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Congregational Singing and the Ministry of the Word

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The church has gone through fads of urgency. A casual tour of any Christian bookstore every few years sufficiently demonstrates this pattern.

The burning issue a couple of decades ago was whether or not the Antichrist would touch down in the Soviet Union. Now such books can be bought in bargain bags from Christian book distributors.

Francis Schaeffer spoke of the drive for personal peace and affluence he anticipated as he watched late 1960s idealism failing on its promises. We saw this predicted hedonism in our country reach a high peak in the 1980s, and in the Christian community it unleashed a flood of self-help literature. There have been Christian twelve-step programs for every addiction imaginable and fifty others besides. The prolific writers of Christian psychology are only outstripped by the authors of romance novels which, by the way, appear to be forging the next trend in Christian publishing. We institutionally baptized rock 'n roll in the 80s; now we're anointing Harlequin novels in the 90s.

As motivating as psychology, spiritual warfare and Christian romance novels are, probably nothing has the church more inflamed presently than worship music. We are a culture virtually[1] formed by our music, and the visible church is not immune to this trend. Indeed, the church often seems to embrace it with gusto. Allan Bloom said, "Though students do not have books, they most emphati-

cally do have music."[2] In my own survey of forty Christian college catalogs and advertisements, I found far more photos of a Walkman than depictions of the cross. If these schools are a reliable indicator—and I suspect they are—a reasonable corollary to Bloom's observation might read, "Though Christians do not know their Bibles, they most certainly know their preferences in worship music."

We are a people defined by our music. We fight over it in the church. We exchange congregations based on worship music style with little concern for what the theology of the new or the old congregation may have been. Whole denominations are embroiled over worship music style with no clear outcome in sight.

We church music directors and worship pastors are primarily administrators of a myriad of activities with ever-increasing demands for diversity. Some of us are intoxicated by the apparent power we wield. After all, well-performed music, large performing ensembles, and large listening audiences do touch some kind of desire for glory in all of us. The post-modern life is often so gray and futile that we would gladly escape to the glory of the fourth chapter of Revelation every Sunday. We demand that music serve this goal, and if we cannot fabricate those conditions ourselves, we will spend considerable sums on technology in the hope of at least attaining virtual glory.

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with well-performed music, large performing ensembles, and large listening audiences. Still, there is a second set of church musicians that senses we are in a runaway train headed straight for a broken bridge. I am one of this latter group, and much of my purpose in this essay is to encourage ecclesiastical authorities and thoughtful lay people to reflect soberly on the crisis before us and to insist, within their own spheres of influence, that comprehensive biblical principles be brought to bear on every detail of worship music.

Indeed, the crisis is that ecclesiastical authorities, while recognizing that music is important to congregational life, usually fail to see that its biblical role puts it squarely within the ministry of the Word as a partner to preaching. For, as the apostle Paul told us, the way that the word of Christ dwells *richly* within us with all wisdom is that we teach and admonish one another *with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs*, and that we sing with gratitude in our hearts to God *with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs*.[3]

If we are to recover the authority of Scripture in our worship, then we must likewise recover it in our music which is an important element of true God-centered worship that is conforming to the principle of sola scriptura. Just as the sixteenth-century Reformers gave major attention to this area, so must we.

We church musicians are not likely to lead the charge in this work simply because we run a perpetual seven-day treadmill with our tongues hanging out. There is little time to get off the treadmill, and in fact, this may be the way most of our congregations subconsciously prefer it. Our congregations are concerned that we make them feel a certain way when they come to church. In the rampant uncer-

tainty of the postmodern world, parishioners understandably want stability in church life (even though we claim we want diversity). If we church musicians paused for a moment, realizing how much music belonged within the ministry of the Word, we might alter our practices in a way that would disrupt the general bonhomie.

The task of bringing comprehensive biblical principles to worship music will be difficult because music literacy in our culture is at an all-time low, even though we hear more music in our day-to-day existence than did any culture preceding ours. We will need to understand both the Bible and music. The musician with a full quiver of musical skills will be in the best position to implement the necessary changes. There is simply no substitute for hard-won musical skills, and this comes only with thousands of hours of ongoing study.[4]

If we are to recover the authority of Scripture in our worship, then we must likewise recover it in our music which is an important element of true God-centered worship that is conforming to the principle of *sola scriptura*. Just as the sixteenth-century Reformers gave major attention to this area, so must we. Indeed, it was Martin Luther who said, "We should not ordain young men as preachers, unless they have been well exercised in music." This, of course, is that same Luther who was so adamant about the restoration of biblical preaching. He saw no sharp division between the role of worship music and preaching or between the role of the church musician and the preacher.

The sharp division between congregational singing and preaching owes more to the work of Ulrich Zwingli, who through a very peculiar exegesis of Matthew 6:7 subsequently eradicated all congregational singing from gathered worship in Zurich. He reasoned that to pray in one's closet meant to pray silently, and that congregational singing was a type of perverted prayer.[5] Therefore, congregational singing was to be suppressed.

Of course, Jesus was saying nothing of the kind. Rather, Jesus enjoined us to pray with no concern for how others might view us. Beyond that, Jesus said, "This is how you should pray: '*Our* Father in heaven, . . .'"[6] If Zwingli is correct, we are presented with the bizarre spectacle of hiding in our closets alone while pretending that we are somehow plural.

Once Zwingli embraced an uncouth understanding of Matthew 6:7, he was compelled to force what the rest of Holy Scriptures said regarding gathered worship through the same garlic press. Thus he says of Colossians 3:16, "Here Paul does not teach us mumbling and murmuring in the churches, but shows us the true song that is pleasing to God, that we sing the praise and glory of God not with our voices, like the Jewish singers, but with our hearts."[7] Would Zwingli say this to the faces of Heman, Ethan, and Asaph, the Chief Musicians of the canonical Psalms?

Colossians 3:16 does say that we are to sing with grace in our hearts. Does it follow that such singing is a matter of silent imagination as Zwingli would have us to believe, a mere sentiment and not connected with the physical, real world? Zwingli owed much of his reforming spirit and treatment of Scriptures to Erasmus who held a "radical antimony between flesh and spirit, form and content."[8] Let us call this what it is, namely, Gnosticism. Worship was to become an ethereal, nonphysical event stripped of corporal participation as much as possible. It followed naturally that congregational singing disappeared, the sacraments were reduced to mere symbols, and preaching became the be-all and end-all of gathered worship.

Zwingli's legacy is huge down to this day. We often treat all the components of our gathered worship as peripheral matters surrounding the one all-important function, the sermon. It shows in the artlessness of our buildings, our

music, all our communications. It has a gnostic, dehumanizing ethos to it. I will even go so far as to postulate that the excesses of the charismatic movement and of Pentecostalism might well be traced directly to it, for ultimately the human cries out, "No, I am human—heart, soul, mind, and strength!" Our passion to see preaching as the reason for gathered worship, as the ministry of the Word to the exclusion of extensive reading of the Scriptures and singing of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, has released the charismatic plague upon us. This blight is really our own doing, and we must repent of it instead of zealously confessing the sins of our charismatic brethren as we are wont to do.

No, Luther was correct: There is no sharp division between preaching, the reading of the Scriptures, and singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. One suspects the Westminster Divines may have recognized this when they said,

> The reading of the Scriptures with godly fear, the sound preaching and conscionable hearing of the Word, in obedience unto God, with understanding, faith and reverence, singing of psalms with grace in the heart; as also, the due administration and worthy receiving of the sacraments instituted by Christ, are all parts of the ordinary religious worship of God.[9]

It is all of weighty importance, and the preacher who spends large blocks of time preparing a sermon while handling the other details of gathered worship in a couple of hours is unwittingly selling the farm. I speak as a musician: Pastors trust musicians far too much and make disciples of them far too little. The theology-free musician will usually make theological decisions that run afoul of the preacher's work. Don't trust the musicians, teach them! The musicians may be the most strategic disciples the pastor has.

