

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](https://paypal.me/robbradshaw)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Reformation & Revival* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ref-rev-01.php



A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership
Volume 7 • Number 3 • SUMMER 1998

MUSICAL IDOLATRY: NON NOBIS

Charles D. King

A number of issues underlie the current discussion regarding worship styles and music in worship. I propose to look at this subject from the perspective of idolatry. My purpose is to offer some clear correctives that I hope will be useful to the church in a time when the spirit of the world threatens to overwhelm the spirit of truth.

As I write I am mindful of Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown," who witnessed every good person in his Puritan town participating in a black Sabbath—or did he? He was never quite sure whether it was a dream or not.

A stern, sad, darkly meditative, distrustful, if not desperate man did he become, from the night of that fearful dream. On the Sabbath day, when the congregation were singing a holy psalm, he could not listen, because an anthem of sin rushed loudly upon his ear, and drowned all the blessed strain . . . And when he had lived long, and was borne to his grave, a hoary corpse . . . they carved no hopeful verse upon his tomb-stone; for his dying hour was gloom.¹

I will attempt to be serious, but not dour. I aim at being careful, but never pharisaical. My goal throughout is to be cautionary, definitely not incendiary.

"Not to us, O Lord, not to us but to Thy name give

glory because of Thy lovingkindness, because of Thy truth. Why should the nations say, 'Where, now, is their God?' But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases" (Ps. 115:1-3).

I suggest that all the discussions I hear about "styles" betray a misorientation. Typically they begin with the question about how to satisfy the worshiper.

Cultural relevance is the primary value for appraising style choices. The basis for evaluating success, then, is either gross numbers or the presence of the "target audience." Success is then ours.



Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to Thy name give glory because of Thy lovingkindness.

The psalmist immediately orients us to the task. We are confronted with our motivations, and if honest we look into our hearts to ask, "Is this true?" Why do I stand in front of my choir week after week? What is my motivation as I lead worship? Whom am I trying to please? Whose glory do I really seek as I select music for the congregation to sing and to hear?

I suggest that all the discussions I hear about "styles"

betray a misorientation. Typically they begin with the question about how to satisfy the worshiper. Cultural relevance is the primary value for appraising style choices. The basis for evaluating success, then, is either gross numbers or the presence of the "target audience." Success is then *ours*.

Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to Thy name give glory. As worship planners and leaders, we are called to a more radical orientation. That is, we are directed to the very roots of our calling: the glory of God's name, the recognition of His love and faithfulness. We begin by asking whether what we offer in music reflects His glory and pleases Him. How does any particular gift recount His love and faithfulness, and so redound to His glory? Let "the nations" ask "Where is their God?" If they cannot apprehend the glory, if they do not comprehend the love and faithfulness we celebrate, we must not be deterred from our duty and delight. "Our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases."

We do not "play" to the nations. But we proclaim Him to the nations. "Sing praises to the Lord, who dwells in Zion; declare among the peoples His deeds" (Ps. 9:11). "Proclaim good tidings of His salvation from day to day. . . Say among the nations, 'The Lord reigns'" (Ps. 96:2, 10). In and outside the church, we must proclaim God with spirit and understanding—in ways that do not obscure the glory, and that present no unnecessary stumbling blocks. This is the only value for cultural relevance.

The principle of evangelism must be to show the people outside the church that the symbols in which the life of the church expresses itself are answers to the questions implied in their very existence as human beings. . . . There is always a genuine decision against the gospel for those for whom it is

a stumbling block. But this decision should not be dependent upon the wrong stumbling block, namely our inability to communicate. What we have to do is to overcome the wrong stumbling block in order to bring people face to face with the right stumbling block and enable them to make a genuine decision. Will the Christian churches be able to remove the wrong stumbling blocks in their attempt to communicate the gospel?²

Those who make them will become like them, everyone who trusts in them.

But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases. Their idols are silver and gold, the work of man's hands. They have mouths, but they cannot speak; they have eyes, but they cannot see; they have ears, but they cannot hear; they have noses, but they cannot smell; they have hands, but they cannot feel; they have feet, but they cannot walk; they cannot make a sound with their throat. Those who make them will become like them, everyone who trusts in them (Ps. 115: 3-8).

