

Behind the Music The REAL Worship War

by Todd Wilken

Music. That is what the "Worship War" is all about, right? Here are two observations, one from Christian pollster George Barna, the other from a pastor in the heart of American Evangelicalism:

Presently, 40% of adults say they attend a service that uses traditional music (e.g., a choir, hymns, organ). The next most common styles are "blended" music (used in the services frequented by 12% of adults); gospel (11%); praise and worship (10%); and contemporary Christian (i.e., CCM) or Christian rock (9%). One out of every eight attenders (13%) said they don't know what the style of music is at their services.¹

Worship music has always been changing, and always will be. Controversy in worship music has always been and, is always lurking. Personal opinions about worship music can have a paralyzing, divisive effect on the church. How long will we continue to allow it to rob us of our joy in worship? How long will we continue to allow it to render His church much less effective than it should be?²

Traditional music, blended music, gospel music, praise and worship music, contemporary music or Christian rock music. These are the battle lines of the worship war, aren't they?

Before you read another word, there is one thing you need to understand: The worship war is not about music.

"Yes it is," you say.

"My congregation was torn apart when we changed the music."

"It all started when they replaced the organ with the praise band."

"That happy-clappy music has ruined my church."

I know; there are thousands of stories just like these. But trust me, the worship war is not about music.

Music is a causality of the worship war, not the cause. So, regardless of what almost everyone thinks. We aren't fighting about music in the Church. Most of the arguments about church music, instruments, organs and praise bands are really arguments about something else, something more important.

A Riddle

I call it the Wilken Worship Riddle. I wrote it after many battles in the Lutheran worship war. And, even though you may not be Lutheran, I think it explains what the worship war is really about. Here it is:

Pentecostals worship like Pentecostals because they believe what Pentecostals believe.

Baptists worship like Baptists because they believe what Baptists believe.

Methodists worship like Methodists because they believe what Methodists believe.

Riddle: *Why do some **Lutherans** worship like Pentecostals, Baptists and Methodists?* ³

I admit, it isn't much of a riddle. The answer is obvious, or at least it should be.

Some Lutherans *worship* like Pentecostals, Baptists and Methodists because they *believe* what Pentecostals, Baptists and Methodists believe. It is that simple. Certainly, these Lutherans will never admit it, but the truth is, they *worship* like they do because they believe what they do. They *no longer believe* what Lutherans believe.

I think my riddle reveals what the worship war is really about. The worship war has never been about music, hymns, instruments, style or culture. The worship war has always been about only one thing: Doctrine, what you believe. A church worships the way it does because that church believes what it does. Another Lutheran, David Jay Webber has observed the same thing.

*Lutheran pastors who look with envying eyes upon the large numbers in attendance at the heterodox churches of our land, and who think that their own attendance will increase if they imitate the worship practices of those churches, **need to realize that such churches worship the way they do because they believe the way they do.** The theology of Arminian churches in particular requires them to devise techniques of persuading and enticing people to make a "decision" to turn their hearts toward God, and to follow Christ. The praise songs that one finds in such churches, which "market" God as one who is available and able to satisfy the felt needs of religious seekers, fit exactly with the false doctrine of such churches. How can Lutherans imitate any of that, and still remain Lutheran? ⁴*

It is a good question. The answer is obvious: they can't. They *haven't*. Decades of Pentecostal and Revivalist worship in Lutheran congregations have produced congregations that are effectively Pentecostal and Revivalist, not Lutheran. These congregations may still carry the Lutheran logo, but Sunday after Sunday they are practicing Pentecostal Revivalists. Your church's logo may be different, but I bet the results have been the same.

The First Thing to Go

For every "contemporary-music-ruined-my-church" story, there is an often-untold prologue. Before the music changed, something else changed.

What was the first thing that disappeared? Was it the Trinitarian invocation? Was it the Confession of Sins and Absolution? Was it the Scripture readings?

What was put in its place? Was it announcements, mood music, a devotional video, or a “and-the-moral-of-the-story is” drama or skit?

Often, in Lutheran circles, the first thing to go has been the Creed. Lutherans have been confessing one of the three ecumenical Creeds (the Apostles’, Nicene and Athanasian) every Sunday since the sixteenth century. In fact, these Creeds are the first, and most essential statements in the Lutheran Confessions. Every confessional Lutheran pastor and congregation

subscribes unconditionally to these Creeds.⁵ Yet, the Creeds are often the first to fall in the worship war.

