
KEYNOTE

THE WESTMINSTER DIRECTORY OF PUBLIC WORSHIP (1645) by Alan Clifford

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INTRODUCTION

...It would appear that in some respects, current confusion in the realm of worship is more difficult to cure than more theoretical theological differences. While it is ultimately true that faulty theology lies behind faulty practice, not all those who have abandoned traditional Reformed worship have rejected Reformed theology, at least notionally. What a former FIEC president has recently written in his church magazine gives us a measure of the problem:

Within the service of worship we are also trying to proclaim God's truth, and here too there is room for variety. The sermon as we think of it, is a relatively modern invention. There is room for all kinds of ways of reading the Scriptures, and also, I believe, for testimonies, interviews, and drama. We have to distinguish very honestly between what dishonours God, and what annoys our sensibilities.¹

And all this in a magazine which happily, in the same issue, quotes — as a SOP for traditionalists? — from Matthew Henry and Thomas Watson! Without pursuing our subject in pure academic and historical isolation, we may surely ask if the

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Westminster divines can help us nearly three hundred and fifty years on? At least they might help us to understand our confusion a little more clearly!

THE REGULATIVE PRINCIPLE AND ITS LIMITS

...Unlike the drafting of the Confession of Faith, the Directory's passage in committee and debate was often stormy.² For the most part, differences of opinion concerned matters which the Scriptures shed no specific light on. ... The task is made no easier when one learns, in the words of Dr. Horton Davies, that the Directory was in fact 'a compromise between the three parties, the English Presbyterians, the Scottish Presbyterians and the Independents.'³

... Apart from certain leading principles, adopting the 'regulative principle' found the various parties at considerable odds where the Directory of Worship was concerned. It is easy to discern from the Scriptures that preaching, scripture reading, prayers and the singing of God's praise are the main elements of Christian worship and that the two divinely instituted symbolic ordinances are baptism and the Lord's Supper. Undergirding this is the New Testament stress that all worship should be both 'orderly' and 'spiritual'. But concerning the precise form of sermons and prayers, the structure of a service of worship, the number of psalms (and/or hymns) to be sung, the frequency of the Lord's Supper, the conduct of marriages and funerals, such matters are not determined in the New Testament. In short, what exactly does it mean to be biblical in the details as well as the principles of worship?

The Westminster divines soon realized that their attachment to the regulative principle did not solve all their problems. It was relatively easy to detect the unbiblical elements in the Book of Common Prayer (BCP), but not so easy to replace them by valid alternatives. Hence the Preface states that in laying ‘aside the former Liturgy, with the many rites and ceremonies formerly used in the worship of God ... our care hath been to hold forth such things as are of divine institution in every ordinance; and other things we have endeavoured to set forth according to the rules of Christian prudence, agreeable to the general rules of the Word of God’. Whereas these criteria were sufficient to ban the sacerdotal and superstitious overtones of the BCP — and still are sufficient to ban drama and dance as well as women preachers and priests of either sex, areas of potential disagreement still remained. This is hardly surprising, for three distinct outlooks faced one another in the Assembly. The English Presbyterians were ex-Anglican Puritans, who, in their ‘nonconformity’ had been used to ‘reformed’ editions of the BCP. The Scottish Commissioners had used the Book of Common Order, the so-called ‘Knox’s Liturgy’, which reflected the forms of Calvin’s Genevan liturgy. These two groups both accepted the validity of liturgical worship. And then there were the ‘proto-charismatic’ Independents who were opposed to any kind of service book. Robert Baillie, one of the Scottish Commissioners, lamented:

While we were sweetly debating on these things, in came Mr. Goodwin, who incontinent assayed to turn all upside down, to reason against all directories... I hope God will not permit him to go on to lead a faction for renting of the kirk.⁴

THE HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF
WORSHIP

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CALVIN AND CRANMER: THE CHARACTER
AND PRIORITIES OF WORSHIP

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PURITAN WORSHIP: THE WESTMINSTER
DIRECTORY

To return to the Directory itself, the in-built ambiguities of Elizabethan Anglicanism, the constant threat of Romanism and the Romanizing measures of Archbishop Laud form the immediate backdrop to the Westminster Assembly. With political Puritanism in the ascendancy, the scene was set to complete the English Reformation. ...

If the text of the Directory tends to obscure differences over alternative preferences, the Preface justifies the replacement of the BCP in no uncertain terms. While its virtues are not ignored, it had become an ‘offense’ to many of the godly at home and abroad. ‘For, not to speak of urging the reading of all the prayers, which very greatly increased the burden of it, the many unprofitable and burdensome ceremonies’, e.g. wearing the surplice, the sign of the cross at baptism, confirmation, bowing at the name of Jesus, etc., ‘have occasioned much mischief’ by troubling the consciences ‘of many godly ministers and people’. Many good Christians have been ‘kept from the Lord’s Table’ and ‘able and faithful ministers’ have been debarred from their ministry. The bishops had virtually insisted that use of the BCP was the only acceptable way of worshipping God. Preaching had been ‘jostled out as unnecessary, or at best as far inferior’ to the reading of the service. In short, the Prayer Book had become ‘no better than an idol by many

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ignorant and superstitious people'. Accordingly, the 'Papists boasted that the book was a compliance with them in a great part of their service; and so were not a little confirmed in their superstition and idolatry, expecting rather our return to them, than endeavouring the reformation of themselves'. Furthermore, exclusive use of the BCP had promoted 'an idle and unedifying ministry', which contented itself with reading 'set forms' composed by others 'without putting forth themselves to exercise the gift of prayer, with which our Lord Jesus Christ pleaseth to furnish all his servants whom he calls to that office'. These were the 'weighty considerations' which led the Assembly to 'lay aside the former Liturgy'.

A LITURGY FOR LIFE

Before we focus particular attention on the public worship of the Lord's Day, it should be remembered that 'worship' embraced the whole of life in the minds of our forefathers. God was to be acknowledged, loved and obeyed in all the experiences and decisions of daily life. Accordingly, the BCP—in keeping with centuries of Christian tradition—made provision for the great and momentous occasions in life from the womb to the tomb. What we immediately think of as 'worship' was a special instance of communal Lord's Day worship, where the Lord is pleased to 'command the blessing' (Ps. 133:3). Thus against a background of common Sabbath desecration, even in less secular times, the Directory supplied practical spiritual guidance on 'the sanctification of the Lord's Day'. While this concern was justified, it was recognized that in the vast majority of English parishes, then as now, the only certain contact people had with the church

was through 'hatchings, matchings and despatchings'. Here the Directory is so unlike the Prayer Book in dealing with the problems posed by nominalism in a territorial conception of the church. ...

THE SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM

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THE SACRAMENT OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

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THE PUBLIC WORSHIP OF THE LORD'S DAY

A combination of radical simplicity and reverent spirituality characterizes the Directory's recommendations for the worship of the Lord's Day. The order of service is as follows:

- Call to worship
- Prayer for grace and enlightenment
- Scripture reading:
 - OT chapter
 - NT chapter
- Metrical Psalm
- Prayer of confession and intercession
- Preaching of the Word
- Prayer of thanksgiving and petition
- Lord's Prayer
- Metrical Psalm
- Benediction

THE PASTOR AND THE PEOPLE

The Directory urges that the people prepare their hearts before assembling for worship, and that they meet 'not irreverently, but in a grave and seeming manner, taking their seats or places without adoration. or bowing themselves towards one place or another'. If the divines were anxious to discourage idolatrous genuflections in worship, they were equally concerned to prevent casual familiarity. Hence there were to be no 'private wisperings, conferences, salutations, or doing reverence to any person present, or

coming in'. Likewise, there should be no 'gazing, sleeping, and other indecent behaviour, which may disturb the minister or people' in 'the service of God'.

