

³ Scripture from the New American Standard Bible (NASB). Copyright © 1960, 1971, 1977, 1995, 2020 by The Lockman Foundation.

faithful to the church's evangelistic mission, and the fear that current worship practices were not aiding the church in that mission. The authors note Contemporary Worship's deep roots in the liturgical pragmatism of American Protestantism, pointing to nineteenth century camp meetings, the revivals of Charles Finney, the liturgical innovations of Catherine and William Booth and the twentieth century ministry of Aimee Semple McPherson.

Like these earlier movements, the goal of the twentieth century Contemporary Worship movement was to "to communicate to people and to do so well" (p.168), freely embracing new musical styles, updated language, the arts, liturgical experimentation, and new technologies. The focus was on assessing the effectiveness of liturgical approaches and generating new ones rather than developing a robust supportive theology. The authors track a growing awareness of generational and cultural gaps within the church and society and highlight attempted strategies to bridge those gaps. Included among them is the work of Donald McGavran and the Church Growth movement, the ministry of Robert Schuller, and the work of leaders like Bill Hybels, Rick Warren and others, whose approaches proved uniquely effective in the spread and acceptance of Contemporary Worship.

The book also includes a look at the extensive liturgical experimentation taking place in some mainline churches between 1965-1985, bringing the evangelical and mainline streams of liturgical renewal together under the umbrella of Contemporary Worship in a way seldom done.

Part 3, "The New Liturgical Normal," traces the confluence of the two streams, both of which were "alive and roaring with activity" (p.291) by the late 1990s. Despite their different theological visions, the line between the two movements was beginning to blur. Worship practices generally unknown fifty years earlier (for example, the singing of choruses, the use of projected song lyrics led by worship bands, increased physical expression, drama and other arts, etc.) were becoming normative in many congregations, and worship in the two streams often looked very similar. Key to this increasing confluence was a burgeoning infrastructure of shared resources and publications addressing music leadership, song resources, the use of technology, and so on. Congregational centers of influence like Hillsong Church, Bethel Church, Passion conferences and others came to the fore to provide models and resources.

The authors note that the "divide between the two [movements] had never been absolute" (p.293) and point to leaders like John Wimber, Chuck Fromm, Sally Morgenthaler and Robert Webber who were able to find a middle ground between them.

The book presents a comprehensive and nuanced story of liturgical development in the last half of the twentieth century. The deliberate focus on theological frameworks brings to the fore new storylines and historical figures. One

of the core strengths of the book is the range of voices and perspectives included. Despite pandemic challenges, the authors were able to conduct 180 interviews, drawing on the lived experience of people working in the field. Well-known leaders are acknowledged alongside many whose contributions have received little recognition to this point. They note that the willingness of many people to share primary resources, including recordings, research, publications, writing and photographs, added much to the research, especially at a time when pandemic restrictions made travel and access to libraries difficult.

The comprehensive bibliography is an invaluable resource to those who may be interested in further reading and research. Offered as “a template for further research” (p.315), the authors suggest it is “the most complete, helpful list of materials related to this liturgical phenomenon published to date” (p.315). The bibliography is divided into primary sources (people within the history) and secondary sources (people writing about the history). Primary sources are further categorized by type (i.e., interviews, email correspondence, periodicals, media, books and chapters). The book also includes comprehensive Name and Subject indices.

The authors also include a very helpful three-page Appendix titled “The Two Histories Summarized in Parallel Columns.” In it they offer brief, concurrent timelines of major developments within each movement. It is an excellent place to begin or to use as a reference point while reading.

All in all, *A History of Contemporary Praise & Worship* is a landmark book, pulling together in one place so many of the ideas and events that have shaped contemporary Christian worship. Rather than an end point, though, the book feels like an invitation to further research and conversation about current liturgical practices among scholars, leaders, students, and worshipers themselves.

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