

# Modernise or Perish!

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A movement is creeping through evangelical and reformed churches these days. It is gathering pace as we near the 21st century. “The spiritual and moral state of the UK has reached crisis point,” it says, “but our traditional church image is dated. We are losing credibility and making little impact for the gospel. Cherished conventions from the past must be abandoned and we must attune ourselves to 21st century people. If we do not, our churches will be left behind and dwindle to nothing. We must modernise, or perish!”

## Changes

This response has produced radical changes. The following quotation indicates some of these. It summarises a challenge thrown down at a reformed ministers’ meeting in 1997:

We desperately need to modernise. We should first of all throw out the AV because it’s archaic, and we should get more with-it in other areas too. I was invited to preach recently in a church which practices these sorts of things and after being at first critical I began to realise that it was only my own personal taste I was following. I looked around and saw that there were about four hundred people there who wouldn’t otherwise have been there if things hadn’t been modernised. What’s more, there wasn’t a single suit being worn throughout that congregation. This is how people dress today. We shouldn’t encourage stuffiness in dress or any other aspect of church life ... We have only ourselves to blame if we cling to archaism and have only tiny congregations ... We need to loosen up in how we relate to other people and make church a more pleasant place to visit. There should be more modern hymns, more congregational participation in worship, more informality.” **Reference 1**

## Modernising movement

This represents what lies behind what can only be called a modernising movement. According to it, secular culture has moved on, but our church culture has remained where it was: in the last century, with many of our church buildings. Our strait-jacketed forms of worship and Christian life are not helping the cause of Christ today. They cannot relate to the age of sound bytes, studied informality, hedonism, and a time when people know more about dinosaurs than about Jesus Christ. So, if we are to appeal to 21st century people we have to become a 21st century church. We need to seriously overhaul our worship and practice as people entrusted with a timeless gospel.

## New situation

This, we are assured, is a new situation. Even twenty years ago things were not as urgent as now. Back then we could have our “hymn sandwich” service: hymn—prayer—hymn—reading—hymn—sermon, etc., our *Authorised Version*, hymns with “Thee” and “Thou” in them, formal dress, led services and so on. But the non-church-going people of today are not familiar with such things. How can we expect them to take us seriously with turn-offs like these? There must be a new approach for the new climate. And so we have this clamour for contemporaneity.

## Unrecognisable

It has left many churches unrecognisable compared with what they used to be. Steadily, changes have been made. The *New International Version* is now in place, sometimes even the *Good News Bible*. A supplement of modern choruses and songs has joined the hymnbook, sometimes with *Mission Praise or Songs of Fellowship* taking over. An overhead projector throws more songs and choruses on a screen or back wall. An assortment of musical instruments lead the singing. Children are also entertained by an amusing talk. Women and young people lead certain items. Preaching is reduced to fifteen or twenty minutes, emasculated of serious biblical content. Services exude informality, designed to make the unconverted visitor feel welcome and comfortable.

Not all churches moving this way have all these elements. However, once begun, where do you stop? The momentum for change can be irresistible. Many churches are a ghost of what they were, because they have been taken farther than they first thought. And often the result is no great increase in converts, but the price has been the loss of its most godly and valuable members.

## New hymnbook

Movements usually have a banner with which members can identify. This year there will appear a new hymnbook entitled *Praise!* (Ref. 2) Consisting of around nine hundred pieces, it is a major new collection, on a similar scale to *Christian Hymns*. However, the difference is that, while the latter was published in 1977 and reflected the preference for traditional hymns, *Praise!* reflects the new mood. Accordingly, the second paragraph of its Preface states that the book “represents a radically new approach to what we sing in our Christian communities.”

One example of this “new approach” is to modernise the wording of hymns. Later in the Preface we read: “As a rule we have removed all use of archaic pronouns and their associated verb forms as being not essential in worship.” So, gone are “Thou” and “Thee,” together with verb endings like “eth” and “est.” This of course fits in with the modernising philosophy outlined above. But it ruins fine hymns like Samuel Davies’ “Great God of wonders.” Worshippers are used to these words in the first verse and refrain:

Great God of wonders! all Thy ways  
Are matchless, godlike and divine;  
But the fair glories of Thy grace,  
More godlike and unrivalled shine:  
*Who is a pardoning God like Thee?,  
Or who has grace so rich and free?*

Now they are:

Great God of wonders, all your ways  
are sovereign, holy and divine;  
but countless acts of pardoning grace  
beyond your other wonders shine.  
*Who is a pardoning God like you,  
with grace so rich, so free, so true?*

It is one of many great hymns sacrificed upon the altar of modernity.