It starts with tinkering. The pastor paraphrases or punches-up the language of the Creed on a Sunday or two. Later, he might compose one of his own; a “special” creed for a special occasion.

These changes are well-intentioned, but ill conceived. They seem

minor and inconsequential, but they aren’t. With the first change, the Creed itself --the historic, universal, ecumenical Creed-- is already gone. Even if the pastor brings the “old” Creed back next Sunday, the deed is done. He has already taught his congregation that his “new” creed will do just as well as (if not better than) the original.

It is surprising how easy it is. It is surprising how quickly congregations surrender, sometimes without a fight at all. If the pastor were to propose a new wording, or a substitute reading for the United States Pledge of Allegiance, the congregation would run him out of town on a rail.



But, change the words of the Christian Creeds, and the congregation humors him. After all, the pastor is just being creative.

It isn't surprising that the Creeds are often the first target of the worship warriors. Remember, the worship war is about Doctrine. The Church's first line of defense against doctrinal change and innovation are the Creeds. Any good soldier knows that you strike the most important targets first.

In the privacy of his study, with a few key strokes on his laptop, a pastor can replace the Creed, while two thousand years of Christians roll over in their graves.

Whether he knows it or not, this pastor has fired the first salvo of the worship war into his own congregation. He has declared war. His sanctuary and chancel are now his field of battle. The parishioners may prove to be his allies, they may prove to be his foes, but either way, there's a war on. Sadly, most of the congregation won't even notice that they've been conscripted until the fog of war has rolled in around them. But by that time, it will be too late. You're in the army now.

Before it is over, the Creed will be gone altogether, along with many other things once considered essential to Sunday morning. Few will remember what Sunday worship used to be. Within a generation, no one will.

The Red Herrings

If the worship war is really about doctrine, why doesn't the debate focus on doctrine? Why does the debate so often focus on everything except doctrine?

Red Herrings abound in the worship war. A Red Herring is a subject introduced to a debate that distracts from the main issue. It may be a true statement, it may be a false statement, it doesn't matter, it is a distraction.

The speaker introduces a new subject into the discussion that has a superficial similarity to the topic under discussion. The new subject is so emotionally charged that people cannot resist arguing about it, even though it is off the original subject. Raising the new topic does not really serve the goal of bringing the original subject to a conclusion. Rather, it distracts attention away from the original subject, preventing either side from supporting its conclusion.⁶

In the worship war, there are Red Herrings that focus on music:

- The organ isn't the only instrument useful for worship.
- Contemporary music isn't bad; every hymn was contemporary when it was written.
- You only want to use hymns from the 16th century.
- The hymnal isn't the only way to worship.
- Non-Lutherans have written some great hymns/songs.

There are Red Herrings that focus on the liturgy:

- The liturgy is just human tradition/ruled/ideas.
- There are no rules for worship in Scripture.

There are Red Herrings that focus on the opponent. These are really personal attacks posing as arguments and have nothing to do with worship, much less doctrine:

- You are just afraid of change.
- You are just insisting on your own way.
- You trust in ceremonies and human tradition rather than the Word of God.
- You are sectarian.
- You think only Lutherans are Christians/go to heaven.
- You're just like those Lutherans in the past who insisted on using German.
- We should stop arguing about worship; it only makes the devil happy.

- We should stop arguing about worship; there are lost souls going to hell.

Finally, there are what I call “Double Red Herrings.” They not only distract from the main issue, but also deny that there is reason to debate in the first place:

- We already agree on what worship is, the real question is *how* to best reach people with the Gospel.
- Our disagreements are over practice, not doctrine.
- We’re just arguing about *adiaphora* (indifferent issues).

Countless conversations about worship have been derailed by these Red Herrings. Learn to recognize them. Learn to ignore them. Stick to the real issue: Doctrine.

The Real Issue

What is the best way to stick to the Doctrinal issue? When staring up the barrel of worship war artillery, those countless and relentless changes and innovations to Sunday morning worship, just ask a simple question: *What does this confess?*

The worship war is about doctrine. Doctrine is teaching. So, what does the pastor’s latest new idea for worship *teach*? What does it *confess*? What is the new idea’s, the new practice’s *Doctrine*? What will we be teaching and confessing if we do this?

Before the lead singer steps into the spotlight, before the guitar sounds its first power-chord, the question must be asked. What does this confess? Before the house lights dim or the video splash screen rolls, ask: What does this teach? Before we lift our eyes to the big screens or our voices in another Hillsong or Casting Crowns chorus, ask: What are we teaching and confessing with this?