The Scriptures are only to be read by 'pastors and teachers', and occasionally by ministerial students. Thus the office of reader, tracing its ancestry from an earlier Reformed tradition back to the synagogue,⁴⁹ was — with doubtful necessity — laid aside. Indeed, do the Scriptures support the Directory at this point? Unlike the Prayer Book lectionary, readings from the Apocrypha are forbidden, but 'all the canonical books' are to 'read over in order, that the people may be better acquainted with the whole body of the scriptures'. Occasionally, part of what is read may be expounded, after the reading, for clarification. However, 'regard is always to be had unto the time' so that the rest of the service, and especially the preaching is not 'rendered tedious'.

THE PRIORITY OF PREACHING

Thus the major concern of the Assembly was to restore preaching to a place of prominence in public worship. Here one detects the great difference in priorities between Anglican and Puritan worship. ... As the Prayer Book became more established, the sheer length of the liturgy left little or no time for a sermon. Practice rather than intention thus justifies Dr. Kenneth Brownell's observation that 'Anglican worship is primarily priestly' whereas 'Reformed worship is primarily prophetic'.⁵¹ ... The Westminster Assembly was determined to ensure that 'good trumpets' would have plenty of time to preach. Accordingly, the Directory declares that 'Preaching of the word, being the power of God unto salvation, and one of the greatest and most excellent works

belonging to the ministry of the gospel, should be so performed. that the workman need not be ashamed, but may save himself, and those that hear him.'

Whatever our former FIEC president means by saying that the sermon is a 'relatively modern invention', we have the Puritans to thank for reasserting its importance. When the centrality of preaching is attacked by those ostensibly in the Puritan tradition, it is high time to remember our roots. For all that is best and most enduring in the history of evangelicalism has been due to the God-honoured, Spirit-anointed preaching of Christ and him crucified. We must not be ignorant of Satan's devices. He is always opposed to preaching. The introduction of drama and dance among so-called evangelicals gives him, and others, great pleasure, for the gap between truth-obscuring 'dramatic worship' and the truth-corrupting theatricalism of the Mass is no great chasm!

One trusts it is not necessary in this conference to labour these points. But, for us to be self-critical for a moment, a thorough study of the Directory's excellent pronouncements on preaching would not only complete a preacher's education; it would help us to avoid the sometimes valid criticism one hears about modern Reformed preaching. For instance, the preacher should not simply dish up dull, undiluted systematic theology. Truth must be made to live. After all, doesn't the prince of darkness prefer dull, dark sermons too? So 'illustrations, of what kind soever, ought to be full of light'. ... If preaching is to be the highlight of Reformed worship, powerless preaching is all the excuse our detractors need to go elsewhere and do something different! May we heed the words of the greatest preacher Puritanism ever produced, Richard Baxter: 'Nothing is more indecent

than a dead preacher, speaking to dead hearers the living truths of the living God'.⁵⁴

To be practical, the Westminster divines didn't expect that every preacher should conform to a rigid Puritan equivalent of the Anglican stereotype with his sanctimonious grin and parsonic voice! They weren't out to crush individuality. As surely as Cranmer's style was not Calvin's, so Bunyan was not to ape Baxter, nor was Goodwin to duplicate Gouge. So, the Directory's 'method is not prescribed as necessary for every man...but only recommended, as being found by experience to be very blessed of God'. But whatever our homiletic method, our ministry should be 'Painful' rather than negligent, 'Plain' for all to understand, 'Faithful' in seeking Christ's honour alone, 'Wise' in the use of reproof, without personal passion or bitterness, 'Grave', so as not to make preaching appear contemptible — there must be no attempt to entertain — and 'Loving' or 'affectionate', that our hearers may see our only concern is 'to do them good'. Lastly, he who teaches others must be seen to be 'taught of God, and persuaded in his own heart, that all that he teacheth is the truth of Christ; and walking before his flock, as an example to them in it; earnestly, both in private and public, recommending his labours to the blessing of God, and watchfully looking to himself, and the flock whereof the Lord hath made him an overseer'. If preaching was in need of reformation according to these criteria 350 years ago, God forbid that we should say anything less today!

THE PRACTICE OF PRAYER

If the prominence given to preaching distinguishes the Directory from the

Prayer Book, so does its policy with regard to public prayer. While the divines retained a fixed liturgical framework, they did not prescribe set forms of prayer. Hence their recommendations were called a 'directory', i.e. the subject matter for prayer is set down for the minister's guidance in prayer. ...

The debates of the Westminster Assembly have a relevance for us today, not least where the content of so-called 'open worship' and sometimes of pulpit prayers are concerned. Indeed, as I heard on one occasion, is it spiritual to thank God for 'sending the Holy Spirit to lick us into shape'? The framers of the Directory would never have called such undignified rubbish Spirit-directed prayer! As A. F. Mitchell makes clear: 'Nothing was further from their intentions than to encourage unpremeditated or purely extemporary effusions, or to represent any fluency in these as the stirring up of that gift which is given to all the children of God in some measure.'⁵⁷ Even the Independent Philip Nye admitted there was a middle way between set forms and extemporary prayers when he said: 'I plead for neither, but for *studied* prayers.'⁵⁸ Surely, as Nye argued, public prayers require no less preparation than sermons. If the 'open-your-mouth-wide-and-I-will-fill-it' policy is irresponsible where preaching is concerned, why should we imagine it is acceptable in the case of prayer? If notes — and even written-out sermons in the case of Jonathan Edwards — are admissible, then why not written-out prayers? And let us not forget that if the minister prays *extempore*, what he utters becomes a pulpit-prescribed form for the praying congregation!

Once the idea of prepared prayer is admitted, the objection to liturgical forms

has to be treated with considerable reservation. Indeed, the Psalms may be regarded as liturgical documents, and did not the apostles weave part of Psalm 2 into their prayer in Acts 4:24-30? The Puritans and others objected to *imposed* liturgies — this being the major objection to the Prayer Book — but they were not altogether opposed to the use of precomposed forms. John Owen granted this later, even though he argues for Christ's gift of prayer to ministers.⁵⁹

Of course, as the preface to the Directory makes plain, the mere reading of fixed prayers could be a totally unspiritual exercise. That said, it is arguable that the Independents tended to be unnecessarily 'ultra'. They were understandably over-reacting to the mechanical abuse of an imposed liturgy. Indeed, had the Church of England adhered more closely to Calvin's policy of a simpler, more flexible liturgy (including set prayers) from the beginning, this over-reaction would have been avoided. As it was, the Independents helped produce a Directory which cut the Reformed Churches adrift from a tradition of discretionary liturgical worship.⁶⁰ Our current free-for-all policy really dates from this time. But surely, may not fixed forms be freely chosen by spiritually minded men alongside their own premeditated prayers? The all important point is the state of the heart. A man may be as unspiritual in his proud opposition to a liturgy as one who slavishly follows it.

It was quite wrong to write the Prayer Book off completely, and later in the century, the Presbyterian Matthew Henry had occasion to rebuke the excessive criticism of it by another minister.⁶¹ ... True, as the preface of the Directory states, the Prayer Book had become an idol to some, but

Cranmer's prayers had helped create a genuine piety among many Englishmen. And who would question the theology and the unction of the prayer of humble access in the communion service:

We do not presume to come to this thy table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy table. But thou art the same Lord, whose property is always to have mercy:...

Surely Cranmer still has something to teach us today about public prayer. ...

THE PRIVILEGE OF PRAISE

To the Westminster reformers, public worship consisted of proclamation, prayer, and praise. Thus the Directory concludes: 'And because singing of psalms is of all other the most proper ordinance for expressing joy and thanksgiving, ... It is the duty of Christians to praise God publickly, by singing of psalms together in the congregation, and also privately in the family.' Time and propriety forbid a lengthy discussion of the exclusive psalmody versus hymns debate. This was simply not an issue for the Westminster Assembly, and the era of English hymnody had hardly dawned. However, the hymns of Watts and Wesley made their impact on exclusive psalm-singers during the following century throughout the English-speaking world. In the United States, the 1788 Presbyterian Directory enjoined the singing of 'psalms *and* hymns'. Forty years earlier, Jonathan Edwards had reacted to the new fashion with moderation. After preaching away from home, he found that his Northampton congregation had been using Watts' hymns to the exclusion of the

Psalter. He ‘disliked not their making some use of the hymns; but did not like their setting aside the Psalms.’⁶⁷ However, this moderation is not enough for Michael Bushell whose reactionary *tour de force* in favour of exclusive psalmody nonetheless deserves the attention of chorus and hymn singers alike!⁶⁸ Certainly psalm singing deserves a much higher profile in modern worship. After all, are the psalms not the heritage of New Testament children of the covenant?