Let us note some features of idols as described in these verses. First, they are made of precious metals. They consist of the finest, costliest material that can be easily shaped. They are pleasing to the eye. But note the ultimate judgment about their spiritual value: *made by the hands of men*. "Our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases." But idols are made by human hands.

Second, these idols are made to look human. They have human features: mouths, eyes, ears, noses, hands, feet. Attractive and lifelike though they may be, they do nothing. Paul, writing to the Romans, recounts the human tendency to exchange "the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator" (1:25).

Third, idols are dead. In Isaiah 44, the prophet

exposes the lifelessness of idols by showing how they are all made of materials that humans also consume: metals which man forgets, wood which man burns for food and warmth. Habakkuk likewise wrote:

What profit is the idol when its maker has carved it, or an image, a teacher of falsehood? For its maker trusts in his own handiwork when he fashions speechless idols. Woe to him who says to a piece of wood, "Awake!" To a dumb stone, "Arise!" And that is your teacher? Behold, it is overlaid with gold and silver, and there is no breath at all inside it (Hab. 2:18-19).

And so idolatrous worship is spiritual death: they know nothing, understand nothing, see nothing; they feed on ashes with a deluded, misleading heart and cannot recognize that what they hold onto is a lie.³ To Ezekiel, God said:

These men have set up their idols in their hearts, and have put right before their faces the stumbling block of their iniquity. Should I be consulted by them at all? Therefore speak to them and tell them, "Thus says the Lord God, 'Any man of the house of Israel who sets up his idols in his heart, puts right before his face the stumbling block of his iniquity, and then comes to the prophet, I the Lord will be brought to give him an answer in the matter in view of the multitude of his idols. . . . And I shall set My face against that man and make him a sign and a proverb, and I shall cut him off from among My people. So you will know that I am the Lord'" (Ezek. 14:3-4, 8).

Hosea 9:16 describes idolaters as blighted, withered, and fruitless. "Our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases." But their idols? "Those who make them will be like them." Idols may be beautiful, but in

man's image, not God's. Aside from that, they are worthless: speechless, blind, deaf, unable to smell, feel or walk. Ultimately, unable to utter a sound.

I found Israel like grapes in the wilderness; I saw your forefathers as the earliest fruit on the fig tree in its first season. But they came to Baal Peor and devoted themselves to shame, and they became as detestable as that which they loved (Hos. 9:10).

But they mingled with the nations, and learned their practices, and served their idols, which became a snare to them. They even sacrificed their sons and their daughters to the demons, and shed innocent blood, the blood of their sons and their daughters, whom they sacrificed to the idols of Canaan; and the land was polluted with the blood. Thus they became unclean in their practices, and played the harlot in their deeds (Ps. 106:35-39).

This is a sobering, cautionary summary. We will become like that which we worship.

MUSICAL IDOLATRY

How does this Old Testament teaching translate into our work in music and worship? "Anyone with a hierarchy of values has placed *something* at its apex, and whatever that is is the god he serves. The Old and New Testaments call such gods idols."⁴ Reinhold Niebuhr defined the "principle of coherence" as one's central meaning of life or focus of significance, and asserted that "all such principles that substitute for God exemplify the biblical concept of idol."⁵ An idol, then, "is any thing, any experience, any accomplishment that promises life without God's help . . . any attempt to fulfill our deepest longings, placed there by God—to fill a vacuum God created—to fill our legitimate needs without God."⁶

So we make idols of style, opinion, surveys, natural abilities. We are surrounded by idols of our contemporary culture, which infiltrate the church: technology, immediate gratification, money, power (control), efficiency (pragmatism), immediacy (accessibility), success, popularity. The most ubiquitous idol, and so the hardest to recognize, is Self.