### **New material**

Even more serious is the new material the compilers have included in this hymnbook. Such as the following by Graham Kendrick (a well-known composer of charismatic-type songs):

We are here to praise you,  
lift our hearts and sing.  
We are here to give you  
the best that we can bring.  
And it is our love  
rising from our hearts,  
everything within us cries,  
“Abba Father”  
Help us now to give you  
pleasure and delight,  
heart and mind and will that say,  
‘I love you, Lord.’

How serious Christians can offer such banal lines to God in worship is incomprehensible. But this is just the point. This new hymnbook has not been produced by a charismatic publisher, but by a Trust that has among its Advisory Council Errol Hulse, Hywel Jones, Stuart Olyott and other well-known and respected brethren. This movement has spread surprisingly far, and it is likely to carry along many more. *Christian Hymns* would never have had material like this. Yet here is a new hymnbook doing so that is clearly aimed at the same constituency, and is a potential replacement for it.

In the future, churches will be known by the hymnbook they use. *Praise!* represents an historic watershed. Those who have this hymnbook will declare where they stand regarding this modernising movement, in much the same way as those who went over to the *New International Version* did. We now have a modern hymnbook as well as a modern Bible version to be a banner for change and declension. The appearance of this hymnbook will simply accelerate the miserable downgrade in worship that all discerning believers will deplore.

### **Response**

What then, are we to think of this modernising movement? How should we respond to it? Weighing these things in the balances of Scripture and church history gives us the only safe perspective. From this viewpoint, the following points are relevant.

#### **1. This movement is not really new.**

Christians in the past have been alarmed and dismayed about decline in the Church. And they have resorted to new ways of remedying it. Toward the end of last century it was like this. The paucity of conversions and absence of revival troubled many. Secular progress seemed to be carrying all before it. A mood of optimism and confidence was abroad that was divorced from biblical and historic Christianity—Darwin and other great thinkers has seen to that. Everybody seemed to be straining towards the Golden Age of the 20th century. Many churches looked to the Moody campaigns, which included novel methods to

communicate the gospel to the masses: solos, testimonies and calls to come to the front. Moody's friend, F.B. Meyer, did the equivalent in his church. In 1893 he began to hold meetings for unchurched men called "A Pleasant Sunday Afternoon." The programme included anthems by a choir, solos, a short address and even applause. Nowadays, such features are included in the morning and evening Lord's day services: things had not travelled so far back then.

As we know, this accommodation to the supposed needs of "outsiders" did *not* work. The last hundred years show that those methods only weakened the gospel and enabled the German Higher Criticism to take firmer hold in this country. C.H. Spurgeon saw the fallacy of it and declared: "Do not talk to us about innovations, and all that; away with your rubbish!"

Back then, the new modernism in methods helped the new modernism in theological unbelief, and between them they hastened the ebb-tide of God's cause. This new modernism in methods today comes at a time of rampant unbelief and apostasy in the professing church. It is no more destined to help reverse it than its equivalent a century ago. Our spiritual and moral ills go deeper than user-friendly church services can reach.

## 2. **This movement fails to reckon with man's true need.**

Which is his spiritual blindness, and enmity to God. Let us face this squarely: scriptural worship holds no attraction for the unregenerate man and never can. This is because it focuses upon what he cannot relate to and refuses to consider. The gap between *spiritual* worshippers and the "outsider" will always be massive and unbridgeable, apart from the grace of God. People "durst not join themselves" to us (Acts 5:13), not because we are not with-it enough, but because our only attraction is *God*. Making things more adapted to their culture will not help.

Granted, it is irresponsible to be indifferent to the unchurched who may venture into our services. Unwelcoming looks, funereal singing, unclear and wearying preaching are obviously going to turn people away. Let there be vibrancy, clarity and the warmest of welcomes—as there always will be when the Holy Spirit is present. But new ways of worshipping, new Bible versions and new hymnbooks aplenty will not bring about what only the sovereign grace of God can do.

It has rightly been said that our gospel must address the worldling according to his *creation*, not his *culture*. The latter is changing, the former is basic. His real need is as someone made in God's image but fallen. The means of grace in the church address him at *that* level. Scripture and experience teach us that outsiders are most impressed when they experience God-honouring worship, Spirit-anointed preaching, and an atmosphere of reverence and Christian love. Revamping things is but tinkering with symptoms and not going to the root of the problem. If we believe in the biblical doctrines of man's total depravity and God's sovereign grace we will eschew this modernising movement.