Moreover, the preacher who budgets forty-five minutes for preaching and five for congregational singing forfeits the catechesis of the heart which congregational singing is. Unless the parishioner is continuously singing what the preacher is continuously preaching, the preacher's words will be of little effect. It is every preacher's nightmare that a parishioner beams during the sermon, nods with assent, says, "Great sermon, Pastor!" and goes on about business with no change of belief structure or ethics. The problem is, they may hear good, biblical preaching, *but the Word of Christ doesn't dwell richly within them because that is not the function accorded to preaching*. Preaching is proclamatory, and we fervently beg the Holy Spirit to "prick the hearts" of the hearers so that the gospel may take effect. Rightly, therefore, did Calvin incorporate a prayer for illumination in the liturgy immediately before the sermon.[10] But illumination implies that some object will glow, and if the word of Christ does not dwell in us richly, there is precious little to light up in the first place. Great preaching is like an automobile and great congregational singing like the key. Without the key, the automobile is no better than a plastic pink flamingo on the front lawn. How tempted we are to hotwire that car with Finney's "use of properly constituted means!"[11]

Let me be abundantly clear about both what I mean as well as what I do not mean. I mean that congregational singing is a fellow warrior in the ministry of the Word together with preaching. I do not mean that preaching ought to take a lower profile in our churches. To the contrary, I assert that we already have too low a view of preaching, not to mention congregational singing. We use music for emotional engineering, not for teaching and admonition as the Bible commands. Then when the preacher looks out over a spiritually desiccated congregation, he feels

compelled to profusely explain, to cajole, to sell the gospel, in short, to produce a crop in unprepared ground by his own efforts. When this happens, we lose the forceful proclamation of the gospel. The hearing of the gospel in gathered worship is, after all, that normative means by which the Holy Spirit intends to reach His people. Seeing a languishing and impotent church, we apply "the right use of constituted means" and erect the parachurch. Sensing the failure of that measure, we then become a religiously based political action committee. We are beset by this downward spiral because we have not treasured God's Word in our hearts that we might not sin against Him (Ps. 119:11). In short, His Word does not dwell in us richly.

THE SCRIPTURES AND MUSIC

If we were to ask people what the purpose of music in worship is, I think the answers would be as varied as if we asked them to name their favorite baseball teams. Yet the Bible gives clear marching orders in this area, as well as a plethora of applied examples. Some of the confusion arises from a peculiar translation issue. Colossians 3:16 reads, "Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God." Other translations, such as the *New International Version*, remove the "psalms, hymns and spiritual songs" from the "teaching and admonishing one another," placing them squarely and exclusively together with "sing . . . with gratitude in our hearts to God." Depending on one's casual reading of this text, worship music could vary considerably.

The real clue, however, is not so much in the word order as in the words "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs." Here we need to think a bit about the intended first-century readers. The addressee of this book is "the

saints and faithful brethren in Christ who are at Colossae" (1:2). At the end of the book (4:16), Paul commands the Colossians to pass the letter on to the church in Laodicea. The church at Ephesus was also acquainted with the formulation of "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs" (Eph. 5:19). In each case, not only did Paul write to them in Greek, but they were primarily Greek readers, and their Old Testament most likely would have been the Septuagint, which labels the 150 Psalms alternatively, "psalms," or "hymns," or "spiritual songs." Taken by itself, this detail speaks strongly for the old Reformed practice of singing the entire Psalter on a regular basis, a practice we might do well to reconsider.

I examined the entire worship music repertoire of a congregation I once served, having inherited a large catalog which I scrutinized by placing each song under one of three categories: (1) teaching, (2) admonition, and (3) singing with thankfulness in our hearts to God. Of some four hundred praise choruses and hymns, I found that most of them fit within category three, with about thirty in category one, and fewer than ten in category two. This may reflect some of our American spirit, the notion that we are free and that nobody should be telling us what to do, least of all a worship leader. A new Gnosticism had crept in on us, convincing us that feeling good is an inextricable component of orthodoxy, and admonition—at least in my own experience—seldom feels good.[12] It does not fit what Kenneth A. Myers calls "orthopathos."[13]

Having stumbled on this feature of my congregation's worship music diet, I then went to the 150 Psalms to see what the proportions of those categories would be. With my acculturated unquestioning trust in modern science, and most especially in the discipline of statistics,[14] I read the Psalms with three colored highlighters in hand. I used one for teaching, one for admonition, and one for grati-

tude to God. More skillful Bible scholars than I will anticipate what I found: There was simply no way to separate the categories. Consider Psalm 103. The way we "bless the Lord" is to reel off a long list of blessings: He forgives all our iniquities; He heals all our diseases; He redeems our lives from destruction; He crowns us with loving kindness and compassion; He satisfies our years with good things, etc.

Later in this Psalm, it becomes clear that these blessings are given to those who fear the Lord. Taken together, we have a song of gratitude to God that teaches us about God's provision and further admonishes us to fear the Lord. This is the nature of true biblical worship music. The glorification of God and the edification of the saints occur concurrently. Please notice here that worship music functions as an integral part of the teaching ministry. Pulpit preaching has greater power to explain the text logically, but music has greater power to inculcate the text, to take that text into other parts of the hearer's being.

WORSHIP MUSIC AND THEOLOGY

Until the time of King David, the role of music in worship was somewhat incidental. It is no accident that the "man after God's heart" institutionalized the Levitical musicians. But just what did the Levitical musicians do? There is no clearly detailed description of the Levitical musician's responsibilities, but as with many other issues in the Bible, a vivid picture begins to emerge by putting several loose particulars together.

In1 Chronicles 6, we learn that the chief musicians, Heman, Ethan, and Asaph, came from the three separate clans of Levi. It may be that musical skill and wisdom necessitated drawing from the whole tribe rather than a narrower pool, as was the case with the priests. Toward the end of the same chapter, we find that the Levites were given towns and accompanying fields scattered throughout the

entire land of Israel. The land of Israel would have been sprinkled with "local" Levitical musicians.

First Chronicles 24 and 25 show us that the priests and the musicians had two-week tours of duty at the temple in Jerusalem. This brings up the fascinating question, "What were they doing the rest of the year?" Part of this is answered in the authorial ascription of the Psalms. We know that Heman, Ethan, and Asaph all wrote Psalms.[15] It was Asaph who thundered that God owns "the cattle on a thousand hills" (Ps. 50:10). If the modern church musician wrote a worship text like Psalm 50, he would probably not get it published in the contemporary Christian music industry, and he might be on the fast track to getting fired at his church. Heman's Psalm 88 is incontestably the bleakest of all the Psalms. All this to say, Levitical musicians wrote Psalms, and those Psalms were not obligated to the gnostic, emotional demands of twentieth-century evangelical church music.

A Levitical musician reached maturity at age thirty, not age twenty as in the case of the unspecialized Levite (1 Chron. 23:3, 5, 24). One wonders what the state of church music today would be were musical leadership withheld until age thirty. I know, for example, of no contemporary Christian music star who embarked upon a career in Christian popular culture with this constraint in mind. The field is admittedly and unashamedly youth-oriented, though many of those youth are closer to retirement than high school graduation. If we are serious about *sola scriptura*, perhaps we should view an age restriction of thirty as a very prudent guideline, especially as our American culture is increasing in its infantility.

We know that Solomon composed 1,005 psalms, most of which are lost (1 Kings 4:32). Nevertheless, this demonstrates that the writing of psalms was probably a flourishing activity at the time. Beyond this biographical detail, we

know that Solomon "was wiser than Ethan the Ezrahite [and] Heman" (1 Kings 4:31). If Solomon hadn't been in the land, *two musicians would have been the wisest men. In short, musicians were teachers of the highest order.* This leads me to suspect that Levitical musicians, being scattered through the land, served as Israel's teachers. Furthermore, the Psalms were their textbook. And because this textbook was a songbook, it may well be that the Levitical musicians catechized the nation of Israel through the singing of psalms. In this way, they prepared the people for the great festivals when they would converge on Jerusalem in numbers which dwarf the church growth movement as well as our modern crusades. This vast multitude would arrive in Jerusalem and participate in a worship service, all without the aid of a sound system. Such a gathering demands considerable discipline and organization.