Idols are what we trust instead of trusting God. So we make idols of style, opinion, surveys, natural abilities. We are surrounded by idols of our contemporary culture, which infiltrate the church: technology, immediate gratification, money, power (control), efficiency (pragmatism), immediacy (accessibility), success, popularity. The most ubiquitous idol, and so the hardest to recognize, is Self. Calvin Johansson reminds us that "death to the self (even in the musical realm) is necessary."⁷ C. S. Lewis—no friend to church music—showed what this death to self looks like:

There are two musical situations on which I think we can be confident that a blessing rests. One is where . . . a man of trained and delicate taste, humbly and charitably sacrifices his own (aesthetically right) desires and gives the people humbler and coarser fare than he would wish, in a belief . . . that

he can thus bring them to God. The other is where the . . . unmusical layman humbly and patiently, and above all silently, listens to music which he cannot, or cannot fully, appreciate, in the belief that it somehow glorifies God, and that if it does not edify him this must be his own defect.⁸

Idols abound. (And let me say how much easier it is to say these things here than if you could walk into my church services tomorrow!) We have seen the man-centered industry of “worship music” move from themes about God (“Lion of Judah”) to the worship leader (artist’s name/concept title). We have learned to live with a contemporary Christian (and church) music industry that is driven by mammon. As we put the approval of men at the center of our choices, we are reaping in music what Paul warned Timothy about in preaching:

For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires; and will turn away their ears from the truth, and will turn aside to myths (2 Tim. 4:3-4).

The Bible teaches us that we will become like that which we serve. “The mark of an idol is what it finally produces.”⁹ “A man can place anyone or anything at the top of a pyramid of values, and that is ultimately what he serves . . . [and it] profoundly affects the way he lives.”¹⁰ Given the complete vanity of idols (they are, in fact, dead), what can we say about idolatrous music ministry? It is man-centered, profit-motivated, and heretical.

I hasten to acknowledge that the danger of idolatry is no respecter of class. The cheapest popular culture has

no more capacity for idolatry than the highest art culture. What idolatry produces in the particular may differ along the spectrum, but the end is still man, money, and myth—and ultimately spiritual death. Apart from the Holy Spirit, all music has the capacity to enslave minds, seduce affections, numb discernment, obscure objectivity, encroach on creativity, and divert commitments.

Trust in the Lord—He will bless those who fear the Lord.

O Israel, trust in the Lord; He is their help and their shield. O house of Aaron, trust in the Lord; He is their help and their shield. You who fear the Lord, trust in the Lord; He is their help and their shield. The Lord has been mindful of us; He will bless us; He will bless the house of Israel; He will bless the house of Aaron. He will bless those who fear the Lord, the small together with the great. May the Lord give you increase, you and your children. May you be blessed of the Lord, maker of heaven and earth (Ps. 115:9-15).

Much of Israel’s idolatry was syncretistic. (“But they mingled with the nations, and learned their practices” [Ps. 106:35]). They worshipped the gods of other nations because (1) they wanted additional security from the local gods of the lands they inherited or (2) they wanted to enter into political alliances with their neighbors. This led them into the mixing of the covenant religion with all manner of idolatry. In Ezekiel 8 we see a horrible picture of this, with fullblown pantheistic idolatry¹¹ in and beneath the temple, and with temple priests worshipping the sun, their backs literally turned away from the holy place.

Another focus of Israel’s idolatry was fertility gods.¹² God’s judgment in Hosea 8 is in keeping with what the idol represents:

A craftsman made it, so it is not God; surely the calf of

Samaria will be broken to pieces. For they sow the wind, and they reap the whirlwind. The standing grain has no heads; it yields no grain. Should it yield, strangers would swallow it up. Israel is swallowed up; they are now among the nations like a vessel in which no one delights (Hos. 8:6-8).

Hosea sums up the worship and end of this cult:

And now they sin more and more, and make for themselves molten images, idols skillfully made from their silver, all of them the work of craftsmen. They say of them, Let the men who sacrifice kiss the calves! Therefore, they will be like the morning cloud, and like dew which soon disappears, like chaff which is blown away from the threshing floor, and like smoke from a chimney (13:2-3).

"Idolatry carries its own punishment: you worship nothing; you get nothing; you end as nothing."¹³

In this context notice God's call to His people: "Trust in the Lord—He is their help and their shield! He will bless those who fear the Lord. May the Lord give you increase." All that Israel hoped to gain, represented in the idols they turned to, was already given to them by the God who called them and loved them: national security, local protection, and flourishing crops. All from God. God's call is to trust Him and wait in confidence to receive the blessings. Those who worship the living God, the Scriptures say, will, like Him, be living: "like a tree firmly planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither; and in whatever he does, he prospers" (Ps. 1:3). The blessed, the salt of the earth and light of the world; the means by which men, seeing good deeds, praise the Father in heaven. "Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48).