However, one wonders if Bushell has not overstated his case. It is simply not that obvious that the Apostle excludes the possibility of post-apostolic hymns in Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16. Without denying that the ‘word of Christ’ is found in the psalms, surely New Testament Christians are expected to sing the ‘word of Christ’ in the language of fulfillment as well as prophecy. It seems strange that our understanding, preaching, and praying may be expressed in NT language when our praise should remain in OT language. This may be illustrated from Calvin who was no exclusive psalm singer⁶⁹ even if he did not write that beautiful hymn attributed to him.⁷⁰ The Reformer says ‘As for public prayers, there are two kinds: the one consists simply of speech, the other of song’.⁷¹ Now if *spoken* prayers may use NT language, why should *sung* prayers be confined to OT language? Is the praise of Christians to be no different from the Jews? And is the issue to be settled by a tune?

Bushell argues that ‘uninspired praises’, i.e. hymns not found in the Bible, have no place in Christian worship. But this could imply the most rigid kind of liturgical worship, with all our prayers and sermons taken *verbatim* from the Bible, for what Christian could be content with uninspired worship at any point

in the service? It is surely sufficient to ensure that every part of worship is consistent with scripture truth rather than a *verbatim* copy of it. If the psalms, unlike our sermons, are ‘untouched by human hands’, where does that leave the Anglo-Scottish Psalter which, in the words of Sir Richard Terry, ‘groans under the weight of the monotonous ‘Ballad Metre’, i.e. 8.6.8.6.’⁷² Did the Holy Spirit reveal them to David and Asaph in such a strait-jacket, sometimes producing embarrassing if not amusing results? The regulative principle could overthrow the entire Presbyterian tradition of metrical psalms in favour of the Anglican chant! The answer is, of course, that literary form is a thing indifferent, and that it is the divinely-inspired truth-content that makes them acceptable. Quite! And is it not an insult to the Holy Spirit to describe a hymn which is orthodox and full of Christ ‘uninspired’? This is not to supplement scripture, but to acknowledge that a hymn may *reflect* revelation as in a mirror. Just as the Westminster Directory was concerned that preaching and praying should faithfully reflect the Word of God, so hymns fulfilling the same requirement may surely be admitted. Consistent with Calvin’s actual position, later Presbyterians like Charles Hodge⁷³ and Albert Barnes⁷⁴ endorse the use-of post-apostolic hymns. As for modern choruses, our forefathers would probably say that *some* of them are useful teaching aids for very young children. But for adults, they can only be the effusions of immature Christians reared on superficial preaching. Where there is a healthy appetite for the Reformed Faith, nothing less than the psalms and hymns of the Reformed Faith will be suitable vehicles of praise.

It is unfortunate that English-speaking psalm-singers usually end up plead-

ing for one rather unpoetic, seventeenth-century version of the Psalms. This is not to forget some glorious and justly famous individual psalms, nor do I wish to appear ungracious in my remarks. But there are other versions which could convince those brought up on the eloquence and energy of Watts and Wesley that psalms should not be so neglected. The *Anglo-Genevan Psalter*,⁷⁵ with its tasteful translations of Marot's and Beza's paraphrases, employing varied metres and set to the majestic and glorious tunes of Greiter and Bourgeois, meets this requirement. Here are the psalms which inspired the heroic-Huguenots in their sufferings for Christ. There was nothing drab about Reformed worship at the beginning, judging by the experience of a student passing through Strasbourg in 1545 where Calvin had published his first psalter just six years before:

You would never believe what a happy thing it is and what peace of conscience one experiences in being where the Word of God is purely proclaimed and the sacraments purely administered. Also when one hears the fine Psalms sung and the marvellous works of the Lord... At the beginning when I heard the singing I could scarcely keep myself from weeping with joy. You would not hear one voice drowning another. Everybody holds a book of music in his hand. Every man and woman alike praises the Lord.⁷⁶

CONCLUSION: WORSHIP IN SPIRIT AND TRUTH

I would like to conclude on this note of joy in true worship. After all, the psalmist declared 'In your presence is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures for evermore' (Ps. 16: 11). One wonders if this was always the dominant note during the seventeenth century. True,

there were great theologians, mighty preachers, and occasional revivals. But there were also — to use the subtitle of Richard Baxter's *Catholick Theologie* (1675) — the 'dogmatical word-warriors', whose bitter disputings and ultra-orthodox contendings tended to drown the note of praise. Alas, the Puritans duplicated their confessions and their energies. It was a century which ended on the low notes of heresy, fragmentation, deadness, and secularism. And all this despite the faithful though formal attempts of the Puritans to complete the English Reformation. Do we not feel burdened by these things today? Do we not yearn for those seasons of revival and refreshment which would cure many — if not all — of our present ills? We dare not think that the mere reformation of worship will guarantee worship itself, any more than reformation itself automatically brings revival. There must be an earnest pleading with God and a humble dependence on the Holy Spirit.

Unlike the Westminster divines whose prescribed services — including solemn fasts and public thanksgivings — were quite formal, the Methodists of the next century restored the less formal love-feasts referred to in 2 Peter 2:13 and Jude 12, and known in the early church. Thomas Manton⁷⁷ doubted whether they had any permanent place in the fellowship of the church whereas Calvin is happy just to acknowledge that these 'frugal' and 'restrained' gatherings were 'feasts which the faithful held among themselves, to witness to their brotherly concord.'⁷⁸ During the early days of the evangelical revival, something very remarkable occurred at a Methodist love-feast. As if to prove that God only meets with those who seek him with a whole heart, whatever

forms they use, John Wesley recorded in *his Journal* for Monday, January 1, 1739:

Mr. Hall, Kinchin, Ingham, Whitefield, Hutchins, and my brother Charles, were present at our love-feast in Fetter Lane, with about sixty of our brethren. About three in the morning, as we were continuing instant in prayer, the power of God came mightily upon us, insomuch that many cried out for exceeding joy, and many fell to the ground. As soon as we were recovered a little from that awe and amazement at the presence of his Majesty, we broke out with one voice, ‘We praise thee, O God; we acknowledge thee to be the Lord.’⁷⁹

May the Lord in his infinite mercy so visit us again in our day. Let us pray:

Grant, Almighty God, that we may ever be attentive to that rule which has been prescribed to us by thee in the Law, as well as in the Prophets and in the Gospel, so that we may constantly abide in thy precepts, and be wholly dependent on the words of thy mouth, and never turn aside either to the right hand or to the left, but glorify thy name, as thou hast commanded us, by offering to thee a true, sincere, and spiritual worship. Grant also that we may truly and from the heart turn to thee, and offer ourselves to thee as a sacrifice, that thou mayest govern us according to thy will, and so rule all our affections by thy Spirit, that we may through the whole of our life strive to glorify thy name, until having at length finished all our struggles, we reach that blessed rest, which has been obtained for us by the blood of thy only-begotten Son, our Lord Jesus so Christ. Amen.⁸⁰ 

For more information about Norwich Reformed Church, please see their website at www.geocities.com/nrchurch. — Ed.

REFERENCES

Various editions of the Directory are available. The one used in this paper is included in *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (The WRS Journal, 7:2, Late Summer, 2000

Publications Committee of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland: Glasgow, 1973).

¹ David Middleton. ‘Praise’ in *Angle*. Surrey Chapel Magazine, Norwich. July, 1989.

