

# **Sounds of Revival: An Unapologetic Apology for Megachurch Worship Practices**

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## **Abstract**

The phenomenon of the megachurch is inextricably linked to its worship practices, and revival is the lens through which both the nature of our Churches and the songs that we sing must be interpreted. This article takes as its starting point the analysis of Contemporary worship in Lim and Ruth's *Loving on Jesus* (2017). Written from the perspective of a Pentecostal theologian and long-time megachurch member, it presents a positive view of contemporary, and specifically megachurch worship. The article draws on both historical and contemporary sources to present the view that megachurch worship is not merely a passing fad or a phenomenon to be analysed. It is rather an experience to be embraced, and one which offers genuine encounters with God. This experience is not only biblically defensible. It is historically orthodox in its aims and emphases, and consistent with a context of revival.

## **Introduction**

The so-called "worship wars" have long since been fought and won and it seems contemporary worship is here to stay. But this series of papers is not just about the styles and methods of contemporary worship. It is also about megachurches, the vehicles which often define these styles and champion these methods, and develop the pioneer organisations that others follow. For that reason, my purpose in this paper is not merely to describe what does happen in megachurch worship, but to explain why it should and must keep happening. In this respect I differ from a recent and incredibly helpful analysis by Swee Hong Lim and Lester Ruth, *Loving on Jesus* (Ruth &

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Lim, 2017), which has helped frame my own thoughts and with which I will dialogue. In what follows, I aim to provide not a history then, but an apology (in the classical sense) for megachurch worship, or, an exegesis of revival. And to be clear, my contention is that that is exactly what is going on. The phenomenon of the megachurch is inextricably linked to its worship practices, and revival is the lens through which both the nature of our Churches and the songs that we sing must be interpreted. Put simply, I contend that revivals, large churches, and new songs go hand in hand. Moreover, I aim to show that they always have done. And for this reason, what is happening in the churches is not something novel, at least in the theological sense. It is deeply rooted in Scripture, it is soundly orthodox theologically, and it is continuous with what has happened in revivals past, dating back to the very birth of the Church. I write as a Pentecostal scholar, and a long-time member of one of Australia's largest churches, Planetshakers.

In their history of contemporary worship Lim and Ruth (2017), set out nine essential characteristics of what they call "contemporary worship." While I realise that their study includes churches whose worship may be described as "contemporary" but that are not megachurches, there is sufficient overlap with the context they are examining to use their definition as a basis for discussion of megachurch worship. The nine characteristics are in four general groupings (Lim and Ruth, 2017, p. 2) as listed:

- Fundamental Presumptions
  - Using Contemporary, nonarchaic English
  - A dedication to relevance regarding contemporary concerns and issues in the lives of worshippers
  - A commitment to adapt worship to match contemporary people, sometimes to the level of strategic targeting
- Musical
  - Using musical styles from current types of popular music
  - Extended times of uninterrupted congregational singing
  - A centrality of the musicians in the liturgical space and in the leadership of the service
- Behavioural
  - Greater levels of physical expressiveness
  - A predilection for informality
- Key Dependency

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- A reliance on electronic technology

My hope is that my thoughts on this will be a resource for those wishing to support and champion the amazing work that megachurches do and their worship practices. But more than that, my hope is that I will be able to provoke or encourage further research in these critical areas. So, with that in mind I present an unapologetic apology for megachurch worship practices.

Before I continue, it is also important to note that hymns have always been important in the life of the church. Most of them — at least the ones that have stood the test of time (here I think of hymns like "How Great Thou Art," "Be Thou My Vision," "Holy Holy Holy," "A Mighty Fortress is our God," etc.) — have a primarily catechetical function and are thus necessarily laden with important theological terms and concepts. And yet in exhorting the Ephesian believers to "speak to one another in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs" (Eph 5:19), Paul reminds us that this catechetical function is only one among several distinct purposes of church music, which also include, at the very least, the exuberant declaration of God's mighty acts, the celebration of God's goodness, and the facilitation of personal encounter with God by the Holy Spirit.<sup>1</sup> These additional functions have come to be designated in recent times by the collective term "praise and worship." Thus, Lim and Ruth demonstrate the evolution of these terms, charting their theology and usage, which according to them has largely been driven by Pentecostal Churches and adopted by others (S. H. Lim & Ruth, 2017, p. 14).