"All idols belong either to nature or to history . . . Any idol that is not an artifact of the natural world is an artifact of the social world."¹⁴ At the risk of stating the obvious, I believe our musical idols fall into the categories of fertility (natural idols) or syncretism (social idols). So we find the church chasing either acceptance by culture, or simply growth in numbers.

Ultimately, perhaps, we recognize our idols in what we rely on when our energy, time, or interests tempt us to "throw something together" for worship. You know the times I mean: other things have crowded our week, and the planning deadline is upon us. Our accompanist needs the anthem schedule, our pastor needs the hymns, a soloist is asking about the theme of the service.



Both kinds of idols drive our pursuit of style above substance; both put man before God. Both end up as mist, chaff, and smoke. Not only because "he who marries the spirit of the age soon finds himself a widower,"¹⁵ but because we are pursuing that which is destined to perish and which, until it does, is already lifeless. Keep-

ing up with the idols of our age becomes an enterprise as meaningless as rearranging deck chairs on the *Titanic*.

There are three tasks in moving toward idol-free music ministry: (1) identify idols, (2) name idols, and (3) remove idols. To identify idols we need gifts of discernment. Sometimes we spot idols by way of recognizing fetishes. Do I use music to stimulate an emotional (called "spiritual") response? Do I accept (or reject) musical options based on their label (e.g., "praise music")? Do I "measure worth by popular acclaim, ignoring principles of art and reason to base [my] judgments on the author's name"?¹⁶ We also recognize idols by gauging our response to others' comments, especially comments about *our* preferences. Ultimately, perhaps, we recognize our idols in what we rely on when our energy, time, or interests tempt us to "throw something together" for worship. You know the times I mean: other things have crowded our week, and the planning deadline is upon us. Our accompanist needs the anthem schedule, our pastor needs the hymns, a soloist is asking about the theme of the service. The printing schedule for Sunday morning is looming. We do not have the time to plan and decide as we would like. Whether what we create in those times is "for me" or "for others," we find that God has not been our primary concern. We have trusted in our skill, our instinct or intuition, or maybe in our liturgical guides and record-keeping. We have not walked with God and listened to His Word. We have not trusted the Holy Spirit to do invisibly what we can do simply, quickly, and visibly.

Naming the idols is a prophetic activity: let the Word of God speak to the issues. In contrast to the biblical description of idols, the Word of God is "living and powerful." Idol-proofing our ministries is in fact possible only if we are people of the Word. The Bible is both

source and judge of our worship.¹⁷ In the Word we remember His love and faithfulness. We learn the fear of the Lord and, in that fear, trust. That which is invisible becomes certain. Our capacity to withstand the onslaught of idolatry is strengthened.

The Word names some idols which set themselves up in every age: mammon, self, security, fertility. Pursuit of these is the worship of our own image rather than conformity to the image of God. The corrective is expressed negatively in Romans: "For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks" (1:21). Our text in Psalm 115 expresses it positively: "Not to us, O Lord, but to Thy name give glory, because of your lovingkindness" (v. 1). If we devote ourselves to glorifying God, to thanking Him, to recounting His love and faithfulness, we necessarily commit to dethroning idols. Let us lay the axe to the root. Whether quietly, under cover of night, as Gideon,¹⁸ or officially and decisively as Josiah,¹⁹ we must determine not to coexist with anything that robs God's glory.

God spoke to Israel in their promised land:

I said, "I will never break My covenant with you, and as for you, you shall make no covenant with the inhabitants of this land; you shall tear down their altars." But you have not obeyed Me; what is this you have done? Therefore I also said, "I will not drive them out before you; but they shall become as thorns in your sides, and their gods shall be a snare to you" (Jud. 2:1-3).

It is not the dead, but we who praise the Lord.

The heavens are the heavens of the Lord; but the earth He has given to the sons of men. The dead do not praise the Lord, nor do any who go down into silence; but as for us, we will bless the Lord from this time forth

and forever. Praise the Lord! (Ps. 115:16-18).

In these concluding verses, the summary of Psalm 115, we are given a glimpse of the majesty of God, the vanity of idols, and the joy of man. How shall we, the living, extol the Lord? How can we keep our music ministries free of idols? I offer, as a place to begin, some core values, some cautions, and a few correctives. None of these concluding comments is original. They are by no means exhaustive. I hope they are helpful, and I hope they will foster discussion in your churches and in your fellowships of church musicians.