Everything in worship confesses something. Putting the preaching of the Word and Sacraments front and center says something about what we believe. What does putting the praise band front and center say? The preaching of Sin and Grace says something about what we believe. What does life-coaching and how-to preaching say? Reciting the Creed says a lot about what we believe. What does omitting it say? Following the historic



liturgy, with its unmistakable emphasis on the forgiveness of sins and the presence of Jesus in the sacrament, says something about what we believe. What does abandoning the liturgy say?

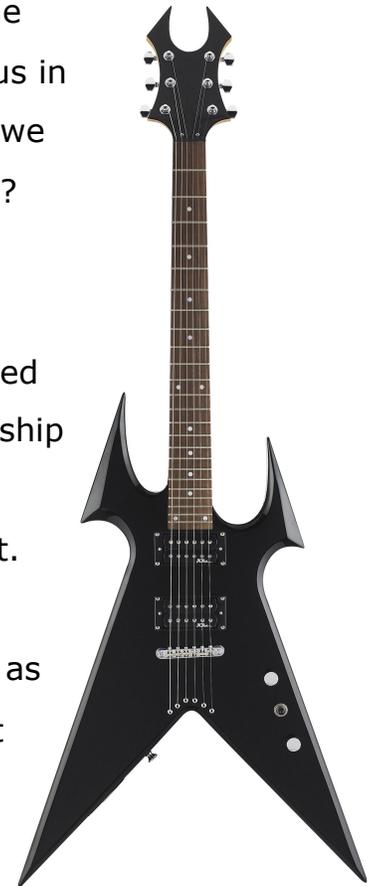
The Real Aggressor



While reading this, you may have noticed something. I have not described the worship war in the typical way. Ordinarily, the worship war is described as a bilateral conflict.

Both sides are usually considered mutual aggressors. Both sides are usually described as trying to gain ground against the other. That description is false. It is actually worship war propaganda. It has been advanced by both sides for their own

reasons, and proven a most effective weapon. But, it is time for the truth: The worship war is not a bilateral conflict.



The worship war is a unilateral act of aggression. One side in this conflict has consistently adopted an aggressive posture; the other side, a defensive one. One side has pushed, advanced and taken few prisoners; the

other side has fallen back and retreated. In fact, the conflict has been less like a worship war, and more like a worship *invasion*.

Wrong has been done on both sides, but there is no denying the fact that the worship war is a unilateral act of aggression planned and pursued by those insisting on change, innovation and often the wholesale abandonment of historic Christian worship. Very few worship warriors on that side realize or admit this, but it is the proven track record of their side for the last half-century.

You might object: "Wilken, you are simply demonizing your opponents in the worship war."

I respond: I believe the opponents of historic Christian worship have the *best* intentions and the *noblest* motives. They sincerely believe that the war they have waged has been to advance the Kingdom of God and spread the Gospel. They have been aggressive, yes; but they would say, only in pursuit of their goal of reaching the lost. No, I do not question their motives, intentions or character; I question their results.

Have the practices they have promoted and established resulted in worship more or less centered on Christ and his saving work on the Cross for sinners? Has the result been more or less focus on God's divine means of Grace --Baptism, Absolution, the Lord's Supper? Has the result been more or less proclamation of the essential Christian message --repentance and the forgiveness of sins in Christ's name?

In other words, have 50 years of worship war advances resulted in a clearer confession of the Gospel on Sunday Morning? I don't believe they have.

It is often observed that the worship war has divided the Church. This is true. Yet it is often the *defenders* of historic Christian worship who bear the blame for causing this division. This isn't true. The burden of blame for the present division in the church over worship rest upon the aggressors in the worship war.

Is this division caused by new or different worship practices? No. New or different worship practices have never been a necessary cause of division. New or different worship practices can foster unity IF they confess the same Scriptural doctrine as the old worship practices. But by and large, that hasn't

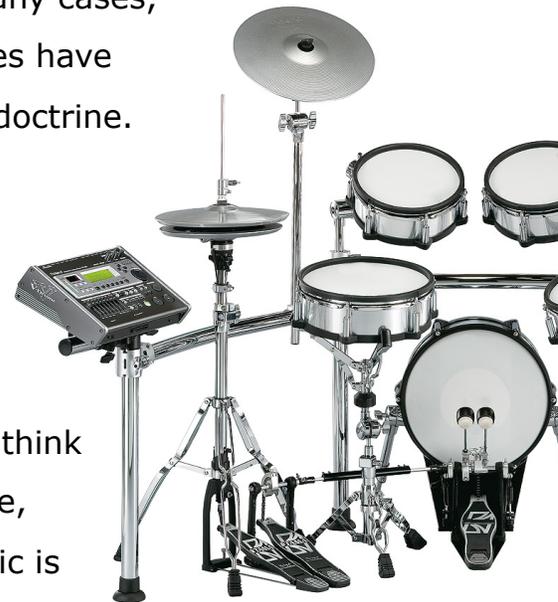
been the case in the worship war. In many cases, the new and different worship practices have brought with them new and different doctrine.