² For a detailed account of the progress of the Directory, see W. A. Shaw, *A History of the English Church*. Longmans, London, 1900, i. 337-57; Robert S. Paul, *The Assembly of the Lord*. T. & T. Clark. Edinburgh, 1987, 359-75.

³ Cited in J. M. Barkley, *The Worship of the Reformed Church*, Lutterworth, London, 1966, 31.

⁴ Cited in W. A. Shaw, *op.cit.*, 340.

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⁴⁹ *The Book of Common Order of the Church of Scotland ... and the Directory for the Public Worship of God...*, with introduction and notes by George W. Sprott and Thomas Leishman, William Blackwood, Edinburgh, 1868, pp. xxiii and 332.

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⁵¹ ‘Worship and the Marian Exiles in Frankfurt’, in *Spiritual Worship*, Westminster Conference, London, 1986, 13.

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⁵⁴ Cited in Philip Doddridge, *Lectures on Preaching in Works*, eds. E. Williams and E. Parsons, Leeds, 1802-5, v.461.

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⁵⁷ *The Westminster Assembly, its History and Standards*, James Nisbet, London, 1883, 228.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 229.

⁵⁹ ‘It is not about stinted forms of prayer in the worship and service of God, by those who, of their own accord, do make use of that kind of assistance, judging that course to be better than anything they can do themselves in the discharge of the work of the ministry, but of the imposition of forms on others who desire “to stand fast in the liberty with which Christ hath made them free”, that we enquire.’ *A Discourse concerning Liturgies, and their imposition in The Works of John Owen, DD*,

eds. W. H. Goold, Johnson, and Hunter, London, 1851, xv, 21). Agreeing with Owen in principle, yet also arguing in favour of traditional Reformed worship, James Bannerman writes: ‘...we do not deny that a form of words is not only lawful, but necessary, in social or public prayer. We do not deny that it is lawful ... for ministers, in conducting the devotions of public assemblies, to premeditate or precompose their prayers... We do not deny, in respect even to human compositions of prayer or formal liturgies... it may become necessary to make use of forms of prayer as helps to ministers and people...’ (*The Church of Christ: A Treatise on the Nature, Powers, Ordinances, Discipline, and Government of the Christian Church*, Banner of Truth, fac. London, 1960, i. 382.)

⁶⁰ Sprott and Leishman, *op.cit.*, 263.

⁶¹ J. B. Williams, *Memoirs ... of the Rev. Matthew Henry* (1828), p. 182, in *The Lives of Philip and Matthew Henry* (two volumes in one), Banner of Truth, fac., Edinburgh, 1974. ...

⁶⁷ Cited in Louis F. Benson, *The English Hymn*, The Presbyterian Board of Publication, Philadelphia, 1915, 163.

⁶⁸ Michael Bushell, *The Songs of Zion*, Crown and Covenant Publications, Pittsburgh, Pa., 1980.

⁶⁹ Judging by his Strasbourg and Genevan Psalters, Calvin was not exclusively committed to the OT Psalms, since they included metrical versions of the Lord’s Prayer, the Ten Commandments, the Song of Simeon and the Apostles Creed. Bushell admits that ‘It is quite true that Calvin never, so far as we know, formally and explicitly condemned the use of any and all uninspired songs in worship.’ (*Ibid.*, 140.) Indeed, this is explained by Calvin’s unprejudiced exegesis of Colossians 3:16, so very different from Bushell’s forced view. Bushell overstates Calvin’s position when he says ‘The Psalms in Calvin’s view are so superior to human hymns that to place the latter alongside the former could only be an act of impiety.’ (*Ibid.*) What Calvin actually said

was: ‘...we shall find no songs better and more suitable for our purpose than the Psalms of David’, which is rather different.

Barkley shows that civil interference in Geneva frustrated Calvin’s desires for weekly communion, and there is evidence that he preferred the worship of Strasbourg to that of Geneva, where hymns were sung as well as psalms. See *The Worship of the Reformed Church*, pp. 16-21. In 1545 Calvin prepared a third edition of his liturgy *La Forme des Prières* for the use of his former congregation in Strasbourg. His outline of the ideal Sunday morning service hardly suggests exclusive psalmody; it also says something about the warmth and breadth of Calvin’s ‘Calvinism’: ‘We begin with the confession of our sins, adding readings from the Law and the Gospel (that is, sentences of remission) ... and after we are assured that as Jesus Christ has righteousness and life in Himself, and that He lives for the sake of the Father, so we are justified in Jesus Christ and live in a new life by the same Jesus Christ ... we continue with psalms, hymns of praise, the reading of the Gospel ... and ... quickened and stirred by the reading and preaching of the Gospel, and the confession of our faith (that is, Apostle’s Creed) ... it follows that we must pray for the salvation of all men for the life of Christ should be greatly enkindled within us. Now the life of Christ consists in this, namely, to seek and save that which is lost...’ (*Ibid.*, pp. 17-18).

The available evidence suggests that Calvin was really in sympathy with psalms and scripture-based paraphrases. Unlike earlier editions, the 1611 edition of the Scottish Psalter reflected Calvin’s position more closely. To say these hymns were acceptable for private rather than public worship is to rest a questionable argument on the mere size of the congregation! See Hector Cameron’s doubtful discussion of these points in ‘Purity of Worship’ in *Hold Fast Your Confession*, ed. Donald Macleod, Knox Press, Edinburgh, 1978, pp. 102-3. To say these ‘hymns’ were published in a *public* service book for only *private* use — when no such rule is indicated — is not very convincing.

⁷⁰ See the hymn 'I greet Thee who my sure Redeemer art' in *Christian Hymns*, Evangelical Movement of Wales, Bridgend, 1977, hymn 124; also *Hymns and Psalms*, Methodist Publishing House, London, 1983, hymn 391. The hymn first appeared in the 1545 Strasbourg Psalter, the very same year Calvin produced the new liturgy for his old congregation. Is it not possible that he wrote the hymn for them too? According to Philip Schaff, it was also discovered in 'an old Genevese prayer-book.' (*Christ in Song*, Anson Randolph, New York, 1869, 678). While external evidence might not be conclusive (see Bushell, op.cit., p.199, n. 56), strong internal evidence of style and piety — comparing the hymn with Calvin's recorded prayers — arguably strengthens Schaff's case for Calvin's authorship of the hymn.

⁷¹ Cited in *Book of Praise: Anglo-Genevan Psalter*, Committee for the Publication of the Anglo-Genevan Psalter, Hamilton, Ontario, 1971, p. v.

⁷² *Calvin's First Psalter (1539)*, ed. Sir Richard Terry, Ernest Benn Limited, London, 1932, p. viii.

⁷³ *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians*, Banner of Truth, fac., London, 1964, pp. 303-49.

⁷⁴ *Notes ... on the New Testament: Ephesians-Colossians*, Partridge and Oakey, London, 1850, p. 132.

⁷⁵ See ref. 71.

⁷⁶ Cited in Jean Cadier, *The Man God Mastered*, tr. O. R. Johnson, Inter-Varsity Fellowship, London, 1960, 98-100.

⁷⁷ *An Exposition on the Epistle of Jude*, Banner of Truth, London, 1958, pp. 273-4.

⁷⁸ *Comm. Jude 12*. (Calvin's Commentaries, eds. D. W. and T. F. Torrance, *A Harmony of the Gospels ... and the Epistles of James and Jude*, tr. A. W. Morrison, Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh, 1972, 330-1.

⁷⁹ *The Journal of the Reverend John Wesley*,

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AM, in *Works*, ed. Thomas Jackson, John Mason, London, 1840-2, i. 160-1.

⁸⁰ John Calvin, *A Commentary on the Twelve Minor Prophets: Volume 2: Joel. Amos & Obadiah*, Banner of Truth, fac., Edinburgh, 1986, 183-4 and 104.