Luther spoke of the Psalms in his translation preface as a "small Bible reduced to the loveliest and most concise form so that the content of the whole Bible exists in them as a handbook."

Luther spoke of the Psalms in his translation preface as a "small Bible reduced to the loveliest and most concise form so that the content of the whole Bible exists in them as a handbook." He recognized that all the great theological ideas of the Bible were found in its songbook, and as a result, Lutheran hymnody of the Reformation time brought the gospel to bear on every aspect of life.[16]

It is true that we no longer have the Levitical ceremonial law, and yet the larger teaching role of the Levitical musicians will not cease until the second coming of the Lord. I think the apostle Paul understood that well, when under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he told us that the way the word of Christ richly dwells within us with all wisdom is that we teach and admonish one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. The word of Christ richly dwells within us with all wisdom when we sing with thankfulness in our hearts to God with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs (Col. 3:16).

In short, I think Paul took the teaching of the Old Testament as so self-evident that he was not compelled to elaborate. Why should he? He had the Psalms in hand.

Most worship music traditions for the past quarter millennium have failed to see the teaching mandate of worship music. The revivalist music of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has been an egregious offender on this score. Examples could fill volumes. For our purposes, one will suffice: John H. Sammis' "Trust and Obey."[17]

When we walk with the Lord in the light of His Word,
What a glory He sheds on our way!
While we do His good will, He abides with us still,
And with all who will trust and obey.

Chorus
Trust and obey, for there's no other way
To be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.

Not a shadow can rise, Not a cloud in the skies,
But His smile quickly drives it away;

Not a doubt or a fear, Not a sigh or a tear,
Can remain when we trust and obey.

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I criticize this text not because Sammis was a malicious man, but rather because such a text can cause serious misconceptions for the Christian. For instance, does the Lord really abide with us only while we are doing His good will? If that is so, how does this notion square with the chastening of the Lord, which presumably comes precisely because we are failing to do His good will? With the Lord's chastening in mind, is it really true that Jesus' smile drives away every shadow, cloud, doubt, or fear? Those very disturbances may be our heavenly Father's providential agents of chastening, and we must remember with resolute joy that chastening is the precious mark of sonship. Only the nonbeliever has any reasonable hope of floating through this life devoid of perplexity. But who could desire the nonbeliever's eternal fate?[18]

This type of text has its roots in the soft mud of Romanticism. In the moments of deepest tribulation, we need

bedrock, not sentimentalism. Our thoughts and actions under duress are uncertain if the word of Christ does not dwell *richly* within us, and God's means to that end is full-orbed congregational singing. I may enter the house of God a quivering heap of doubt and indecision, but leave with the very armor of God because my brothers and sisters in Christ have taught and admonished me as they sang the great redemptive works of the Lord.

Contemporary Christian music is the heir apparent of revivalistic hymnody. How ironic it is that lovers of "good old hymns" (revivalistic hymns) are often put off by this newer form of sentimentalism. Like revivalistic hymnody, contemporary Christian music preponderantly misses the teaching mandate of congregational singing. Consider Andre Crouch's well-known chorus, "Bless His Holy Name."[19]

Bless the Lord, O my soul,
and all that is within me
bless His holy name.
Bless the Lord, O my soul
and all that is within me
bless His holy name.
He has done great things,
He had done great things,
He has done great things,
bless His holy name.

The problem here is that true gratitude must have its basis in objective facts or doctrine as the real Psalm 103 so clearly illustrates. If objective facts of redemption are not overtly stated, the singing is mere sentimentality, nothing more than Hallmark card poetry, good moral sayings which any Mormon or Buddhist could embrace. Indeed, if our song texts are not overtly stating objective facts of Christ-centered redemption we are depriving our congrega-

tions of true joy. All this is hardly to say that the writers of such praise choruses are heretics. Rather, it is to say that the poetry is inadequate to the necessary subject matter. And just as the highly skilled church musician is in the best position to implement *sola scriptura* because of years of musical study, the poet of worship music texts must arduously study our vernacular. Words matter. Furthermore, the apostle James warned, "Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we shall incur a stricter judgment" (3:1). Worship music teaches whether or not we want it to do so. It behooves us, therefore, to approach the writing of worship music texts with as much theological clarity and as much linguistic skill as possible.

Crouch's text lacks the bulkiness of Psalm 103. There are many Scripture songs which, being so short and removed from their scriptural context, leave the reader with an erroneous understanding of what the biblical writer intended.[20] This is a regrettable practice. When we sing a mere isolated Bible verse or two, we are able to make that small passage mean whatever we wish, and this is dangerous for, as Jeremiah told us, "the heart is more deceitful than all else" (Jer. 17:9). In truth, we need to be singing those portions of Scripture *which we do not like, and we must sing them within their scriptural context.*

In the 150 Psalms, we find all the great biblical doctrinal themes presented poetically, themes such as our depravity, the atonement, our redemption, creation, God's providence, God's wrath, His mercy, etc. They are all there. Whatever else Paul's admonition means, even a loose reading would indicate that our worship must regularly touch the entire superstructure of Christian doctrine.

BUT HOW DO WE WORK OUT THIS TRUTH?

The moment, however, we turn our thoughts to the fleshing out of this concept, we run into huge style barriers.

There are styles that simply will not carry various texts, and those individuals who are most fond of those styles will be the first to admit that the words do not fit their style. Thus, the usual response is that those texts do not belong in worship because they do not feel "worshipful." It seldom occurs to the style adherent that perhaps there is something wrong with the style, not the words.

I say, therefore, axiomatically, any style that is not able to carry texts whose presence is demanded biblically is an inappropriate style for Christian worship. Furthermore, encouraging diversity of styles merely allows individual worshipers to gratify their own appetites, dismissing those worship songs which are not in their preferred styles. There are styles that plainly do not belong in gathered worship, and it is time for pastorally responsible Christians to repent of the cultural relativism that so easily besets us.

As soon as I say this, someone will retort, "But Luther used songs from the bar." This is a regrettable misconception widely popularized in our time. Similarly, some will triumphantly respond with that famous Luther quotation: "Why should the Devil have all the good tunes?" Anyone who has read Luther extensively knows that when Luther spoke of the Devil, he usually meant the papacy.

Let's be concrete about this and consider a volatile style example—"rap." I think it is fair to say that this style is strongly associated with selling malt liquor, shooting police, and raping women. Until quite recently, a casual visit to the rap section of any major record store would cause concern to even the most libertine Christian. The majority of rap album covers were overtly pornographic. That's just the packaging! Most people in the world would concur with this assessment, and yet we have Christians trying to "redeem" this style and use it evangelistically.[21] As a justification of this practice, some will cite the apostle Paul's remarks about meat offered to idols in 1 Corinthians 10. Comparing meat and music, however, is the proverbial case of comparing apples with oranges. Meat is meat. It has a certain amount of nutrients whether it was offered to an idol or not. Music, on the other hand, is pure idea. Music is *always* born in a sociological context, and that context is inextricable from the music. Our test then should be, "Is a style associated with murdering police, raping women, and selling malt liquor, suitable to thinking on whatever is true, honorable, right, pure, lovely, of good repute, excellent, and worthy of praise" (Phil. 4:8)?

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use of traditional music!

As for Luther borrowing tunes from the bar, this is a misunderstanding of both music theory and music history. The "bar form" is a label for a musical/architectural form, not a description of musical activity occurring in a public place of alcoholic consumption. In Luther's time, there were academic societies called Meistersingers.[22] They existed for the purpose of composing songs based usually on biblical texts, and the musical form they used was called a "bar form."[23] The bar form is like a fixed recipe. It has as much to do with consuming alcoholic beverages in a public place as does "bar oil" for a chain saw, attorneys "passing the bar," or Jewish boys and their "Bar Mitzvahs."