Why then, Music?

If the worship war isn't about music, then why are so many convinced that it is?

I have a theory. I think most Christians think the worship war is about music because, after 50 years of the worship war, music is all that is left.⁷ Where the worship warriors

have made their most successful advances, they have managed to eliminate or empty of its meaning every element of historic Christian worship. In worship warrior-held territory, the historic liturgy and all of its parts are gone. Law and Gospel proclamation are almost literally unheard of. The sacraments are reduced to mere rituals, retained because... well, no one is really sure why, except that the Bible commands that they be performed.



What's left? Music. It is the only thing both sides of the worship war still have in common, if only superficially. Proof of my theory are the hundreds of essays, articles, blog-posts and books about "worship" that are really essays, articles, blog-posts and books about music. Proof of my theory is that most of American Evangelicals think of worship *almost exclusively* in terms of music. Moreover, they seem unable to conceive of worship music outside the narrow genre of contemporary Christian pop music.⁸

This also explains why the rank and file of the worship war think that worship is a matter of preference. If worship is music, then we are only debating aesthetics, and who is to say whether your music/worship is any better than my music/worship?

I suspect that if we could go back to the beginning of the worship war, we might find something very different. We might find Christians, in the first battles, actually arguing about doctrine, thinking doctrinally about worship, about preaching, about the Sacraments, and yes, even about music. Those days are gone.

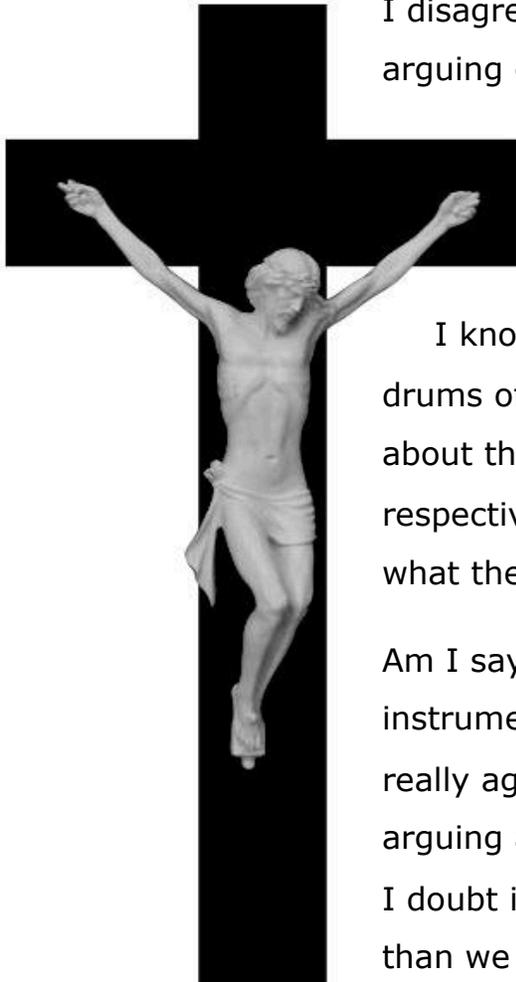
That is the most tragic result of the worship war. Where worship warriors have gained ground, they have systematically robbed Christians of the ability to think of worship (and thus to argue about worship) in doctrinal terms. What is worship? What isn't worship? Is worship what man does for God, or what God does for man? What is the purpose of worship? What are the benefits of worship? Those are all doctrinal questions.

Without doctrinal, Scriptural answers to those questions, Christians living in occupied worship war territory are left with nothing but their feelings, preferences and subjective opinions. Did it feel right? Did it make me feel better? Did I like it? Did it move me? When your criteria for deciding

whether the worship was good is the same used to decide whether your U2 concert tickets were worth the \$250 you paid for them, something is wrong.