SOME CORE VALUES

Music ministry must be *radically God-focused*. It begins with God, who is Creator, Redeemer, King, and Conqueror (Rev. 4, 5, 11, 19). He is "above everything, below everything, in everything but not contained, holding all things together. He is omni-holy, transcendent, pure, altogether other, and dwells in unapproachable light."²⁰

How in this world can we ever hope to glorify God and give Him praise? What music can begin to approach the unapproachable? To our great relief and eternal benefit, the awesome and holy One moved in our direction. Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!

We realize that to be God-focused is to be *Christ-centered*. All that we can say about God can be rightly said of Jesus. He is in the law, writings, and prophets of the Old Testament. Jesus is the Word at creation, the glory in Isaiah 6 and the Bridegroom of the Revelation.

So what does this mean for those of us who make music for worship? (1) This pillar of ministry focuses what we will sing. Our texts are primarily to God, especially to God in Christ, and those that are not are about

Him. (2) Questions of "style" are man-centered. We ask a different question: "May I (or, do I dare) offer this music to God as revealed in the Bible?" (3) God-focused, Christ-centered music ministry calls for our best efforts, while recognizing that we can never produce anything worthy of so great a Savior. This is humbling!

Working through the complex set of issues regarding church music, we do well to remember that worship is: God-centered, Scripture-focused, people-sensitive.

How easy it is to reverse the order. It is so critical that we build everything upon the core commitment of God-focused ministry.

The music ministry is *Word-dominated*. This flows naturally from the pillar of Christ-centeredness. Jesus is the Word of God in the beginning (John 1:1), and the final Word of revelation (Heb. 1:1-3). And to be Word-dominated flows naturally back to being Christ-centered, for all the Bible is about Christ.

The written Word of God is the "text" of music ministry. Everything we sing (as congregation and as choir) is subject to Christ and His word. Beautiful texts and famous texts are used only if they can stand under the light of the Word.

For the Word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do (Heb. 4:12-13).

"We are determined that all ministries receive their creative dimensions from God's Word."²¹

1) We must be people of the Word, living in trust and submission to the Bible. This shapes our character and it equips us each to be like the “noble Bereans” (see Acts 17:10-12).

2) Just like the texts, but distinct from them, music used in worship must meet biblical standards of excellence: creativity, beauty, and craftsmanship.

3) As servants of the Word, we may have to say “no” to performing, in worship, some musical expressions that as musicians we would like. For example, we cannot use an entire traditional *Requiem* because parts of the ancient Roman Catholic text are unbiblical.

4) Music can teach, compel, convict, inspire, etc., but it may not replace the sermon on any but the most unusual and carefully chosen occasions. Music in the service is neither more important than the sermon, nor simply a preliminary to the “main event.” The entire service is the main event. In this relationship, the music ministry is submissive (subject out of reverence for Christ) to the preaching ministry.

Our first two core values—Christ-centered and Word-dominated—are inseparable and give abundant life to ministry.

A third core value is *character*. There are two sides to the character issue—ministry is built on godly character, and it contributes to godly character in server and served alike.

Musicians are, by virtue of their very visible public service, worship leaders. It is imperative that our lives not detract from the message we sing. “By insisting that our ministry be character-focused, we are affirming that *what we are inside is of greatest importance.*”²² Is my devotional life consistent and alive? Does it shape my thoughts, words, and actions? Are family and friends drawn to Christ by my living example? Am I morally

consistent, living life and fostering attitudes that reflect my high calling in Christ? If someone from my neighborhood saw me “up front” would they consider me in my natural environment, or call me a hypocrite?

What we prepare and present in music must also contribute to godly character. It must challenge, instruct, correct, rebuke, soothe, encourage, judge, etc. In other words—as one vehicle of expressing biblical truth, the music ministry ought to be useful for changing the lives of those who hear. There is a structure for this to occur:

1) I come to my music ministry as a child of God, with my character submitted to His lordship, examined in the mirror of His Word.

2) In rehearsal and private preparation I learn, assimilate, believe, and communicate the texts of biblical truth.

3) The Holy Spirit uses my character (which may or may not be known to the listeners) and my preparation (which is obvious!), and applies it to the hearts and minds of those who listen.