It is true that melodies from the inn could occasionally migrate into the church in Luther's time. However, it is equally true that melodies from the church could wend their ways into the inn. This is not the case in our time for the simple reason that the inn of Luther's time does not correspond to the bar of our time. The Reformation in England began in an inn. It was a place of spirited discussion and thought. It was a communal place in the best sense. The last time, however, I walked by Bob's Pair-O-Dice, country 'n western music was belching out of the bar and, as near as I could tell, no one was discussing theology. Finally, musicological research since 1923 has leaned more and more in favor of Luther as the composer of his own melodies, though Luther certainly had no scruples with inns as ample historical evidence indicates.[24] They were places to look for good beer, not good music.

We must admire and encourage the desire to "become all things to all men, that [we] may by all means save some" (1 Cor. 9:22). I would caution that "becoming all things," however, does not mean embracing the world's culture uncritically, and certainly it is incorrect to claim Luther as the patron saint of such an idea. In our efforts to

"become all things to all men" we must constantly ask ourselves, "Can a man take fire in his bosom, and his clothes not be burned?" (Prov. 6:27). If we believe that "becoming all things to all men" is a matter of cultural relativism, then there is nothing to stop us from transforming the music of Madonna into praise choruses.

STYLE

What is style? In order to apply biblical principles to style and worship music, we need to understand what the Bible says about style, as well as what style is. "Style," *per se*, is something common to all humanity, and as such belongs squarely in the realm of common grace and general revelation. Only some people experience God's "saving" grace while all humans experience some measure of "common" grace. Every good thing comes from the kind hand of God. The sun and the rain come down on the good and the evil alike. All humans, all cultures, exhibit "style" or aesthetic behavior.

It is precisely at this point that Christians of all persuasions fall on their faces. We often confuse our theology with our style, resulting, in the end, in confused theology. It is a lack of alertness. To borrow a metaphor, it is not enough to be gentle as doves; one needs to be wise as a serpent, too. Moses had the finest training of the Egyptians; Daniel had the finest training of the Chaldeans and the Medes. Their training was one of common grace, and the community of faith was richer for it.

Before unraveling this tangled web, I raise two questions that must be in constant consideration during this discussion. First, is style good or bad because of some intrinsic beauty? Second, is style good or bad because of the ethical effect it has on mankind?

STYLE AND THE DOCTRINE OF CREATION

All issues of style and culture have their distinct seeds in Creation. Of course, they were not developed, but as the fertilized egg is fully human with all the essential information contained in forty-six chromosomes, so, in the same way, all the essential details of human culture can be found in the first three chapters of Genesis.

God is self-sufficient. He needs nothing. Without the presence of necessity, there is no pragmatism, no crisis or contingency to be addressed. For pragmatism solves problems and fulfills need, and since a self-sufficient, sovereign God has no needs, it is clear that He created the cosmos purely for His pleasure. It was an act of undiluted aesthetic delight, a work of art.

First, we see God making tangible objects and enjoying them. He makes them, apparently, merely for His pleasure. We need to linger on this point a bit because it runs against the grain of the American pragmatism that is so deeply entrenched in our intellectual presuppositions and in our methods of church life, even among those of us who repudiate the technique-oriented views of the church growth movement.[25] We still tend to order our regular assembling

together according to norms that are acceptable to our culture.[26] And of all the various veins of philosophy, we need to remember that pragmatism is the only indigenous, uniquely American innovation.

God is self-sufficient. He needs nothing. Without the presence of necessity, there is no pragmatism, no crisis or contingency to be addressed. For pragmatism solves problems and fulfills need, and since a self-sufficient, sovereign God has no needs, it is clear that He created the cosmos purely for His pleasure. It was an act of undiluted aesthetic delight, a work of art. He set the wild donkey free (Job 39:5). He made the ostrich with wings which flap joyously (Job 39:13). The heavens are the poetry of His fingers (Ps. 8:3).[27] Throughout the process of creation, we see God periodically taking a step backwards to view His work and noting, "It is good," not, "That does what I need it to do," or, "That functions well." If there is a human analogy to this aspect of God, it is not the engineer or salesman, but, rather, the artist.

"Then God said, 'Let us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth'" (Gen. 1:26). I suggest that we know only two things about the nature of God to this point, and that these two features are equally significant for understanding human nature: First, He made things merely for the purpose of delighting in the process of making as well as delighting in the completed object, the result of that process; second, He is a singular Being who, nonetheless, has some mysterious plurality to His nature. These two attributes of God and His actions bear directly on the artistic behavior of the creature made in God's image.

When God brought man into the picture, the first thing the man did was name the animals. Adam did not have to

study grammar and spelling: He made up the rules and sounds just as they pleased him. Furthermore, he could just as easily have called a camel a nahotsdowth or a stroile if it had seemed appropriate. On the face of it, it appears that the names were merely a matter of Adam's pleasure. "And whatever the man called the living creature, that was its name" (Gen. 2:19). This is a variant on "and it was so" seen in the first chapter.

Now all this seems a bit philosophically distant, but then it all comes into clear focus when Jesus tells us, "Pray, then, in this way: 'Our Father who art in Heaven. . . .'" There is familial relationship between the Creator and the being created in His image. God makes things for His own pleasure, and, therefore, so does man. Furthermore, man before the fall makes things that please God *because that familial relationship has God and man thinking, feeling, willing, and acting on the same wavelength*. Yes, the man has complete freedom, but his actions are hardly arbitrary.

So we see both in God and in the man created after His image the tendency to make objects just for pleasure and beauty. In both cases, there is no apparent human audience. The audience seems to bring no bearing to what the aesthetic object shall be. The essence of the aesthetic object is based solely in the pleasurable intentions of the Creator (God) or of the maker (man).

This brings us to our first principle of style found in the creation: There is style, culture, or art that has intrinsic goodness, goodness based on beauty itself. And though man is now fallen, the image of God remains besmirched, but not destroyed. The principle of beauty for pleasure has come down to us in the activity of high art, or high culture. And though Christians are tempted to give it a bum rap, this really is "art for art's sake." In its most rarefied state, high art is art made simply for its beauty (as understood by the individual maker) without regard for any audience. It is

the old man pruning his roses and the child forming play dough into unidentifiable objects. It is the teenage girl reveling in her long, glossy hair and the fireman polishing his truck. And, of course, it is the composer, the poet, the sculptor, and the painter.

The chief art of the church is music, and yet, for the most part, high art composers have been outside the church for about 250 years, since the death of J. S. Bach who was the supernova of the great Lutheran tradition of biblical church musicians. There were two reasons for this sad turn of history.

The first was that Pietism overwhelmed the church at that time, and Pietism put a premium on how one felt as a mark of orthodoxy. (Pietism is truly alive and well today, too!) If the music didn't make the worshiper feel worshipful, then, clearly, it was not spiritual music. High art composers, who delight in using the minds God gave them, quickly found themselves on the endangered-species list.

The second reason high art composers ceased to be active in the church is that the church (especially in Europe) ceased to be a viable entity. Pietism, begun as an effort to strengthen the church, eventually so weakened it that the attack of the Enlightenment left the visible European church of the nineteenth century in a liberal cesspool.

With this divestiture of high culture, the church gave up leadership in the development of culture and has since tried, with tongue hanging out, to keep pace with the world. Those who stand ready to cast aspersions on contemporary Christian music should soberly and penitently consider the history. In the Reformed church, we talk a good deal about a "Christian world and life view." Here is a lacuna in our worldview through which we could drive a truck.

STYLE AND THE NATURE OF GOD

The second principle of style is found in that mysterious

plurality of God's nature. God places His image on man also in the words, "It is not good for the man to be alone" (Gen. 2:18). He reveals His intention to make man mysteriously into a plural being as well. These words apply directly to human marriage, most specifically to the marriage of Adam and Eve, in which we have the beginnings of human society. God made us as communal beings. It is truly not good for us to be alone, and this creation imprint should call into question many of the forces contained in modernity that are making the world highly populated with lonely, disconnected people—people with few communal relationship.