One of the things that I believe Lim and Ruth have gotten profoundly right in their observations about contemporary worship is their discussion of the sacramental quality of worship. Of course, the terminology they use would be entirely foreign to most megachurch attendees, especially to Pentecostals who comprise the vast majority of this group. Their insistence on the terms *sacramentalism* and *liturgy* in a work on contemporary worship — apparently an implicit critique of Pentecostalism's iconoclasm in the first instance and oral culture in the second — is puzzling to say the

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<sup>1</sup> To be clear, I do not contend that Paul necessarily intends to designate three *genres* of music in use in the Church, though such a conclusion would not be unwarranted, but rather that his apparent need to use three different words to define the scope of Church music in the first century is parallel to a similarly diverse scope of church music in our own day. New Testament commentators often use the term 'hymn' when designating passages such as Philippians 2:6-11; e.g. (Gordley, 2018). If this usage is correct, such 'hymns' are certainly theologically rich and catechetical in nature. It should perhaps be noted that the earliest post New Testament hymn, the *Phos Hilaron* written in the 4<sup>th</sup> century or perhaps even slightly before, can hardly be said to be 'theologically rich' by comparison however. (For some analysis of this see Alexandru, 2020).

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least. Furthermore, though their appeal to the liturgical terms *anamnesis* and *epiclesis* may communicate with precision to scholars in the field, one cannot help but wonder if they would be better served by adopting the more familiar terms associated with the phenomenon they are attempting to analyse, namely *praise* and *worship*. But these more traditional classical terms serve to make a very important point, for sacramental theology at its core is the belief that the Church, in its worship, can truly encounter God. That is, that via the sacraments—certain actions or rituals performed that admittedly have certain elements of tradition, but ultimately find their genesis in Scripture—Christians can experience the “real presence” of Christ. In that sense, Pentecostals and Charismatics could certainly be said to have a sacramental understanding of worship (whether or not they use that word), for surely the premise of megachurch worship is to truly encounter God’s presence. But the point is that this expectation of encounter, however it is described and whether (or not) it is actually experienced, is not novel. It is not a recent innovation. It is consistent with the expectation that the Church has always had in its worship, however expressed.

Lim and Ruth’s analysis suggests that Pentecostals have perhaps not gone far enough in developing a theology of God’s presence, and specifically God’s manifest presence, that special moving of the Holy Spirit that most of us know from experience yet struggle to articulate in a way that is defensible outside of our movement. They point to just a handful of texts that are commonly used to establish the expectation of God’s presence in congregational worship. If they are right, and my own experience suggests that they are, then it is incumbent on us, mainly Pentecostal and Charismatic megachurch people, to do the work biblically and theologically to better explain the phenomenology of God’s Presence. And I would commend this as a fruitful direction for further research. But make no mistake, the encounters that are experienced in “contemporary worship” are *real*. That is not to say that these cannot be simulated or exaggerated or outright faked. Lim and Ruth acknowledge that some churches “...adopted contemporary worship for tactical reasons. Whereas the Pentecostal approach had been to adopt the new music as a way of encountering God, these congregations tended to implement contemporary worship as a strategic way of attracting new people.” (S. H. Lim & Ruth, 2017, p. 131)

And it goes without saying that it is possible at times to misinterpret merely emotional experiences as being “God encounters.” But what seems undeniable, even in the face

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of the most cynical criticism of megachurch worship, is that people can and do really encounter God in these contexts. Testimonies—anecdotal evidence to be sure, but testimonies too numerous to ignore—describe real encounters with God’s Spirit that have resulted in deep inner healing, instantaneous transformation, miraculous physical healing, refreshing, encouragement, expanded vision, the release of spiritual gifts, and that most important miracle of all, salvation. In short, the encounters that are experienced in the context of megachurch worship are consistent with a context of revival.