4) Listeners are affected, and must deal with the Spirit’s movement in them. Will lives be changed because of our ministry? That is a work for which we are not responsible, but to which we contribute by “what we are inside.”

I believe that our ministries will be judged on one criterion: Were we good stewards of the gifts of God’s people in worship? When everything is sung and done, when the last “amen” has faded and the chandeliers in our beautiful sanctuaries lie in a dusty heap, the only important question will be, “Did we build a people who worship in spirit and in truth?”

The music ministry must be an *equipping* ministry—an environment for ideas and questions, resulting in investment in the ministry. Equipping ministries allow

people to develop their full servant potential in Christ, to work in the areas of their gifts and passions, to stoke the "fire in the belly."

Within the music ministry, we share the "grace [that] has been given as Christ apportioned it," and use our gifts and callings "to prepare God's people for works of service." Some are explorers—opening new territories for ministry; others are philosophers—applying truth to our endeavors. Still others are inviters—they draw new people into our relationships (faith, church, service); or patient laborers—teaching, guiding, correcting. Each has a gift and a role, each has a voice. In that way we see "God's grace in its various forms." The goal is "that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God" (Eph. 4; 1 Peter 4).

So in the ministry of music we must love one another, prefer one another, and serve one another. As we grow in unity and maturity, we also grow in our equipping ministry. Our capacity to worship (as musicians working together) limits or unleashes that of the assembly. Our lives and the materials used in worship "prepare God's people," "speak the truth in love," "teach the truth that is in Jesus." It is in the context of this people-building ministry that we are to "speak to one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs."

And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful. 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. And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father (Col. 3:15-17).

SOME CAUTIONS

Let us be cautious of "arriving." Let he who thinks he stands take heed, lest he fall! "Without reformation the tradition [or any entrenched commitment] becomes distorted, stale, or dead—or an idolatry."²³

Humility and a commitment to spiritual maturity are essential to ministers of music. As soon as we become entrenched we begin our departure from that calling. Do I wonder, "Can anything good come out of Nashville?" Warning! Do I know that I know more (and better) than my congregation? Warning! Is my philosophy of church music sewn up, and my theology impregnable? Warning! Let us hold unswervingly to essential things, but not take ourselves too seriously.

Think about our children, and the generation of worshipers that we may have already lost. "The best way to sing children out of the church is to give them [poor] music into which they cannot grow, which they will realize very quickly is designed to treat them poorly and manipulate them, just as the surrounding culture does."²⁴

SOME CORRECTIVES

We will become like that which we worship.

1) Ask: May we offer this to God? He is both object and subject, both audience and lead role, the beginning and end of worship. Everything we say, sing, and do in public worship is by Him and through Him and to Him. He is present. Is this an acceptable offering? Is it creative, beautiful, and well-crafted? Does it express glory? Is it a worthy vessel of His praise? We will become like that which we worship: We will be at our best giving back to God from among His best gifts.

2) Stop singing what is not true. Examine with care the words that we sing, and the words we put before our congregations. A hymn may be tried but not true, long

in the hymnal but still found wanting. A new song may surprise us with its fresh expression of timeless truth. A popular song may be a pack of theological lies and emotional falsehoods. That which is less accessible may in fact carry the weight of God's glory. Let us be careful to sing what is true. Let us be humble enough to seek counsel when we are unsure, and to accept rebuke when we have made mistakes. We will become like that which we worship: We will be shaped by the truths we sing.

3) Do not disguise the truth. Let the package reflect the contents. The medium, I'm sorry to say, really is the message. There is no "joyful" rap—even the ode to joy has an angry edge in that mode. Jesus' return in glory with His holy angels will not be a roller-skating party.

Marva Dawn²⁵ warns about sub-Christian texts—these are ways we disguise the truth: they proclaim no message about God or faith (many a Christmas song, e.g., "Bring a Torch," is in this category). They are theologically correct but shallow (Wonder Bread songs, easy-listening, "The Name of the Lord" [a strong tower]). They contain "disinformation"—not false, but misplaced or irrelevant ("I Will Celebrate" says I will praise, but never gets around to it), they muddle theology ("Open Our Eyes, Lord"), they are more apt for the campfire or rally ("River of Life"—we get into *it* instead of into God).