**You alone *are*
the LORD; You
have made
heaven, the
heaven of
heavens, with
all their host,
the earth and
everything on
it, the seas and
all that is in
them, and You
preserve them
all. The host of
heaven wor-
ships You.**

Nehemiah 9:6

EXEGESIS

SCRIPTURAL SINGING IN THE CHURCH by John Battle

In church history singing has been central to church worship. From the earliest congregational singing to the chanting of ministers to the singing of choirs, the forms changed during the centuries after Christ. It was the Reformation that restored congregational singing to a prominent place in worship. It was said that Martin Luther won more converts through his hymns than he did through his sermons.

In our days we desire to worship God in singing in the way commanded in Scripture. There are several places where we are commanded to sing unto the Lord. Since the church is one through the various dispensations, we would expect that God, who was pleased with the Psalms being sung in Israel, would be pleased with praises in music today. Such indeed proves to be the case.

BIBLICAL SINGING

Throughout the Old Testament the people of God worshipped with music and singing. Moses and his sister sang to celebrate the Red Sea crossing. The prophets that met King Saul were singing and playing on lyres, tambourines, flutes, and harps (1 Sam. 10:5). David played the harp and sang for Saul. But the most important music was that of the tabernacle and temple worship, consisting of the Psalms. These were written and performed for centuries in the center of Israel's worship. The "singers" were an important part of the population when the Jews returned to Jerusalem from captivity and the second temple was built.¹

The tradition of sacred singing continued through the intertestament period. The Jews continued to sing many songs taken from the OT, including Moses' and Miriam's songs of victory over Pharaoh, Moses' prayer in Deuteronomy 32, the song of Hannah, the song in Habakkuk 3, Isaiah's song in chapter 26, the prayer of Jonah from the fish's belly, and the prayer of Azariah and the song of the three Hebrew young men in the apocryphal additions to Daniel 3. In the synagogues Psalms and other portions were chanted, without musical instruments.²

Music in worship continued into the New Testament. After the Last Supper, before Jesus led his disciples to the Garden of Gethsemane, we read that they sang a hymn, probably a Psalm (from Pss. 113 to 118). In the New Testament times the Christians gathered and sang praises to Jesus Christ as the Lord, the Son of God. Of course, they continued to sing praises to God as well.

Actually, several passages in the NT itself probably are early Christian hymns. This appears from the metrical lines of the Greek, the important theological summations provided by the passages, and the sometimes their different style from the context. Most scholars believe that the following passages appear to be early Christian hymns sung as part of the church's worship: Acts 4:24-30; Ephesians 5:14; Philippians; 2:6-11; Colossians 1:15-20; 1 Timothy 3:16; and the several songs in Revelation.³

Christians in the early church sang selections from the NT also, especially the Magnificat of Mary (Lk. 1:46-55), the Benedictus of Zechariah (Lk. 1:67-79), the Gloria in excelsis Deo of the angels

(Lk. 2:13-14), and the Nunc Dimittis of Simeon (Lk. 2:28-32).⁴ In an especially interesting exchange of correspondence, dated AD 112, Pliny the Younger, the pagan imperial legate in Bithynia in northern Turkey wrote to the Roman emperor Trajan, reporting to him what the Christians in his province were doing and what he was doing to suppress them. Christianity had an early beginning there, having started while Peter still lived (1 Pet. 1:1). Pliny mentioned that the Christians he observed “were wont to assemble before daybreak and sing by turns a hymn to Christ as God.”⁵ This hymn would be either a NT portion of Scripture set to music, or a Christian composition based on scriptural truth.

Two important passages that regulated singing to the Lord in the New Testament churches were written by Paul during his first Roman imprisonment:

“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.” (Colossians 3:16)

“Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit. Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Ephesians 5:18-20)

Both these letters were written at the same time to churches in Asia Minor, to the church in Colossae, and to the circuit of churches starting in Ephesus and ending in Laodicea near Colossae. We can assume that similar instructions would have been given to all the churches.

The Reformed belief in the regulative principle is based on the second com-

mandment. We are to worship God only in the way he has ordered in his word. Therefore, it is important for us to see how our singing is to be regulated by Scripture, especially in these two passages. Of course, for a complete study, it would be necessary to examine much more from Scripture, including the use of music in both testaments. Only then could a final conclusion be sustained. However, we will find that these two passages contain much that is found elsewhere in the Bible, and can provide a good place to begin studying this subject.

TYPES OF MUSIC

These passages list three terms for the music we should sing to one another and to God. They are psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. It appears from biblical usage that these three terms overlap in their meanings. So a psalm could also be classified as a hymn, or as a spiritual song. However, the reverse is not necessarily the case.⁶ There could be a hymn or a spiritual song that is not a psalm, for example. Each term has a range of uses that distinguishes it from the others.⁷

Psalms

The first word used is *psalm*, from the Greek ψαλμός *psalmos*. As we would expect, this term is most frequently used for the Psalms of the Old Testament. Very frequently the term *psalmos* is used in the Septuagint Greek translation of the Old Testament (LXX) in the titles of the Psalms. David is described as the one who wrote Israel’s psalms (2 Sam. 23:1). Using a form of that word, David is described as a skillful player of musical instruments (1 Sam. 16:18). Amos 5:23 in the LXX refers even to the psalms of the musical instruments. It is obvious from

the abundant use of this word in the Greek OT that it refers to songs of praise accompanied by musical instruments.

In the NT the term is often used referring to the OT Psalms.⁸ Also, the word in its various forms is used for singing praise to God in general. Those who are merry are to sing psalms (Ja. 5:13); the collected Christians are to encourage each other with, among other things, psalms (1 Cor. 14:26); the saved Gentiles will sing psalms to God (Rom. 15:9, quoting Ps. 18:49; obviously not being sung in the temple!); and the Christians were to pray and sing psalms to the Lord with the Spirit and with their minds (1 Cor. 14:15).

From the total biblical usage, it appears that the early church was to continue praising God in song, using musical instruments.⁹ They were to sing the old Psalms of David, and other songs that the Holy Spirit would lead them to sing, using the added revelation of the New Testament.

Hymns

The second word is *hymn*, in Greek ὕμνος *humnos*. In the LXX this Greek word and its related words are used to indicate any song of praise. It can refer to the Psalms of David (as in 2 Chron. 29:30). Yet even the pastures and flocks can “sing hymns” to God (Ps. 65:13; in the LXX 64:14). Usually it refers to praise to God, but it can be used for other objects, like Dagon, god of the Philistines (Jud. 16:24). The two terms hymn and sing a psalm are put together in the apocryphal book of 2 Maccabees 1:30, which the New Jerusalem Bible translates as “The priests then chanted hymns accompanied by the harp.”

Jesus and his disciples sang a hymn when they finished the Lord’s Supper, before they went to the Mount of Olives

(Mt. 26:30 = Mk. 14:26). At midnight in the prison, after having been beaten and placed in severe stocks, Paul and Silas sang hymns so loud the other prisoners could hear them (Acts 16:25). The Lord Jesus in prophecy is spoken of as singing hymns to God in the midst of the church (Heb. 2:12, quoting Ps. 22:22).

We learn in these and other passages that we are to sing songs to God that praise him — his attributes and his works. Whether these are taken directly from Scripture or are expressing scriptural truths in other words, God should be the center and subject of our hymns.

Spiritual songs

Here Paul combines two words. *Song* in these passages is the Greek word ᾠδή *ode*, “a song,” related to the verb ᾄδω *ado*, “to sing.” A song could be of various types, secular or religious. The word occurs several times in Revelation, as the new song sung by the angels in heaven (5:9), the new song sung by the 144,000 in heaven (14:3), and the song of Moses sung in heaven by the redeemed saints, which song is then quoted (15:3-4).

But since songs can be secular as well as sacred, wicked as well as pious, Paul specifies what kind of songs the Christians should sing to God and each other. They are to be spiritual, in Greek πνευματικός *pneumatikos*. This word, of course, is related to the Holy Spirit, and to spiritual truth in general — that is, truth concerning God and the world of spirits.