It should be obvious by now that, while I am a worship enthusiast, I am not a worship expert. My expertise lies in the area of theology and history. And while the Pentecostal movement of the last hundred or so years is an area of passion area for me because I am part of it, I am far more comfortable in ancient than in recent history. That would certainly be a limiting factor if what we were discussing were indeed a recent phenomenon, but we have already established that the expectation of encounter in worship is not an innovation. What then of the evolution (or perhaps revolution) within the nature of that worship—the songs—that Lim and Ruth document? If their analysis is anything to go by, most seem to have accepted the narrative that this revolution is indeed a recent innovation. But I want to challenge that narrative in two key areas because I believe that the Church is doing now what it has always done, or at least what it has done at its best, that is during previous periods of revival.

The first notion that I want to challenge is that the reason for the undeniable, and at times almost explosive, growth of churches in recent decades is because finally we got our methods right. That is, churches grow big because *we* make them big. Here, Lim and Ruth tend to support this narrative rather than challenging it. To simplify their argument, Churches until about the 1960s sang hymns with archaic language, and then the Church went through some kind of revolution where language was modernised, and many traditional trappings were shed with relevance becoming paramount. Note here that one of Lim and Ruth’s nine characteristics of contemporary worship is “a commitment to adapt worship to contemporary people, sometimes to the level of strategic targeting” (S. H. Lim & Ruth, 2017, pp. 2, 4). While it is considerably more charitable, I note that this understanding of the recent evolution of “contemporary worship” does share similarities with the typical accusations levelled against megachurches and their leaders by self-appointed church watch dogs and hostile media (for example, see Parsons, 2017).

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I first encountered this narrative not long after I had begun attending a Megachurch in Melbourne in the mid-nineties. I was watching Australia's television program "A Current Affair" over dinner with my parents, who were still disappointed in my ecclesial decision making and felt that they had raised me to be the sort of person that ought to know better. So, you can imagine what an entertaining dinner conversation ensued when a much younger Brian Houston appeared on our screens complete with Hawaiian shirt, trademark winning smile, and larger than life voice. (Hillsong) Pastor Brian has become a lot more street wise in his dealings with the media since, and at his expense so have the rest of us.

But it is an all-too-familiar script. We have all heard variations of the themes discussed that night. Churches that get big, do so because they compromise the message of the gospel — they don't preach enough repentance, or they don't preach about sin etc; they get big because they have a singular charismatic leader; often the founder who holds way too much power and/or has way too much money. Here, the arguments continue as many and various — surely if we throw enough mud, some of it will stick right? Churches get big because they focus not on biblical truth but on entertainment —music, lights, etc. Music entertainment is a clever marketing strategy because after all that is all these big churches are — big businesses. Churches get big because they preach prosperity and faith healing *et cetera*.

In return, I want to suggest something a little subversive; a little revolutionary. Megachurches are good. They are good for people; they are good for other churches, and they are good for the world. But more than that, people don't make megachurches, God does. We are not that clever. It is fine to analyse a church from the outside, as indeed Lim and Ruth do with the growth of Willow Creek church and the movement of imitators that it spawned (S. H. Lim & Ruth, 2017, pp. 14, 15). But if you asked my pastor, the pastor of Planetshakers Church, about how the Church started or why it grew as much or as rapidly as it did,<sup>2</sup> you would not hear anything about "strategic targeting." What you would hear about is prayer and the Holy Spirit and being obedient to a word from God. What you would hear is the story of *revival*. And here is my point. Churches may remain big for a time through methods and systems. But churches do not typically grow big without a genuine move of God.

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<sup>2</sup> According to the *Brill Encyclopedia of Pentecostal and Charismatic movements*, Planetshakers has been the fastest growing Church in Australia's history (S. Lim & Coombs, 2021).

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My main argument is that big churches are evidence of big moves of God; of revival. Big churches make a big impact for God. Big churches are champions of big thinking. They grow big people who do big things. And for sure, they typically have big name leaders with big targets on their backs so when those leaders make even little mistakes those mistakes have big consequences. But both the magnitude and the extent of the disappointment (and even outrage) that is justifiably felt when big leaders fall is testament to the enormous influence that these churches exert within global Christendom, an influence that extends far beyond their official membership. And that should come as no surprise. God has always used larger churches, usually those in significant cities, to influence the direction of the global Church. We think in the early years of the Churches of Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria, Caesarea, Rome, and later Constantinople. In the early days of the Protestant Reformation, we might think of the influence of the Church of Geneva or the Church of Oxford. What is significant about these places is that they were all at some time or other, what our megachurches of today are: revival centres.