## 3. **Scripture is against the approach this movement takes.**

Evangelism seems to be the all-controlling factor. As if effectiveness here must determine everything else. This, however, is unscriptural. According to the Bible, the order for God's Church is first *worship*, then *witness*. In her Old Testament form the Church was organised, instructed, disciplined and sanctified to "show forth the praises of the LORD" (Isaiah 60:6). And in her Christian form it is the same (1 Peter 2:5,9—notice, a spiritual priesthood to offer worship, and then to show forth God's praises to a needy world).

When worship and life together are scripturally ordered, it is a worthy exhibition of God's wisdom to the angels (Ephesians 3:10; 1 Corinthians 11:10). Paul was

pleased with the “order” he knew was in the church at Colosse (Colossians 2:5). Only when this is so can we *also* be a credible witness to an unbelieving world. When worship is subordinate to evangelism, something is seriously wrong. The needs of the ungodly then govern how we worship God. The tail is now wagging the dog. Is not the church looking *outwards* instead of *upwards*, and therefore forgetting the whole point of her existence? Since when have the unregenerate had a say in what is done, or not done, in God’s own Church? (1 Timothy 3:15). To yield to the demands of this movement is to let the world into the Church.

4. **This new modernism in methods is influenced by the spirit of the age.**

We live in days when almost everything old is decried. What belongs to the past is automatically assumed to be outmoded. This makes people feel the need to change things and make them up to date. Stores re-fit themselves for a new look, companies spend millions on a new logo and livery, makeovers for this and that are in demand. More sinister though, is the spirit that seeks to re-invent traditional values and beliefs. Absolute standards are disregarded, experimentation in morality and lifestyles is glamorised, and “alternatives” are cried up. The boundaries of taste and decency are pushed farther and farther by the entertainment media. New depths of ugliness and evil are explored to satisfy the restlessness of an age that has lost its moorings.

Sadly, many Christians seem affected by this spirit and are like those at Athens, who “spend their time in nothing else, but either to tell, or to hear some new thing.” (Acts 17:21). When it comes to Christian worship and evangelism this spirit has no place. Neither our Lord nor His apostles bent their principles to the winds of change. The Great Commission makes no provision for workshops on worship, counselling, the use of music, drama, laughter and suchlike. It tells us to “teach” (Matthew 28:19) and “preach” (Mark 16:15) the saving truth of Christ. It tells us in worship only to have “commanded” things (Matthew 28:20)—i.e., only things sanctioned by Scripture. The Church is called to change, not be changed by, the spirit of the age. We have our agenda from heaven, and whether old-fashioned or new-fangled, we are to care nothing for our image so long as we are pleasing God.

Almighty God is *not* pleased when we presume to alter what He has appointed for His glory in the Church. Under the Old Covenant strict obedience was commanded—even down to the difference between uncut stone and brick for His altar (Exodus 20:25; Isaiah 65:3). Nadab and Abihu were severely judged for offering “strange fire before the LORD, which he commanded them not” (Leviticus 10:1). Under the New Covenant, the Old is fulfilled in Christ, and the obligation to strict obedience remains (Matthew 5:17-19). He is the same God, who is offended at our departures from His revealed will.

In this age of change, when many of the Lord’s people seem confused, we are wise if we choose the old ways prescribed in the Scriptures and trodden by our godly forefathers: “Thus saith the LORD, stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls” (Jeremiah 6:16).

5. **This modernising movement tends to remove reverence from God’s worship.**

The effect of the changes is to “lighten and brighten” the services. So that outsiders can feel more at home with us. Then hopefully, the reasoning goes, they will listen to our gospel. It is bridge-building to meet them halfway. However, Scripture condemns “will worship” (Colossians 2:23)—worship of the kind *we want* (for

whatever reasons, even worthy ones). When God is disobeyed, His Holy Spirit is grieved. This means the withdrawing of His presence and power. Such a state means we are bereft, orphans (John 16:18)—without help and comfort. Surely, if the sense of God’s awe-inspiring presence is lost, where is the gain? Then all is lost. God-demeaning, breezy and catchy ways in the solemn assembly will bring us to this. When the Lord leaves us to ourselves, a man-centred jocularity then replaces reverence. Nothing spiritual and saving can be expected then.

Consider these words: “God is greatly to be feared in the assembly of the saints, and to be had in reverence of all them that are about him” (Psalm 89:7). They call us to ensure that worship in God’s house involves the utmost reverence and hallowing of His name. This must be secured and preserved at all costs. Nothing is more important to God than His worship; nothing can be more important to us than the felt sense of His presence—and the reverence it brings.