Spiritual things in general can be those truths that are in agreement with God’s word (Rom. 7:14; 15:27; 1 Cor. 2:13-14; 9:11; Col. 1:9). Sometimes they are things that are non-physical in nature (as in 1 Cor. 9:11). A spiritual person is one who is controlled by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 2:15; 3:1; 14:37; Gal. 6:1), and

spiritual gifts and blessings are bestowed by the Spirit (Rom. 1:11; 1 Cor. 12:1; 14:1; Eph. 1:3).¹⁰ A spiritual being is one who belongs to the spirit world, and thus spiritual beings can be righteous or wicked (Eph. 6:12). Sometimes physical items are spoken of in a figurative sense, with a spiritual significance (1 Cor. 10:3-4; 1 Pet. 2:5; Rev. 11:8). Finally, spiritual things can be things that are enlivened or empowered by the Holy Spirit, as the “spiritual body” we will have in the resurrection (1 Cor. 15:44, 46).

Putting all these uses together, we can see that spiritual songs are songs which are agreeable to the word of God, and which thus are empowered by the Holy Spirit to praise God and edify the church. It is only by the Holy Spirit that we can sing to Jesus as Lord (1 Cor. 12:3).

Thus the Christians were to sing “psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs,” not indicating three names for the same thing (that is, three types of OT psalms), or three strictly divided categories of sacred songs, but rather, sacred songs whose definitions overlap. “The ‘psalms’ might be drawn from the OT Psalter, the ‘hymns’ might be Christian canticles (some of which are reproduced, in whole or in part, in the NT text), and the ‘spiritual songs’ might be unpremeditated words sung in the Spirit, voicing holy aspirations.”¹¹ The key is that these songs must agree with Scripture, exalt God, and edify believers.

WHY SING?

Paul begins the paragraph in Ephesians 5 with a practical goal for the Christians: be imitators of God and live a life of the love of Christ. Our lives are not to be imitating the sinful world, but are rather to be full of light, pleasing the

Lord. Christians are not to be taken in by the darkness and fall into its errors and sins, but rather are to walk in the light of Scriptural truth. To do this, we must “understand what the will of our Lord is” (v. 17). The contrast continues; not to be filled with foolishness, to be drunk with wine. Instead, we are to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Verses 19-20 tell us how to do this. We must continually be thinking and meditating on the word of God. It is the Wisdom literature of the OT that abounds with this practical knowledge, and this knowledge is encapsulated in the hymnody of Israel and the early church. Singing is one way to bring what we learn before our minds in impressive ways. It implants in our memory and consciousness the truths of God’s wisdom. This is why we sing not only ourselves, “in our hearts,” but also “unto one another.” This singing also glorifies God, as it shows our “giving thanks” unto him for all his blessings.

The Colossians 3 passage bears a similar burden. Verse 1 begins with the truth that we are now risen with Christ, and therefore have a new interest and direction to our thoughts and lives. Verses 5-9 tell us what we must get rid of and discard — the old habits and sins common to the world. These thoughts and ways must be replaced with the godly beliefs of the gospel, the love of the brothers, and living together in Christian unity that pictures the new man in Christ. By the time that Paul gets to verse 16, he comes back to the same point as he did in Ephesians: we must be filled with the wisdom of Christ in order to think in this new way. And how are we to be filled with this wisdom? We do this by singing to one another psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. We thus bless each other and glorify God by being thankful. Here Paul

mentions two positive results — we teach each other and we admonish each other. There can be no Christian life apart from accurate Christian doctrine; and our singing of God’s wisdom fills our minds with his truth. As a result we are able to live out the Christian life (v. 17, and the “household rules” that follow).

Thus we believe that singing in the church is a vital part of the worship of God. It glorifies him by giving him thanks and ascribing to him those attributes and works by which he is described in the Bible. It strengthens those who sing, as they are reminded of God’s truths and the duties he has set before us. It binds us in unity as we sing the same thing together, showing our common faith and purpose. And scriptural singing edifies those who hear, reminding them of their faith and duty. Though the centuries God has blessed his church through its singing. Let us obey God in worship, and sing to him and one another agreeably to Scripture, from the heart, and with joy and thanksgiving. 📖

¹ For a readable history of music in the OT and NT periods and in the early church, see Donald P. Hustad, “Music in the Worship of the Old Testament,” “Music in the Worship of the New Testament,” and “Music in the Worship of the Early Church,” *Music and the Arts in Christian Worship*, Vol. 4 of The Complete Library of Christian Worship, ed. by Robert E. Webber (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1994), pp. 188-198.

² Hustad, “Music in the Worship of the Old Testament,” pp. 191-192.

³ Cf. Walter Lock, *The Epistle to the Ephesians* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1929), p. 60; F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, NICNT, p. 159, n. 156.

⁴ Hustad, “Music in the Worship of the New

Testament,” p. 193; also F. F. Bruce, *Colossians*, p. 159, n. 156.

⁵ Pliny the Younger, “Letter to Trajan,” in *Letters* 10:96 (Trajan’s reply in *Letters* 10:97); this translation in Lock, *Ephesians*, p. 60; Charles Hodge discusses this Latin sentence, stating that “Whether the passage refers to the responsive method of singing or not, which is somewhat doubtful from the parallel passage in Colossians (where Paul speaks of their teaching one another), it at least proves that singing was from the beginning a part of Christian worship and that not only psalms but hymns also were employed,” *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians* (1856; reprinted, London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1964), p. 303.

⁶ “The early usage . . . appears to have been as loose as that of the corresponding English terms, psalm, hymn, song, is with us. A psalm was a hymn, and a hymn a song. Still there was a distinction between them as there is still.” Charles Hodge, *Ephesians*, pp. 303-304.

⁷ To find biblical Greek usage the BibleWorks4 computer program was used. Much of the information in the following paragraphs, especially relating to non-biblical usage is available in the thorough articles of Heinrich Schlier, “ᾠδή, ᾠδὴ,” and Gerhard Delling, “ἕμνος, ἕμνω, ψάλλω, ψαλμός,” in Volumes 1 and 8 of *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. by Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. and ed. by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (1964, 1972). Delling’s article, especially, contains massive amounts of helpful material.

⁸ As in Lk. 20:42; 24:44; Acts 1:20; 13:33.

⁹ The question as to whether musical instruments should be used in churches in the New Testament period is a debated one in the history of the Reformed churches. While Luther retained many worship practices from the Roman church, as long as they did not contradict Scripture, Calvin upheld the regulative principle that only those practices commanded in Scripture should be allowed in the churches. He believed there should be no musical in-

struments used in worship, and had them removed from his churches. He also restricted singing to the OT Psalms. This practice has continued in some Reformed churches, for example, in the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America. Many polemic works have been produced from that perspective, including James Glasgow, *Heart and Voice: Instrumental Music in Christian Worship Not Divinely Authorised* (Belfast: C. Aitchison & J. Cleeland, n.d.), John McNaugher, *The Psalms in Worship* (Pittsburgh: The United Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1907), and *The True Psalmody; or The Bible Psalms, the Church's Only Manual of Praise*, by ministers from the Reformed Presbyterian and the United Presbyterian Churches (1859; portions reprinted, Dallas: Naphtali Press, 1991). Some time ago the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, before embarking on its own project of publishing the *Trinity Hymnal*, appointed a study commission on this topic. In 1947 this committee reported to the 14th General Assembly of the OPC. The committee was divided: the majority report was brought by Robert S. Marsden (chm.), R. G. Kuiper, Arthur W. Kuschke, John H. Skilton, Edward J. Young; the minority report was brought by John Murray and William Young. Both sides are skillfully argued with much supporting evidence. These reports provide an excellent summary of the argument on both sides. The OPC did not officially approve either report, but shortly thereafter published the *Trinity Hymnal*, which incorporates both biblical Psalms and other hymns.