Unlike high art, there is a type of art which is made by people who know each other for people who know each other, and this art is used to enhance their being together. It is an art or style presupposition which is ever conscious of the audience, with the well-being of—or ethical effect on that audience in mind. Wholesome community, not beauty, is the chief end of this type of art, and, therefore, this should be spoken of as folk art.[28] Here, goodness could be described as "extrinsic." Plato is probably the chief proponent of this assessment of art. He maintained that any music bringing about undesirable behavior in the citizen should be censored by the republic. The early church fathers, almost to a man, also held this view of style, and, most specifically, of music style.[29]

STYLE AND MODERN THOUGHT

How odd it is that the current visible church is embracing diversity and multiculturalism uncritically, completely setting aside the wisdom of the early church fathers. There are congregations all around the country now that have multiple worship services, each in a different style to cater to the appetites of different target groups. Of course what results is a conglomeration of separate congregations under one roof, each subcongregation demanding that its

felt needs be met. It is group selfishness which does anything but integrate the whole body of Christ.

In keeping with this spirit, an advertisement in a recent issue of *Christianity Today* read: "Anointed poems put to music. Fee based upon income. Styles available: primitive, do-wop, rockabilly, pop, primitive R & B, Tex-Mex, regae, Bossa Nova, soul, jazz. Send $3 to . . . ."[30] The diversity in this advertisement is breathtaking, but no more than what is available in the broad visible church. Indeed, this man would not have taken out a classified ad in the church's leading periodical if he thought that he wouldn't get any customers.

Ironically, the gospel should unite us because we share one common need—forgiveness of sins. In truth, when we focus on felt needs—in this case, style appetites—we are fractured into little ghettos. I suppose that this rage for diversity is more the work of the Spirit of the Age than of the Holy Spirit. After all, if this advertisement is any indication of the way things are, we are presented with the bizarre spectacle of using rockabilly to portray the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God.

When Paul tells us to think on those things which are true, honorable, right, pure, lovely, of good reputation, excellent, and worthy of praise, we are admonished to bring issues of style under this microscope. Certainly high art, with its root in the image of God, fits these categories. But so does folk art, because it is not good for the man to be alone. The wholesome community of folk art fits the model of creation as God intended it.

One final note about diversity, for there is much confusion abroad at the present: Yes, we will have diversity with us until the Great Day of the Lord. For cultural diversity can be traced directly to the Tower of Babel. After all, the most distinguishing mark of any culture is its language. Certainly we must learn foreign languages so that we may proclaim

the gospel to all nations. And certainly we must have the sojourner in our homes. But is the Lord glorified when we aid and abet the growing tribalism and balkanization of our culture by our bent to diversity in worship? How does this square with Jesus' prayer that we may be one? In some parts of our country we have profound ethnic diversity, and this condition presents special difficulties in gathered worship that cannot be ignored. Still, much of the drive for diverse style appetites would fade if we came to gathered worship with the notion that we would edify our siblings in Christ as we taught and admonished them with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.

POP CULTURE: THE GREAT MODERN PARASITE

Before moving on, it is important to recognize that high culture has its roots in aesthetics; folk culture has its roots in sociology. Comparing them is like comparing apples and oranges: They are both good when done well, and the canons of what is "good" are quite different for the two types. The Bible has more to say about folk culture than high culture because folk culture is inextricably based in interpersonal relationships where high art belongs primarily to general revelation.[31] Indeed, the church is a folk culture that transcends national and ethnic boundaries through a divinely inspired printed Word.

There is yet a third type of culture or style presupposition which, nonetheless, borrows liberally from folk and high culture. It is an imposter and a parasite because it is based on deceit. Its creation root is found in that tragic event when "the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise" (Gen. 3:6).

There are two threads to be considered here: The first is that Eve coveted—she wanted something that was not rightfully hers; second, by eating of that tree, she opened

Pandora's box of ever-increasing knowledge resulting in technological wonders that we cannot control. And those technological wonders have had a profound and devastating effect on our ability to maintain cultural objects that cause us to think on things that are true, honorable, right, pure, lovely, of good reputation, excellent, and worthy of praise.

How odd it is that the current visible church is embracing diversity and multiculturalism uncritically, completely setting aside the wisdom of the early church fathers. There are congregations all around the country now that have multiple worship services, each in a different style to cater to the appetites of different target groups.

This third type of culture is made by people who tend not to know one another for people they do not know at all and will probably never meet. This is made possible by magnetic recording and by broadcasting. Before the twentieth century, the effects of these technologies and the kind of culture they created were unimaginable.

This third type of culture is not fundamentally concerned with beauty of form, as in high art, or in wholesomeness of community, as in folk art. It is concerned with one thing and one thing only, dollars and cents. It is covetous. The artist is not primarily held accountable to God for a transcendent standard of beauty, nor to a local community with ethical responsibility. Rather, the artist must answer to the share holder. For the Christian, it is a brazen case of being "unequally yoked together with unbelievers" (2 Cor. 6:14). John Styll, without blushing, points out that EMI, "which promotes everything from Garth Brooks to Beastie Boys," owns the Christian Sparrow label.[32] This third type of culture is, of course, popular culture, including *Christian popular culture.*

It is true that the Christian labels owned by larger companies have a good deal of autonomy. "'They're not trying to affect our message or our vision,' said Brentwood President Jim Van Hook of Zomba Music. Similarly, Reunion President Terry Hemmings said of BMG, 'They haven't in the least bit tried to sway the lyrical direction of our music.'"[33] Without any intent to malign the large conglomerates that have bought Christian music companies, I think we can also fairly anticipate that the Mafia would grant a Christian label much autonomy *as long as the Christian label made money*. This is the critical point. The whole "autonomy" issue still begs the question of unequal-yokedness. I think it should be clear that the bottom line with Christian popular music *is the bottom line*. It is commerce first, with the worship of God and the edification of the saints grabbing at the coattails of this juggernaut. Jesus said we could not serve both God and mammon, and yet the commercial Christian music industry by its very structure tries to do just that.

Having made these stinging indictments, I don't think the people working inside the Christian music industry are villains. There is no conspiracy here, just garden-variety worldliness. If we were to look for malefactors in this picture,

it would be the pastors, the elders, the bishops, and the seminary professors who, as the technology driving commercial music emerged, failed to realize how integral music is to the ministry of the Word. They left a gaping hole that business interests were only too ready to fill. In other words, music technology created a new entertainment market niche while ecclesiastical authorities were standing by flat-footed.

COMMON OBJECTIONS

The first objection runs something like this: "But aren't all the people who work in these companies Christians, and don't they want to serve the Lord with their music?" Yes, their intentions may be good. The problem is not their intentions, but rather their lines of accountability. There is little potential for church discipline when these people spread some marginal or outright false teaching (which occurs more frequently than anyone cares to admit). Whenever anyone teaches in the church, as Christian music most certainly does, that person displays a low view of the depravity of man when his teaching ministry is accountable to shareholders rather than to ecclesiastical authorities.[34] So it comes as no surprise that we have high-visibility moral lapses inside the Christian music industry that are handled with patchy results.[35] And this crisis has overtaken us because our church discipline is flaccid and we are lax in protecting the doctrinal purity of the church through its music component of the ministry of the Word. This is what happens when we remove the outside authority of Scriptures and of scripturally ordained ecclesiastical authorities.

The second objection might run like this: "Isn't popular music just today's folk music?" This is, in reality, a good objection, since pop musical forms usually closely resemble folk musical forms. If, however, we bear in mind that elegance of form and beauty are not the primary goals of folk music, the difference between folk and pop music will

be clearer.[36] Our God is at least as concerned with *why* we do something as with *what* we do. For from the heart "flow the issues of life" (Prov. 4:23). Remember, folk culture is primarily communal. Pop culture is primarily profit driven. Contemporary Christian music is a half billion-dollar-a-year industry.

Traditions that keep the good and judiciously add the new are alive and healthy. We should view the music of the Jesus People in the late 1960s and early 70s as a wholesome development, even though very little of it should be used in gathered worship today.