In earlier times, just as in our own day, big churches were used by God in big ways. They fed the poor, they sent missionaries, they established movements, they often significantly shaped the cities that were in<sup>3</sup> and importantly, for our purposes here, they influenced how other churches worship.

And that brings me to the second area I want to challenge in the narrative: the transition away from old songs — the hymns with archaic language — to new songs. I'll start with this observation. People don't actually write old songs. We only sing old songs when new ones haven't been written for a while. In Planetshakers, the Church I am part of, new songs are being written and released on a monthly (and even at times on a weekly) basis. Just this week I was leading our chapel service in Planetshakers College, and I requested a particular song of one of our worship leaders. I didn't realise, but the song had been written in 2015. Our young worship leader was incredulous. "It's...five years old! That's like 20 years in Planetshakers!" The implication was clear. Why sing a song from five years ago when you could sing one from this month??

The truth is that there are so many *new songs* being sung in churches in this season that we seem to have forgotten it was only a generation ago when we had to sing

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<sup>3</sup> One thinks of the influence that Ambrose exercised over the city of Milan, or John Chrysostom in Constantinople, or indeed Calvin in Geneva.

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Amazing Grace every second week because it seemed like the last time a truly great song had been written (Newton, 1779). But that is because what the Church is now experiencing worldwide—and not all parts of the Church, I grant, but make no mistake it IS being experienced in all parts of the world—is revival. This is a revival of the type that we have not seen since that associated with the Methodist movement in the mid to late 1700s. And it is of course no coincidence that “Amazing Grace,” perhaps one of the greatest worship songs of all time and certainly still the most well-known, was written in this period.<sup>4</sup>

The point is this: songs are always new and fresh; even “contemporary” when they are written and first sung. And this is the case with all the old hymns. The archaic language that they are written in is testament to their enduring quality; many of these older songs are remnants of revivals past. And I mean revivals plural. It is not just the Wesleyan revival that left its mark on the church’s worship. But let’s briefly look at the Wesleyan revival. This example will bear out what I have been suggesting to this point. In addition to large crowds and an experience of the presence of God, many conversions and accounts of supernatural manifestations, also nearly 7000 songs were authored during the period of this revival by Charles Wesley alone, not to mention the other lesser known songwriters of this period. That is a rate of between four and five new songs per week maintained consistently over a thirty-year period! In addition to that, new and innovative methods of church growth were introduced, hence the name of the denomination that grew out of that revival—the Methodists. Methodism represented not a novel theology, but indeed, new methods. In other words, a translation exercise that updated the look and feel of the church for a new era. It sounds a lot like “contemporary worship.”

But what of other revivals? The Protestant Reformation influenced large numbers of people in that many found faith in Christ in and through this movement, particularly in the early stages of it. The word of God was received with joy by large crowds, and new churches were established. What do we also find? This period of revival was one in which many new songs were authored, at least one of which (“A Mighty Fortress is our God”) was sung in the Church I grew up in. Perhaps most significantly was the

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<sup>4</sup> John Newton was not actually a Methodist, though he was certainly a contemporary of John Wesley and no doubt affected by the same revival. The song Amazing Grace was written during a period of prolific hymn writing and growth in his own Church at Olney. For more information see (“Amazing Grace! (How Sweet the Sound),” n.d.)



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monumental translation exercise which was commenced, and is still underway, which started with the first vernacular translation of the Bible from the original languages since Jerome's translation into Latin in the fifth century. Again, new methods, large crowds, mass conversion, new songs, and the updating of language.

Speaking of Jerome's translation of the Vulgate in the fifth century, it should come as no surprise that its publication similarly coincided with a period of revival among Latin speaking Churches. One of these that we know about occurred through the ministry of Augustine. In the City of God Book 22 chapter 8, Augustine (of Hippo, 2009, pp. 739-749) recounts a series of supernatural miracles of which he himself was personally aware. These miracles he reported (too numerous to recount here) included instantaneous physical healing and the supernatural provision of finance; in fact, the same sorts of miracles that are reported in many megachurches today. The last of these accounts contains the healing of a brother and sister from a disorder that caused persistent uncontrollable shaking. Augustine describes a large crowd and the "sounds of wonder" as a deafening spontaneous praise erupted in response to the miracles (Augustine of Hippo, 2009, p. 749).