You Aren't Helping, Wilken

I know what you are thinking, even my allies in the worship war. You are thinking that by writing this, I have only made matters worse.



I disagree. The Church has wasted decades in the worship war arguing over the wrong things. Congregations, even entire denominations have been divided. Christians have become refugees from their own churches. The no-man's land between the two sides has only grown.

I know many will read this and think that I'm beating the drums of war. I'm not. I'm calling for a truce and honest talk about the real conflict in the worship war. Let's put our respective practices and their doctrines on the table and see what they are.

Am I saying that if we stopped arguing about music, instruments, hymnals and composers, we would discover we really agree after all? Not likely. Am I saying that if we stopped arguing about all these things, we would find common ground? I doubt it. We'll probably discover that we disagree even more than we thought. But at least we will be disagreeing about the real issues that divide us.

Do we want to carry on as we have been, with no end in sight? Do we settle for an uneasy truce, *détente*, a cold worship war? Do we surrender?

I keep coming back to that question: *What does this confess?* Is it unrealistic to hope that both sides of the worship war could honestly answer that question? What do those pushing for Pentecostal/Revivalist worship want their worship to confess? What do those defending historic Christian worship want their worship to confess? If we are honest, I think we will see that the two sides will give two very different answers. And, that would be a big step in the right direction. At least we would know what we are really fighting about.

Doesn't everyone agree that this has gone on long enough? If we continue to be distracted by side issues, the real issue dividing us will remain. If we keep arguing about music, we will never answer the question, and we will never address the real issue: Different doctrine is driving our different worship practices. Neither side's worship practices are doctrinally neutral. Let's be honest. Let's admit what that doctrine is.

If we don't recognize and finally admit what the worship war is really about, how can we ever hope to have worship peace?

¹ The Barna Group, "Focus On 'Worship Wars' Hides The Real Issues Regarding Connection to God," November 19, 2002, <http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/5-barna-update/85-focus-on-qworship-warsq-hides-the-real-issues-regarding-connection-to-god>

² Larry Grayson, "How to Handle Worship Wars" Arkansas Baptist State Convention website, <http://www.absc.org/teams/0leadership-a-worship-team/766-how-to-handle-worship-wars.html>

³ Please Note: This riddle says *nothing* about music, musical style, musical instruments, authors, sources, date of composition or hymnals.

⁴ David Jay Webber, "Walking Together" in Faith and Worship: Exploring the Relationship between Doctrinal Unity and Liturgical Unity in the Lutheran Church," p. 25, <http://www.angelfire.com/ny4/djw/WebberWalkingTogether2012.pdf>

⁵ The Formula of Concord describes the Creeds as "symbols, i. e., brief, succinct [categorical] confessions, were composed against them in the early Church, which were regarded as the unanimous, universal Christian faith and confession of the orthodox and true Church, namely, the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed, we pledge ourselves to them, and hereby reject all heresies and dogmas which, contrary to them, have been introduced into the Church of God." Also, "Since of old the true Christian doctrine, in a pure, sound sense, was collected from God's Word into brief articles or chapters against the corruption of heretics, we confess, in the second place, the three Ecumenical Creeds, namely, the Apostles', the Nicene, and the Athanasian, as glorious confessions of the faith, brief, devout, and founded upon God's Word, in which all the heresies which at that time had arisen in the Christian Church are clearly and unanswerably refuted." Ep. 3; SD, 4

⁶ Bruce E. R. Thompson, "Rhetorical Ploys," <http://courses.csusm.edu/fallacies/rhetoricalploys.htm>

⁷ For convenience, I date the beginning of the Worship War at 1965 and the founding of Calvary Chapel in Costa Mesa, CA.

⁸ T. David Gordon writes, "We are surrounded by nearly ubiquitous pop music—so much so that nothing else really registers in our consciousness as music. If it is not accompanied by a guitar, if it is not accompanied by the predictable melodies and rhythms of pop culture, it just doesn't seem like music." And, "Johnny hasn't been persuaded that hymn-singing is wrong; Johnny simply cannot relate to anything that doesn't sound contemporary. He cannot shed his cultural skin, the skin of contemporaneity, of triviality, of *paedocentrism*. He thinks he prefers contemporary worship music forms to other forms, but in reality he prefers contemporaneity as a trout prefers water; it is the only environment he knows." (T. David Gordon, *Why Johnny Can't Sing Hymns: How Pop Culture Rewrote the Hymnal*, Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P & R Publishing, 2010, pp. 14, 173)