There was a time when contemporary Christian music was folk music; a time when a bunch of hippies at Calvary Chapel and at Peninsula Bible Church bought guitars, learned a few chords, and then, out of the overflowing gratitude of their hearts, began to make up simple expressions of their faith. Their work was not especially strong, either musically or textually. Still, this work was born in the wholesomeness of Christian community. The early Maranatha praise songs show the characteristic rough edges of music first made in the garage with little concern for future popular culture stardom.[37]

A similar movement occurred over a two-hundred-year period in Reformation Germany. During that time, nearly 100,000 hymns were written![38] Comparatively few of them are with us today, and most have graciously been forgotten. That time furnished us with "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," "Now Thank We All Our God," "When Morning Gilds the Skies," "All Praise to God, Who Reigns Above," and "Praise to the Lord, the Almighty." I suggest that we might not have these exquisite hymns if there had not been the other 99,500 that quickly went into the waste basket. We are told that Solomon's songs numbered a thousand and five (1 Kings 4:32). What became of them?

The point is that the good usually comes into being in the midst of a multitude of necessary mediocrities. For this reason, we should encourage those who want to praise God and edify the saints making new songs, even if those songs often seem vacuous and insipid. Music is not canonical. We can set aside weak worship music with the passing of time. Inviolable traditions are idols. Traditions that keep the good and judiciously add the new are alive and healthy. We should view the music of the Jesus People in the late 1960s and early 70s as a wholesome development, even though very little of it should be used in gathered worship today.

Finally, there is a grim lesson hidden beneath the appearance of those 100,000 Lutheran hymns, and that is this: The last phase of Lutheran hymnody was born inside of Pietism, that movement that laid great weight on how one felt as a mark of orthodoxy. Pietism, with its man-centeredness, opened the doors of the church to the Enlightenment, and with the Enlightenment, Lutheran hymn writers were all but silenced. It is no accident that J. S. Bach (1685–1750), whose life corresponds to late Lutheran orthodoxy, chose a preponderance of early Lutheran hymn texts for his cantatas. He was a pious and passionate man, but he was no Pietist. And so it is one of history's bitter

ironies that Richard Wagner was baptized on May 22, 1813, in Bach's home church, St. Thomas's of Leipzig. Enlightenment Lutheran clergy no longer exorcised infants at baptism because they had come to believe that man's original nature is good, and the world has paid a dear price for the impotent Lutheranism of 1813. Richard Wagner, probably more than other men, was responsible for popularizing the "Aryan Myth." It's all there in plain German in Hitler's *Mein Kampf*.

Lest Reformed people be tempted to crow over the apparent impotence of a Lutheran worldview, it should be remembered that, according to Abraham Kuyper, the Continental Reformed Church was reeling at the same time for much the same reasons. With the religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries behind, the church let down her guard, and a bigger, albeit quieter, foe in the form of the Enlightenment beset her and left many casualties.

Speaking at the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, Robert Godfrey lamented our recent rage for technique-oriented church life. He said:

> The problem is that once one gets beyond anecdotes about the new, exciting achievements, the evidence for evangelical success is sadly wanting. America is not experiencing a revival of faith or holiness. Christians may be moving from one congregation to another, but Christianity does not seem to be growing overall.

Godfrey then went on to support this claim with statistics from George Barna noting that "in the last five years church attendance in America has declined from 49% to 37%."[39]

Of course, we do not have the historical distance necessary to evaluate our circumstances. Still, I suspect that we

are presently witnessing the sort of precipitous decline the church experienced as she entered the Enlightenment. Furthermore, it may be that no agent has been more instrumental in precipitating the present decline than our appetite for pietistic music.

THE GREAT CONTEMPORARY CHURCH MUSIC REVOLUTION

As the music of the 1970s Jesus People grew in popularity, its commercial viability ignited a metamorphosis, one that removed it from local control inside the community of a local church to corporate control. Now we are faced with churches of all stripes shopping indiscriminately from Integrity's Hosanna! Music.[40] On any given Sunday, it is altogether possible for congregations from the Christian and Missionary Alliance, the United Methodist Church, the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, the Presbyterian Church in America, the Southern Baptist Convention, and the Evangelical Free Church, to sing from Hosanna Music's widely distributed praise and worship compendium, *Come and Worship*.[41] Consider song #64, Ramon Pink's "Highest Place." At the top of the page in italics are the words of Philippians 2:9: "Therefore God exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the name that is above every name." Below this text is the title, then the words and music which read:

> We place You on the highest place,
> for You are the great High Priest;
> We place You high above all else,
> and we come to You and worship at Your feet, etc."[42]

The lyrics convey a teaching that is difficult to separate from a heresy espoused by the manifest Sons of God "which holds the position that the church is the incarnation of God and is therefore to 'take dominion'—politically and otherwise—before Christ can return."[43] It is the equivalent of name-it-and-claim-it at the congregation level, rather than the individual level. In either case, it is clearly heresy, for only God can speak things into existence. We do not lift Christ; He lifts us.

Commercial Christian music often leaves the efficacy of the blood of Jesus in an ambiguous position. It is not always clear whether the blood is understood as a propitiation for our sins or a talisman to protect us against physical catastrophes such as auto wrecks and cancer. Indeed, the lyrics of commercial Christian music are seldom refined in a doctrinal crucible, yielding, rather, to the demands of rigid rhyme schemes and popular musical/architectural forms.

Examples of overt heresy, such as Ramon Pink's "Highest Place," are the exception, not the rule. The larger problem with commercial Christian music is not what is said,

but rather, **what is left unsaid.** Integrity's Hosanna! Music, with its roots deep in Pentecostal postmillennialism, has a heavy emphasis on God as our rock, fortress, strong tower, and mighty warrior, to the expense of other essential doctrines. It sees Jesus primarily as a hero, a sort of Christian Arnold Schwarzenegger knocking out demons. And demons, not our own depravity, are then perceived as the chief source of evil. Augustine had to deny Manichaeism and own his sin before God, not blaming it on some supernatural third party, and yet, through popular fiction and commercial music, our flesh is being told that ever-titillating lie, "Someone else made you commit evil."

Commercial Christian music often leaves the efficacy of the blood of Jesus in an ambiguous position. It is not always clear whether the blood is understood as a propitiation for our sins or a talisman to protect us against physical catastrophes such as auto wrecks and cancer. Indeed, the lyrics of commercial Christian music are seldom refined in a doctrinal crucible, yielding, rather, to the demands of rigid rhyme schemes and popular musical/architectural forms. Such a practice conveys the message that exact words are not important; the listener will read between the lines and fill in the meaning as he wishes. As the queen said to Alice: "The word means what I say it means."

While Hosanna! Music expends considerable energy on a victorious, combative Christianity, Vineyard Music focuses more on how we feel, leaving us with an image of Jesus as the great psychotherapist waving a magic wand. It is the perfect theology for the age of victimization.

Both models, God as spiritual gang leader and God as psychological prosthesis, are appealing—and they are marketable. Unfortunately, the gospel is offensive. It is a stumbling block. The fact that Christ died for sinners according to the Scriptures is the true baseline article of our faith. Justification by grace alone through faith alone means nothing if Christ did not die and rise again from the grave for our salvation. Jesus' transferrable capital punishment is John Bunyan's "wicket gate." And yet, the blood sacrifice for sin, that doctrine which shows how disgusting our depravity really is, receives conspicuously short shrift in commercial Christian music. It just plain doesn't sell very well.

There are many reasons why all sorts of churches are embracing commercial contemporary Christian music uncritically. High among them is this naive assumption that popular culture is really folk culture. It is trusting when it should be fleeing.

SO WHAT ARE WE TO DO?

Like David Wells, "I begin by reserving my deepest suspicions for those who want answers to the difficulties I mentioned. The desire for answers is innocent enough, but the spirit in which they are demanded frequently is not."[44] The fact is, the problems in worship music are deep and manifold. They have grown steadily over a quarter of a millennium, and they will not be solved overnight. Indeed, the suggestions I am about to offer are merely the starting point seen through the glass very dimly.

We need to recognize that there are very few present, worship music traditions which effectively inculcate the word of Christ musically to such a degree that His word dwells in us richly. Some traditions are worse than others, but God will not bless us for confessing other Christians' sins. The profound danger here, as so often evidenced by congregations that fiercely exclude contemporary Christian music, is that reformation cannot occur at home. If my congregation is focused on the evils of commercial music encroachment, we are not directing our attention to the evils of our own practices. Therefore, *the first step is to repent and to cry out for God's mercy.* I would go so far as to say that if this

step is not taken seriously and continuously, there is no reason to anticipate God's blessing on our efforts, nor is there any reason to take the measures I am about to propose.

