

Worship and The Pastor

*Response to Revd Dr Robert Solomon's Paper
By Revd Peter Poon*

I am deeply honored and felt extremely privileged to be asked to respond to one of the papers presented in today's symposium. I must say that I benefited much from today's presentations myself. And I hope that we would see more of such exchanges and learning experiences from now on.

As time is precious and as the time given for me to respond is short, I would limit my response to just 3 points.

1. There is wholehearted and complete agreement on my part to Dr Solomon's points that pastors should be leaders in the worship services. Pastors can exercise their leadership in many roles and the most crucial of them are to educate, train, as well as to correct misconceptions of worship that are not biblically sound.

Pastors could educate the entire congregation through their preaching, small groups, and as well as by their exemplary leadership both in their personal lives as well as through their leadership in worship services themselves.

Pastors could also conduct training for leaders in worship, helping them to fine-tune and align their practices in worship leading with biblical principles.

However, I'll like to challenge TTC, which is a premier training institution for pastors for many denominations, to take the role of preparing her students adequately for church ministry especially in the worship aspect. Perhaps, the new campus and with better facilities and the establishment of the denominational study centers will place more emphasis on this aspect.

I would also encourage TTC to take the lead to help to bring together theologians and like-minded people, like musicians and song writers, to look into words used in many contemporary songs used in worship; and perhaps to make suggestions for changes or alternatives to both the music and words of these songs.

2. Coming to the issue of pop culture and how it influences worship. I want to say that culture does have a great impact on life in general. Changes that take place around us do influence us to change. However, just as there are negative aspects there are positive ones too. Besides, cultural changes are really symbolic changes and they carry along with them meanings that are accepted by the prevailing people as norms. To deny them is to live in the past. As such, cultural changes influencing worship are to be expected. For instance, we move from chants to hymns and now to so-called contemporary songs. Cultural changes also led to the way we dress as we go to church services. They are not so much issues of right or wrong but rather the understanding or interpretation of their meanings.

As Bible-believing Christians, one other criterion is important, and that is, are these meanings, symbols and cultural changes biblically sound?

As such, my response to this is not whether we should go back to using hymns for worship but rather are these contemporary songs written in such a way that are based on biblical principles?

Now, I want to make it clear that I too do not support the entertainment paradigm as mentioned by Dr Solomon. I find it extremely uncomfortable worshipping in an environment that espoused such characteristics in worship whether they are biblical or not. However, I would not agree that all practices that may be associated with the entertainment paradigm as wrong. A case in point, what is commonly called, give a clap offering to the Lord. Clapping or applauding could easily be associated with a star status performer who having rendered a wonderful performance, he is applauded and some times, even given a standing ovation or in some cases, an encore is called for.

Giving a clap offering to God does sound like making God into a superstar, the very problem of the Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical "Jesus Christ Superstar." However, when we understand that applause is rendered as in bowing, an act of respect or appreciation, and even honor or reverence, a clap offering to God may not be at all unacceptable.

The issue is really one of understanding the meaning behind the acts themselves that could make the difference. In that sense, I am, reluctant as I am, willing to look a little further into the meanings in the many so-called entertainment practices in worship and ask serious questions of what do they really mean to worshippers today.

3. My third response is from the perspective of post-modernism. When we talk about pop culture, it is important to look at all the changes in the worship scene through the eyes of the emergence of post-modernism. We do not have the time to go into describing what post-modernism is now but I need to say that much of what's happening to our world today is influenced by post-modernistic developments. First, with the advent of the internet, we are truly like what McLuhan had said, "becoming a global village." We crossed boundaries not only geographically but also socially and intellectually as well as spiritually. New Age gurus are speaking at Buddhist Fellowship and even Christians are invited to grace the forum of New Age Conference.

Of course, one the greatest influence of post-modernity is on music. There's no doubt that in order for us to reach out to the young people who are deeply influenced by post-modernity, we have to allow their songs and their types of music to be used during worship. So instead of critiquing them for the lagging behind in memory and story found in great hymns and closing the door on them, we should help them along in two specific ways.

- a. Educate them about the values in great hymns; help them to appreciate the stories and theology, and to help them to understand these hymns written in a different genre of music.
- b. Train, motivate, inspire and challenge them to write songs and compose music with more depth and meaning. Workshops and seminars should be conducted to highlight their awareness and to inspire them to higher level of excellence.

Having said that, coming from a conservative evangelical background, I echo all of Dr Solomon's sentiments and embrace many of his suggestions and applaud him for his courage in saying them. I am encouraged and inspired. But I would also want to place on record that I had personally encouraged both the congregations that I had served in to initiate a so-called contemporary service. I totally agree with him and Marva Dawn about the danger of dichotomizing our worship experience as a result of this. However, I do recognize that we are in a transitory nature of a wider social, intellectual, cultural and even spiritual movement from a modernist mindset to a post-modernist one. And that to help the church to make sense of the changes, one of the ways is to allow our young people the freedom to explore and find meaning in their relationship with God in this new world. However, I must also say that there is at the same time a great need to provide guidance and education for them especially from the pastoral point of view. There must be room for dialogue, discussion, and study to empower them to learn to worship God meaningfully.

By pressing for an authoritarian approach to sanction them would not help. Instead, we have to walk alongside with them and be doers of God's word with our love, understanding and patience to nurture them and guide them to worship the dynamic God.

Finally, worship is relationship with God and requires our total being given over to Him. In order for us to lead worship or to worship, we need to deepen our personal intimacy with God first. As such, the key to meaningful worship is first and foremost the practice of spiritual discipline. And for the post-modernists, they are looking and searching for deeper spiritual experience. In this, I believe that we have found a common ground in worship. As a pastor, I first need to deepen my own spirituality and then lead my congregation in a worship that is first and foremost a meaningful spiritual encounter with our creator God. The form and instruments of worship is really secondary. The spiritual encounter with the Almighty is primary.