¹⁰ For this reason, some scholars believe this phrase refers to charismatic songs (see, for example, F. F. Bruce's quotation referred to in the following note; Bruce may have this idea in mind, though he is not specific); however, it could just as well mean songs that are agreeable to the Holy Spirit and concerned with spiritual matters.

¹¹ F. F. Bruce, *Colossians*, p. 159; see notes 155-157 for his more detailed argumentation and references.

PRAYERS OF PRAISE AND OF IMPRE- CATION IN THE PSALMS by Christopher Lensch

The book of Psalms historically has been identified as the hymn book of the church. As our canon of prayerful hymns, it captures all the emotions of the human soul. From the torment of the persecuted, to the anguish of the penitent, to the quiet confidence of the soul at peace with God, to the ecstasy of the supplicant delivered from himself and his enemies, the Psalms are unsurpassed in defining our approach to God.

Deeply spiritual and emotionally personal, the Psalms set the pattern for our prayers of adoration, confession, and pleading. Is anyone hungering for God? let him find satisfaction in the words of Psalm 42. Is anyone anxious over the state of his heart or of his world? let him find peace in Psalm 73. Is anyone troubled? let him find security in Psalms 77 and 80. Is anyone overflowing with joy? let him exult in the praise of God in Psalms 111 and 113.

God's gift to us, the Psalms are the highest expressions of man's deepest aspirations after God. They capture our desire to commune with God, to think His thoughts, to do His will. As such, the Psalms are responsive to Who God is.

Once we begin to recognize Who God is, our very normal response to His daily goodness is worship. More than a responsive litany of prayers, however, the Psalms must be seen in our approach to God as constitutive. Enlightened by the teaching of the Law of Moses, they shape our view of God and ourselves, leading us accordingly to Him as our Creator and our Redeemer. The Psalms elucidate for us the theological world in which we interact with God.

While the Psalms are quite personal at times, they are very much God-centered. The clear and deliberate picture of God in the Psalms dictates our approach to Him. Creatures though we are, God made us to fellowship with Him; we are made in the image of God.¹ Still, His infinity/eternity,² righteousness,³ undeserved goodness,⁴ and holiness⁵ remind us that we may approach only at His bidding and on His terms.⁶

But worship Him we must. Here is how one contemporary Bible student beautifully describes the bridge of praise between God and His worshipers:

Praise is the duty and delight, the ultimate vocation of the human community; indeed, of all creation. Yes, all of life is aimed toward God and finally exists for the sake of God. Praise articulates and embodies our capacity to yield, submit, and abandon ourselves in trust and gratitude to the One whose we are. Praise is not only a human requirement and a human need, it is also a human delight. We have a resilient hunger to move beyond self, to return our energy and worth to the One from whom it has been granted. In our return to that One, we find our deepest joy. That is what it means to “glorify God and enjoy God forever.”

As praise is appropriate to human community, so praise is appropriate to the character of God, for our praise is a response to God’s power and mercy. Nothing more can be said to God. Nothing more can be added to God. Nonetheless God must be addressed. It is appropriate to address God in need, by way of petition and intercession. But address in need occurs in a context of lyrical submission in which God is addressed not because we have need, but simply because God is God and we are summoned to turn our lives in answer to God.⁷

True praise will be responsive to what God has done in His world. Biblical praise will be a constitutive, rational approach to Who God is. The Father’s praise will be in spirit and in truth.

This is why the praise of God requires more than our noise, or at our worst, our silent groanings. Praise is more than a feeling within us. God has revealed Himself in the Psalms in such a way that the Psalmist always worships the Lord intentionally and rationally. Where do any of the Psalms allow us to put our minds in neutral to blather away in the presence of the Almighty? The Lord was never pleased with the fat of rams if the worshiper’s heart was not in the sacrifice. Neither is He pleased with twenty empty “Hail Marys,” nor with a 100 thoughtless repetitions of a “praise chorus” to the point of charismatic hyper-ventilation, nor with the pagan’s spinning prayer wheel, nor with our trite table prayers.

Rather, praise must focus on its grand Object so that there generally will be a deliberate, rational aspect to praise besides the emotive aspect. There will be a balance between the groanings of Romans 8:26⁸ and the diverse and loud “hallelujahs” of Psalm 150. The apostle summarizes, “What is the conclusion then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will also pray with the understanding. I will sing with the spirit, and I will also sing with the understanding.”⁹

The Psalms teach us that God’s praise must be both cognitive and emotive, from the heart and the mind. It is fitting that our focused prayers of praise should be carried by the emotive vehicle of music.

PRAYERS OF IMPRECATION

There are some prayers in the Psalms against the wicked that immature or misguided Christians might wish were less

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focused and more implicit. They are troubled by prayers in the Psalms that utter harsh sentiments against God's enemies. These are generally called imprecations, or imprecatory prayers in the Psalms. There are as many as 50 imprecations scattered among at least eighteen of the Psalms.¹⁰

Modern Christians have mistakenly made "dispensational" value judgments about these OT prayers calling for judgment. No less than C. S. Lewis was misguided in his handling of these prayers. He writes¹¹ that the language of imprecation in the Psalms breathes of "refined malice" and borders on being "devilish," and that Christians may not entertain similar passions nor pray similar prayers seeking judgment.

While not justifying the language of imprecation, Lewis short-sightedly concludes that it was a cultural problem.

...[H]e explains that the ancient Hebrew people had no social pressures to refrain from expressing their feelings, such as resentment, with anything less than perfect freedom — 'without disguise, without self-consciousness, without shame' — without fear of being politically incorrect, sounding neurotic, or being sued for saying something that might offend the hearer. He notes as well that the psalmists lived in much more bloody and violent times. War was much more 'up close and personal.' Modern warfare, in many ways, is much more impersonal and often fought from a great distance. [Many of us] have never experienced the brutalities of war — of seeing friends and loved-ones brutally tortured, beaten, bludgeoned, axed, or stabbed with all the bloody gore and awful smelliness of it. The very brutality of the language of these Psalms repulses our effete modern sensibilities. ...Lewis admits of our genteel softness as a reason for seeing these passionate calls for revenge as horrific.¹²

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Dispensational offenders¹³ like this impugn the relevancy, if not the plenary inspiration, of the Word of God. Where Lewis missed the boat is his failure to recognize that the call for curses was not against personal enemies, but against God's sworn enemies. This is not a case of personal passions getting the best of a believer, but of seeking God's glory through the execution of God's justice upon His enemies.

When the enemies of God's anointed king blasphemed and worked violence, David as God's representative could legitimately say, "Do I not hate them, O LORD, who hate You? And do I not loathe those who rise up against You? I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies."¹⁴

Before dismissing portions of God's Word as sub-biblical, casual critics need to consider how imprecations in the Psalms fit, not just into their OT times, but into the context of the Psalm and into the message of the whole Bible. Consider these factors:¹⁵

There is no conflict between the ethic of the OT and NT. Jesus' teaching in the "Sermon on the Mount" about turning the other cheek and going the extra mile addresses the believer's behavior and attitude toward unjust, personal adversaries. In that sermon He teaches that He did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill ("establish") it.¹⁶ This becomes even clearer when we view Jesus' sermon as a conservative reconfirmation of the OT ethic of loving one's personal enemies.¹⁷

Jesus never set aside the OT law of retribution (*lex talionis*) against social criminals who, as enemies of God and His magistrate, must be prosecuted. Such social or international criminals are in view in the Psalms as objects of the Psalmist's execrations.

To impugn the imprecations of the OT is to impugn Jesus and the apostles.

Of keen interest is Jesus' familiarity and usage of imprecatory Psalms. Apart from four key Messianic Psalms, Jesus and the apostles cite most often certain imprecatory Psalms. Psalm 69 is referenced five times and seems to have found a place in His heart during his ministry.