We need to recognize that there are very few present, worship music traditions which effectively inculcate the word of Christ musically to such a degree that His word dwells in us richly. Some traditions are worse than others, but God will not bless us for confessing other Christians' sins.

The next step is to examine the entire corpus of worship music specific to the local congregation to see what sort of teaching, what sort of admonition, and what sort of gratitude to God we see in that body of music. There are all sorts of preformed grids that will help us in this work. Whether or not our congregations use them liturgically, or even if they are of different doctrinal persuasions, I think they are, nonetheless, useful in getting a comprehensive handle on our own specific practices. When we read the command to honor father and mother, certainly this extends to wise and faithful saints of the past. These forebears have produced many admirable comprehensive doctrinal teaching models that we would do well to employ in evaluating our own thoroughness. Such a set of tools might include the Apostles' Creed, the *Nicene Creed*, the *Anglican Thirty-nine Articles*, *Luther's Shorter Catechism*, the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, the *Heidelberg Catechism*, the church year, lectionaries, and Berkhof's *Systematic Theology*, and so forth. Of course the Bible is the preeminent document in this matter. Nevertheless, we display a pitiable arrogance if we disdain the wisdom of persons who probably understood the Scriptures more thoroughly than we do.

Prudential wisdom encourages us to reduce our consumption of commercial Christian music. On the face of it, this measure might seem Draconian, in part because it will force us to home-grow our own contemporary worship music, and the bald fact remains that music literacy has dropped to such a dismal level that skilled composers are not frequently to be found in local congregations. The local church will have to review its vision in light of this failing and take steps to remedy it. As worship music begins to flex its biblical muscles, we will quickly find that our general music literacy is woefully inadequate to the task.[45] This will take a generation or two, thousands of hours of music study, and many dollars to remedy. The church has left the job of music education up to the public school and to the whim of individuals, and the public school understandably doesn't train very good worship musicians.

We will need to review the way we spend our time in corporate worship. Each Sunday, we will need to ask, "Did the music ministry today cause the word of Christ to dwell in us richly?" "Did we teach and admonish one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs?" "Did we sing with gratitude in our hearts to God for Christ's finished work on the cross?" My guess is that we will quickly find that we do not sing together enough to accomplish these biblical demands. One of the canons of the church growth movement is that services that extend beyond an hour are not

seeker sensitive and are, therefore, to be avoided at all costs. There are 168 hours in a week. What do we say about the lordship of Christ when we spend only one of those in corporate worship?

By now, pastors reading this essay should feel a bit withered. The assignment is reaching Herculean proportions. Some may be thinking, "How will Aunt Maude, who plays the piano voluntarily (and not very well), pull this off?" Others may think, "Gosh, the college kids I've hired to do the worship band won't have a clue about this." Still others may think, "I see my pastoral responsibility for oversight in this task, but I'm already overworked, and I do not have the budget to hire a real worship musician even if I could find one. Furthermore, what little music education I've had has not prepared me to deal with any of these problems."

The worship music load I have described cannot be carried by most preachers. The biblical church musician has the ministry of the Word and prayer just like the pulpit preacher, but with musical means. He needs a corollary training to that of the preacher. He needs to operate under the same standards of accountability and doctrinal scrutiny as the preacher. And like the ox and the preacher, he must not be muzzled while he is treading out the grain. There is a peculiar romantic notion afoot that musicians make music because they love it, that they are so driven that they would do music under any circumstances. Yes, musicians are strange, but they and their families eat real food like everyone else.

To the overwhelmed pastor I say two things: Take the long view, and take heart. There are some measures the pastor can take now.

First, retake ecclesiastical authority over the music and over every word sung in corporate worship and small groups.[45] When approached with a doctrinally inadequate special music

project (usually an accompaniment track from some favorite commercial Christian artist), the pastor must be able to say, as Erik Routley did, "You can't have it, because it is not good for you."[46] Remember, worship music is an issue of shepherding.

Second, pastors must vociferously denounce the widely held notion that entertainment is good while boredom is bad. Gene Edward Veith points out that the word "bored" did not enter English vocabulary until the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century.[47] Moreover, Veith says that the corresponding biblical concept to boredom is sloth. In other words, boredom is primarily the hearer's problem, not the speaker's. Until this point is won, much biblical teaching and admonition will remain off limits.

Third, recognizing that pastors' reading lists are already overburdened, I will restrict my recommended reading to one small book, Calvin Johannson's Discipling Music Ministry.[48] A wise man once said, "with all thy getting, get understanding" (Prov. 4:7). Johannson's modest volume catapults the pastor into understanding.

Fourth, pastors will do well to register complaints with their seminaries over the minuscule and sometimes nonexistent place music holds with the Master of Divinity training. If congregational singing is an integral part of the ministry of the Word, then certainly seminary curricula should reflect this condition as a substantial required course offering. As it is, evangelical seminaries have a haphazard track record with this aspect of ministerial training, and young pastors usually discover this inadequacy within weeks into their first pastorates.

Fifth, within congregational life we would do well to foster children's choirs, having as a major goal the teaching of great hymn texts. Yes, great *old* hymn texts are what we should be teaching. For until sometime during the eighteenth century the overwhelming majority of Christian song texts were

written by ordained ministers of the Word. The texts reflected the depth of their theological training. Since that time, there has been a steady decline in the proportion of song texts produced by ministers of the Word to that of lay people self-ordained to the task. So extreme is the case now that anyone who knows a half dozen chords on a guitar and can produce rhymes to Hallmark card specifications is considered qualified to exercise this component of the ministry of the Word regardless of theological training and examination. For the spiritual well-being of our children they must learn the great old pre-revivalist hymns. It is amazing how many children enjoy Mr. Rogers' operas. Children will acculturate to what is placed before them. Remember, worship music is an issue of shepherding.

Sixth, we must grow worship musicians from inside the four walls of the church under the theologically watchful eyes of pastors. I am immediately constrained to issue a word of caution here: It is true that the guitar can serve some limited use, and we should rejoice to have guitars when it is the best we can do. Still, keyboard instruments present much greater musical versatility. Guitarists are physically limited by the very nature of the instrument to the number of keys they may use. This often takes the song outside of the best singing range for the congregation. A capo may remedy this situation somewhat, but it introduces new tuning problems and weakens an already thin timbre so that the instrument approaches the sound of a toy ukulele. Keyboard instruments, by contrast, are only as limited in matching the congregation's best singing range as the player's ability to read the music or to transpose. There is no presupposed physical obstacle.

Congregations should seriously invest in the continuing education of musicians. We should consider paying for piano lessons as well as instruction in music theory and counterpoint. Music theory is to music what hermeneutics

is to theology. Counterpoint is to music what logic is to philosophy. We have a crisis in church music because these disciplines are not part of the life and breath of our musicians. Remember, worship music is part of the ministry of the Word. We would be appalled by a preacher who read at a third grade level and did not understand grammar. We handicap the ministry of the Word when we leave our musicians unprepared.

Should all these measures be implemented, I would not expect overnight and glamorous results. Still, if we care about our children's children, I think we need to take the tough, disciplined steps beginning now. We need to seriously pray, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Even better, we might consider singing it.[49]

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Notes

1. It is fair to speak of much of our musical experience as "virtual" because most of it comes to us through recordings that we can reexperience in exactly the same form a limitless number of times.
2. *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 68.
3. Colossians 3:16.
4. Few adults will be able to accomplish this study. We must start with our children, and Christians who are embracing classical education are in the best position to address this crisis. Music is one of the seven liberal arts. However, I hasten to add that we are speaking here primarily of *music theory as a mathematical discipline,* not music performance or music appreciation. Some basic music performance is necessary for a meaningful interaction with music theory. That panoply would include

sight-singing and modest keyboard skills. Many church musicians today are deficient in sight-singing or keyboard skills, and most have only a passing acquaintance with the riches of music theory.