In short, we need to sing not just "our God is an awesome God," but that He is awesome in particular ways or because of particular characteristics: He is "immortal, invisible, God only wise, in light inaccessible hid from our eyes." We will become like that which we worship: If we sing the truth in truthful ways, we will equip people with the truth.

4) Address God or sing about Him. We will do our faith and worship a great service if we eliminate from our singing songs about ourselves. Remember the old

idol, Self? How can we keep from idolatry if our songs keep us in its presence? But if our singing always brings us to the majestic, transcendent, condescending, imminent, holy, gracious, speaking God of the Bible, how will we ever be satisfied with lifeless gods that are no gods?

*When you've camped on the Great Plains
in thunderstorms and nearly lost a son and
a wife on a hike in the Badlands; when
you've cycled the majestic northwoods at
the headwaters of the Mississippi; when
you've surprised a wolverine on a trail in
the Rockies—it's hard to get excited about
the amusements of Dollywood.*



When you've camped on the Great Plains in thunderstorms and nearly lost a son and a wife on a hike in the Badlands; when you've cycled the majestic northwoods at the headwaters of the Mississippi; when you've surprised a wolverine on a trail in the Rockies—it's hard to get excited about the amusements of Dollywood. Lift up your eyes to the One enthroned above it all, and point your congregation to the beauty of His holiness. We will become like that which we worship: Stand in His presence, surrounded by His word, and be changed.

The highest heavens belong to the Lord, but the earth He has given to man.

Everything we make and use in worship may become an idol. Our materials, however prone to misuse, are God's gifts to us. Let us use them to His glory, with hearts and wills conforming to His purposes. Accepting nothing that robs His glory, let us reject nothing that truly honors Him.

Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to Thy name give glory because of Thy lovingkindness, because of Thy truth.

You who fear the Lord, trust in the Lord; He is their help and their shield. The Lord has been mindful of us; He will bless us . . . the small together with the great.

The heavens are the heavens of the Lord; but the earth He has given to the sons of men. The dead do not praise the Lord, nor do any who go down into silence; but as for us, we will bless the Lord from this time forth and forever. Praise the Lord! (from Ps. 115).

Author

Charles D. King is minister of worship and music at College Church in Wheaton, Illinois. This is his first contribution to *Reformation & Revival Journal*.

Notes

1. Roy Hawey Pearce, ed., "Young Goodman Brown," *Nathaniel Hawthorne: Tales and Sketches* (New York: Library of America College Edition, 1996), 288-89.
2. Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 49, 213.
3. Isaiah 44.
4. Herbert Schlossberg, *Idols for Destruction* (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, 1983), 5.
5. *Ibid.*, 6.
6. Roger Thompson, "The Pretenders," sermon series at Berean Baptist Church (Burnsville, Minnesota, Fall 1994).
7. Calvin Johansson, *Discipling Music Ministry* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson), 56.

8. C. S. Lewis, "On Church Music" in *Christian Reflections* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 96.
9. Thompson, *ibid.*
10. Schlossberg, 6.
11. Douglas Stuart, *Communicator's Commentary*, XVIII: Ezekiel (Dallas: Word, 1989), 89.
12. With Aaron's golden calf in Exodus 32, "the Israelites were apparently concerned to provide their own means of securing the presence of the Lord" (David Peterson, *Engaging With God*, 34). References to calf-idols in prophetic writings are notably distinct from this episode, although the tendency to idolatry is well illustrated here.
13. David Allan Hubbard, *Hosea* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 216.
14. Schlossberg, 11.
15. W. R. Inge, quoted in Schlossberg, 9.
16. Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, Purgatorio XXVI, 120-23; trans. John Ciardi (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977).
17. William Willimon, *The Bible: A Sustaining Presence in Worship* (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Judson Press, 1981), 19.
18. Judges 6.
19. 2 Chronicles 34.
20. R. Kent Hughes, *Vision 2000* (College Church in Wheaton, January 9, 1994), 2.
21. *Vision 2000*, 3.
22. *Vision 2000*, 4 (emphasis added).
23. Marva J. Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 60 (brackets added).
24. Paul Westermeyer, "Chant, Bach, and Popular Culture" in *The American Organist*, November 1993, 27:11:39.
25. Dawn, 171-74.