Consider too, the example Paul gives in 1 Corinthians 14:24,25. Here, he instances the case of an outsider attending an assembly for worship: “there come in one that believeth not.” He finds the service properly ordered, and the presence and power of God there. The Word is divinely blessed to his soul: “and thus are the secrets of his heart made manifest; and so falling down on his face he will worship God, and report that *God is in you of a truth.*” This testimony is everything: God is in you of a truth. Will this be the fruit in assemblies with the new paraphernalia? Far from being made to feel comfortable, sinners should be made to feel profoundly uncomfortable, until they repent, are converted, and come to know “the living and true God” (1 Thessalonians 1:9).

**6. This clamour for change may well be a symptom of something else.**

It can be a sign that God *is* departing from us and leaving us to our own foolishness. In the days of Eli, the Israelites hit upon the novel idea of taking the Ark of the Covenant with them into battle against the Philistines. They overlooked the fact that the cause of their recent defeats lay elsewhere. This new tactic did them no good (1 Samuel 4). The only cure was repentance, and a return to God (1 Samuel 7). They made the mistake of responding to the need instead of returning to God.

Far from *modernising* our services, should we not rather be *mourning* in them—grieving over our sinful conformity to the world, our prayerlessness, our disobedience to God, our unbelief? Not change in the Church but change in *ourselves* should be the response to the enemy coming in like a flood.

The difference between us and previous generations emerges at this point. Whereas we in desperate days resort to modernisation, *they* resorted to humiliation before God and enquiring prayer. Their concern was, not so much gospel-success, but why the Lord seemed to have departed from them—and how they could secure His return. Ours is no day for bright confidence in new ways. Rather, may God humble us before Him, and stir us up to seek His face, having confidence only in the things He has given us to do in the Church. His blessing is promised to those who honour Him.

**7. Finally, keeping to the old paths does not invite decline or extinction**

We need to ask the question: Where does church growth come *from*? The answer is: Only from above (John 3:27; 1 Corinthians 3:6). It is wholly dependent upon God’s favour and blessing. If He withholds that (and He may for reasons that do not reflect upon us—how “successful” was Enoch, Noah, Isaiah, Jeremiah?), no amount of

modernisation can alter this. If He is pleased to give the growth we long for, no amount of keeping to scriptural, proven ways will hinder it. As someone has rightly said: "We will gain more from faithfulness to Christ and His institutions than we will ever lose. The final reckoning is still to come (1 Peter 5:4)".

We can appeal to facts to prove this. Some of the largest churches in the UK are those which are "behind the times" when it comes to worship. The Metropolitan Tabernacle in London has thronging congregations to hear preaching from the Authorised Version, and where its worship is marked by the absence of those things so apparently necessary these days. Its minister, Dr. Masters, has argued against such things, calling for biblical ways in the church, not far removed from his most illustrious predecessor, C.H. Spurgeon.

Another example is Heath Evangelical Church, Cardiff in South Wales, where hundreds gather. The minister, Mr. W. Vernon Higham, uses the Authorised Version and Christian Hymns. Mr. Higham is a highly-esteemed hymn-writer himself, a number of whose compositions are in hymnbooks currently in use. He has perhaps a unique right to speak to us on such matters. Recently he has written these incisive words:

"We live in times where there has been a terrible change in the worship of God. Instead of our worship, and particularly our hymns, being God-centred they have become man-centred. This change has led us on a downward path, deceiving many into thinking that it is necessary to compromise in order to attract. Are we forgetting the sovereignty of God, and that His arm is not shortened that it cannot save? It is necessary in every aspect of our Christian faith and our living to have God and His glory in view."

We could cite many other churches as worthy examples too. In being specific like this, we would not imply that we necessarily agree with everything that a particular church does. These are simply facts to support and illustrate this point: that to maintain biblical standards in the Church does not necessarily mean small congregations and irrelevance.

Movements do not just happen. They are the result of a way of thinking. I maintain that the thinking behind this clamour for modernising the church is skewed from Scripture and blinkered in outlook. It is well-meant but mistaken. It manifests, not so much a passion for the Church as a passion for church growth, which is a different thing. God's work must be done in God's way. Calvin had it right when he said: "The excellence of the Church does not consist in multitude but in purity." Let us, then, keep to the narrow path of obedience, and leave all consequences with God.

*"Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen."* (Ephesians 3:20,21).

1 Extract from a report by Alan Morrison, "Diakrisis," 14 June 1997.

2 Published by Praise Trust, Birch Lodge, Winchester Road, Chilworth, Southampton SO16 7LG.