5. Charles Garside, *Zwingli and the Arts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), 40.
6. Matthew 6:9.
7. Ulrich Zwingli, *Interpretation and Substantiation of the Conclusions* (350, 2–6) as quoted in Garside, ibid., 45.
8. Ibid., 37.
9. *Westminster Confession of Faith* XXI.5 (Atlanta: Committee for Christian Education & Publications, 1990).
10. Cf. Bard Thompson, *Liturgies of the Western World* (Cleveland: William Collins Publishers, 1979), 199.
11. Charles Finney maintained that revival was not a miracle of the Holy Spirit, but rather the natural consequence of "the right use of means." When we don't perceive preaching accomplishing what we think it ought, we are sorely tempted in the same way to tamper with the other components of gathered worship as means to an end. Much of the church growth movement can be understood this way.
12. Ancient Gnosticism was a slippery heresy evading definition. At a minimum, however, Gnosticism embraces a secret knowledge, a knowledge which is derived more intuitively than objectively. For a good expose of Gnosticism, see Peter Jones' *The Gnostic Empire Strikes Back* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1992).
13. *All God's Children and Blue Suede Shoes* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1989), 186. Myers notes, somewhat wryly, that "evangelicals seem to have more in common concerning the sentimental trappings associated with faith than they do in defining what the nature of that faith is." In other words, what evangelicals have in common is a type of Gnosticism.
14. The discipline of statistics is the unchallenged canon law of the church growth movement.
15. These particulars are not unimportant and therefore shed light on the arcane question, "Are the headings of the Psalms canonical?" For Luther, they were verse one.
16. We need only think of Tobias Clausnitzer's "We All Believe in One True God, Father," Philip Nicolai's "Wake, Awake, for Night Is Flying," or Martin Luther's "Isaiah, Mighty Seer, in Spirit Soared."
17. Alternatively called "When We Walk With the Lord." Sammis lived from 1864 to1919. This hymn is found in many hymnals. It is not surprising to find it in commercial broad evangelical collections. It belongs appropriately to Methodist hymnals, for it fits Methodist theology well. It is perplexing, however, to find it as #672 in the 1990 *Trinity Hymnal*, a joint project of the Presbyterian Church in America and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. If the same zeal for the correctness of both bodies' books of church order existed in the provision of hymn texts, the contents would be quite different. Some PCA congregations own commercial broad evangelical hymnals which cost less than the *Trinity Hymnal*. And who can blame them when the doctrinal distinctives are blurred?

18. This is the spectacle Asaph contemplates in Psalm 73.
19. Number 33 in Praise, Maranatha Music, 1983.
20. Notable examples of this practice could include Martin Nystrom's "As the Deer" (Maranatha! Music, 1986), Bill Sprouse's "Psalm 5" (Maranatha! Music, 1986), and Les Garrett's "This Is the Day" (Scripture in Song, 1980).
21. To be fair, we could apply a similar test to such styles as rockabilly or space music.
22. This piece of history is the basis of Richard Wagner's opera, *The Meister Singers of Nuremberg.*
23. Cf. Howard M. Brown, *Music in the Renaissance* (Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall), 232.
24. Ulrich S. Leupold, ed., *Luther's Works* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965), 53:202.
25. A techniques approach to the gospel has a long history. Charles Finney said: "The success of any measure designed to promote a revival of religion, demonstrates its wisdom."
26. An example of this problem might be a conflict between physical comfort and auditory clarity. The noise of an air conditioning system, while not *consciously* audible, will compete with that auditory space occupied by sibilant consonants, hamstringing the hearing of the Word. For it is those consonants that make speech clear. Since faith comes by hearing, such a technology should be troubling, and yet the most peculiar expressions arise at the suggestion that eighty-five degrees inside the room is not an unreasonable price to pay for clear auditory perception.
27. Luther translated the word "work" as "poetry."
28. By "folk" music, we should not automatically think of the style of James Taylor or Gordon Lightfoot, or of guitars, tin whistles and Celtic drums.
29. Like Plato, Clement of Alexandria, Isidore of Pellusiom, Basil the Great, and John Chrysostom all had scathing things to say about the aulos, an instrument associated with Bacchus. The aulos was a twin-piped oboe type of instrument whose tone color may have approached our modern saxophone. It taxes the imagination to see these fathers of the faith approving the use of the aulos because of some supposed seeker-sensitivity.
30. February 6, 1995, 77.
31. I was a guest on a talk show recently where one caller advanced the notion that good aesthetic forms should come in groups of six with some sort of structural pause representing the seventh day. Another caller asserted that the organ was (almost sacramentally) the correct instrument in gathered worship because it was that instrument most like the human voice, and the human voice, after all, is intended to

praise God. I was constrained to inform him that, in point of fact, the saxophone is the instrument most like the human voice. (And I am not fond of the saxophone.)

High art is often the victim of such theological joy-riding. We do not understand the structure of enzymes by applying some external construct from the Holy Scriptures. No, we must understand enzymes by studying enzymes. In the same way, there is no way to understand high art without studying it, and I might add that dabbling does not constitute study. Christian humility is conspicuously absent in most opinions about high art, especially modern high art.

32. "The Christian Music Industry: Under New Ownership," *Worship Leader*, July/August 1995, 29. Styll went on to quote Benson Music president Jerry Park as recently saying, "The challenge is to achieve real growth to the extent that our owners expect of us. We have got to do a better job of attracting new buyers" (p. 30).
33. Ibid., 30.
34. There are heart-warming exceptions to this rule, such as Steve Camp who submits his lyrics to several theologians for scrutiny before taking them into the marketplace. Regrettably, this is the exceptional case of an individual voluntarily looking to the church for help rather than the normative case of the church proactively exercising her God-ordained authority over the doctrinal purity of the church.
35. *Newsweek* spread the Michael English affair before the world in lurid, factual detail that exceeded *Christianity Today's* restrained treatment. (Cf. Paul O'Donnell and Amy Eskind, "God and the Music Biz," *Newsweek*, May 30, 1994, 62-63.) One is reminded of Nathan's comment to David, "By this deed you have given occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme" (2 Sam. 12:14). As with fallen pastors, the scope of the influence determines the necessary scope of the repentance. As I was browsing through CDs at my local secular record store, I could not help but notice Michael English's post-adultery recording titled, "Healings." He had moved from the Warner Alliance label (the Christian subsidiary) to Curb records (also a subsidiary of Warner).
36. John Styll claims that "Contemporary Christian music, generally speaking, is not church music" (op. cit., 29). And yet the church is a folk unit because it is not good for the man to be alone. The irony here is that when our parishioners listen to many hours of commercial Christian music during the week (often in isolated privacy), they come to expect and desire that in corporate worship.
37. This simple sense of ministry and shepherding has been replaced in large measure by an ethos of stardom. Instead of the frenzied and fabricated joy engendered by this music, we ought to don sackcloth and ashes in response to this development.
38. See Albert Edward Bailey, *The Gospel in Hymns* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952), 309.
39. As quoted in Larry B. Stammer, "Church Attendance Falls to 11-Year Low," *Los Angeles Times*, March 2, 1996, B4ff. "This article, " says Godfrey, "was based on the surveying of the Barna Research Group Ltd."
40. Integrity's Hosanna! Music, a publicly held company, boasts being "American's number one producer of praise and worship choruses."
41. Mobile, 1994.
42. Words and music by Ramon Pink, *Scripture in Song*, 1983, administered by Maranatha! Music.
43. Christian Research Institute, perspective CP 0606.
44. *God in the Wasteland* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 29.
45. Full-orbed music literacy includes the ability to compose music from scratch, to perform that music, or to conduct other performers, and to understand theologically and historically the place of that music.
46. As quoted in Calvin M. Johannson, *Discipling Music Ministry* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1992), 168.
47. *Tabletalk*, November, 1995, 8.
48. Op. Cit.
49. There are many settings. The two that I consider especially good for congregational singing are John Fisher's "Holy Father, Hear Our Prayer" (F.E.L. Publications, 1969) and Martin Luther's "Our Father Who in Heaven Art."