Space does not permit further discussion about the many other revivals throughout history, but what I am seeking to establish is that these three things have always gone together: revival, church growth, and new expressions of worship. You cannot separate the three. Revival led to a release of worship. Worship has carried revival. Revival has birthed the megachurch. The megachurch is the vessel for revival.

And so, my conclusion to this point. Neither marketing nor mere sociology is the correct lens through which to view contemporary and megachurch worship. Revival is the correct lens through which to view it. I plead the following: Megachurches and their worship are not a theologically emaciated, hyper-emotional expression presenting a dumbed down version of the gospel. They are not the result of clever marketing strategies (are we really that clever?). These churches are not novel, they are soundly orthodox. Megachurches represent revivals; and their worship invites us to an experience of encounter with God. And while mimicking their methods may produce a measure of 'success' for a time, true success is to be found by seeking and obeying God. Lim and Ruth's work provides a cursory attempt at understanding the biblical theology that undergirds the contemporary Praise and Worship revolution, but without any real insight.

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Crucially, these authors have picked up the use of the tabernacle of David typology in Pentecostal literature (though this seems interchangeable for them with the tabernacle of Moses or the Temple of Solomon), but they seem to have largely missed the point of it. They do recognise why it is that of these three, the tabernacle of David is the preferred biblical typology for entering God's presence. But they seem to think that it is because of "the perceived lack of animal sacrifice in David's tabernacle" (Lim & Ruth, 2017, p. 127). This is perhaps a helpful insight, but far from the main point. Actually, the tabernacle typology has been used to expound megachurch or revival worship because the Ark in the Old Testament not only represents, but somehow mysteriously carries, God's Presence. The worship teaching around David's tabernacle arose for two key reasons. First, unlike the Tabernacle of Moses which preceded it, and the Temple of Solomon that succeeded it, the Tabernacle of David represents a brief prophetic window where there was no veil of separation between the Ark of the Covenant and God's people when they drew near to worship. Those who developed this typology, and Melbourne megachurch pastor Kevin Conner (1989) is foremost among them (although not the first to introduce the idea), have observed that it was during this period that Israel learned to praise. Similarly, it was during this period that musicians and singers were rostered on literally around the clock to worship God before the Ark, i.e., in God's presence. During this period many of the Psalms were authored, which is significant.

The second reason why the Tabernacle of David typology is preferred is there is evidence during this time of what we might call 'revival'. In addition to the large crowds, constant musical worship and new songs being authored, there is also the story of Obed-Edom the Gittite. This man became one of the singers, and this marks the inclusion of a Gentile family into the covenant promises of Israel. In other words, the Tabernacle of David prefigured not merely a worship experience, but the New Covenant itself, where the veil would be torn and the sacrifice would be made once for all. It evoked a time when the Presence of God would become available to all as the Holy Spirit was poured out, and the Good News would be preached. It is this good news that the promises that had once belonged only to Israel were now available to the Gentiles; i.e., to the nations.

And that is why it is the promise about the restoration of David's tabernacle that the apostle James reads at the council of Jerusalem in Acts 15. This marked a time of revival. This was a time of reinterpretation and the translation of God's message into

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the languages of the nations, which occurred first supernaturally on the Day of Pentecost. At the inauguration of the global church, the disciples spoke without having learned the languages of all present, and those who gathered heard them giving glory to God each in their own tongue. This was a time of supernatural manifestation, mass conversions, an experience of the tangible presence of God. Additionally, this was a time when, according to the book of Acts (2:47) the Church was “praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people” and the Lord was adding to their number daily those who were being saved. It was at *this* time, a time of revival, that James reminded the Church that God would restore in these the last days the Tabernacle of David not merely so that we could have big churches or feel-good songs, but *so that* all the nations would be able to come into God’s promises and worship him with us.

In conclusion, we cannot and must not cheapen what God is doing through megachurches throughout the world in this generation by merely analysing it. As I have said, megachurch worship invites us: to an *encounter* to be experienced and shared; it offers us a *revival* to be embraced and shepherded; and it is rooted in a *theology* to be received and defended.

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