Jesus not only pronounces a woe (a curse) upon Chorazin and Bethsaida, but He consigns Capernaum to Hades for its hard-heartedness.¹⁸ Jesus is not above saying that some souls are "accursed."¹⁹

Paul calls for a curse upon anyone who does not love Jesus²⁰ or who preached a false gospel.²¹ He calls for justice against his and God's enemies, knowing that vengeance belongs to the Lord and that He will repay.²²

John carries the message of the martyrs calling from the grave for retribution.²³

Christians should know that divine grace is supported by divine justice, and divine justice prepares for divine grace. With a biblical view of God and God's justice, and with the realization that any poetic vitriol in the Psalms is directed against the Lord's enemies, prayers of imprecation in the Psalms not only become understandable, but expected. Even C. S. Lewis says that the absence of righteous indignation in our own lives should alarm us.²⁴

If nothing else is considered apart from Jesus' usage of the imprecatory Psalms, we must draw the conclusion of another careful Bible student:

I do not say that the fact that these Psalms are so unequivocally endorsed and appropriated by our blessed Lord explains the difficulty they involve. But I am sure that the simple statement of it will constrain the disciples of Christ to touch them with

a reverent hand, and rather to distrust their own judgment concerning them than to brand such Scriptures as the products of an unsanctified and unchristian temper.²⁵

While Christians should not rush to sling wholesale imprecations against God's present enemies, neither should we be troubled when in our responsive Scripture readings in worship we come across prayers invoking God's judgment.

CONCLUSION

Right praying grows out of right theology. When we pray for justice for ourselves or for just retribution on anti-Christian forces, we pray according to God's will knowing that justice belongs to Him and that He will repay. When we adore God in our prayers of praise, we meet Him in the heavenlies and begin "to enjoy Him forever."

The Psalms teach us that prayer indeed belongs to the realm of the Spirit. The Psalms teach us that prayer is informed and shaped by God's objective Word and by an enlightened desire to seek His kingdom and His righteousness. And if the Psalms teach us nothing else, they remind us that we can pour out our souls to God in prayer, in song, and, indeed, in prayer-songs known as the Psalms. 📖

¹ "For You have made him a little lower than the angels, And You have crowned him with glory and honor. 6 You have made him to have dominion over the works of Your hands; You have put all things under his feet...." –Ps. 8:5ff.

² "Before the mountains were brought forth, Or ever You had formed the earth and the world, Even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God." – Ps. 90:2; cf. Ps. 139

³ "For You are not a God who takes pleasure in wickedness, Nor shall evil dwell with You.

⁸ Lead me, O LORD, in Your righteousness because of my enemies; Make Your way straight before my face.” –Ps. 5:4,8

⁴ “Show Your marvelous lovingkindness by Your right hand, O You who save those who trust in You From those who rise up against them.” – Ps. 17:7; cf. Ps. 103

⁵ “Exalt the LORD our God, And worship at His footstool — He is holy.” –Ps. 99:5,9

⁶ “Oh come, let us worship and bow down; Let us kneel before the LORD our Maker.” – Ps. 95:6,7

⁷ Walter Brueggemann, *Israel’s Praise*, p. 1.

⁸ “Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered.” –Rom 8:26

⁹ 1 Cor. 14:15

¹⁰ For example, see Psalms 35:5,6,8; 59:13; 109:8-16; 137.

¹¹ Reflections on the Psalms, by C. S. Lewis, pp. 23-25.

¹² Summation of C. S. Lewis by WRS student, Linda Wier, in a Spring 2000 term paper, “Notes on the Imprecatory Psalms,” pp. 4,5.

¹³ Other dispensational offenders include Halley of Handbook fame and, not surprisingly, C. I. Scofield.

¹⁴ Ps. 139:21,22

¹⁵ For a good summary of this question, see *War Psalms of the Prince of Peace: Lessons from the Imprecatory Psalms*, a recent book by James E. Adams.

¹⁶ Mt. 5:17

¹⁷ “You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.” –Lev. 19:18

¹⁸ Mt. 11:21-24

¹⁹ Mt. 25:41

²⁰ 1 Cor. 16:22

²¹ Gal. 1:8,9

²² “Alexander the coppersmith did me much harm. May the Lord repay him according to his works.” –II Tim. 4:22

²³ “And they cried with a loud voice, saying, ‘How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?’” –Rev. 6:10

²⁴ Lewis, p. 30.

²⁵ Chalmers Martin, “Imprecations in the Psalms” reprinted in *Classical Evangelical Essays*, p. 132.

**For the eyes of
the LORD *are*
on the righ-
teous, and His
ears *are open*
to their
prayers; but
the face of the
LORD *is* against
those who do
evil.**

1 Peter 3:12

APPLICATION

THE MINISTRY OF THE WORD THROUGH MUSIC by Leonard Pine

*See then that you walk circumspectly,
not as fools but as wise, redeeming the
time, because the days are evil.*

*Therefore do not be unwise, but
understand what the will of the Lord is.*

*And do not be drunk with wine, in
which is dissipation; but be filled with
the Spirit, speaking to one another in
psalms and hymns and spiritual songs,
singing and making melody in your
heart to the Lord, giving thanks always
for all things to God the Father in the
name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submit-
ting to one another in the fear of God.*

— Ephesians 5:15-21

Why do you sing in worship? Apart from the numerous commands and examples found in Scripture (as if they weren't enough), music as a means of worship is the harmonious expression of the redeemed, declaring God's worth to one another and to God himself. Though it can be observed by the lost to good effect (Psalm 40:2, 3), music in worship is not an evangelism tool (Psalm 137:3, 4). Paul tells us in both Ephesians 5 and Colossians 3 that our worship music is to take the following forms: *psalms* (the Psalter, usually with instruments); *hymns* (songs of praise, also with instruments); and *spiritual songs* (other songs that speak to the variety of the Christian experience in the Spirit). These forms, laden with the content of the Word, constitute the primary language of the heart in corporate and individual response to God. God has ordained music in worship so

that He may be exalted by His creatures, and that we may edify one another (Eph. 5:19, 21).

MUSICAL WORSHIP EXALTS THE LORD

In his article, "The Triumph of the Praise Songs" (*CT*, July 12, 1999, p. 34), Michael S. Hamilton observes, "One cannot sing praise songs without noticing how first person pronouns tend to eclipse every other subject." This from a man who approves of them! One has only to listen for a few minutes to most Christian radio stations to confirm that this observation is true. Today's Christian music focuses primarily upon man, his feelings, his problems, and his efforts to come to God.

But is the inward look the focus of the Scriptures? Just having a large number of first person pronouns is not the problem, as even a cursory review of the psalms will show that the psalmists certainly looked within. But introspection that goes no further is viewed as a problem (e.g., Psalm 77). The psalmists use their own experiences as opportunities to rest in the Lord's sovereignty, power, wisdom, holiness, protection, and so on. True worship occurs when the focus is turned outward to gaze in wonder and faith on the face of God. Music is ordained of God to enable the believer to do just that. First Chronicles 16:9 demands, "Sing to Him, sing psalms to Him; talk of all His wondrous works!" Psalm 100:2 is even more concerned with entering into the presence of God: "Serve the LORD with gladness; come before His presence with singing."

To exalt the Lord in your music, first of all, you must worship with a text ori-

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entation. Paul urges in Colossians 3:16, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom....” Christocentric content is what God desires from us, as we acknowledge the Savior He has provided for His people. Worship is not, as so many today believe and practice, something that springs out of feelings and emotions. Worship must be grounded first and foremost in the Word. I’m not simply speaking about the language we use, or certain forms of music. I’m speaking about having your emotions and feelings (a natural part of responding in love to the One who loved and chose you before the foundations of the world) under the discipline of the Word in both content and form of expression. Simply put, just because you like it doesn’t mean it’s right. In fact, just because millions of people like it doesn’t mean it’s right. Whether or not your musical worship is consistent with the content and forms of the Word is the criteria. And, you’ll notice, the Word is not anthropocentric!

Another aspect of this text orientation that must be mentioned is the necessity of substance. Endless repetition of simple (even biblical) phrases may produce euphoria in the singers (witness the use of mind-numbing choruses to soften up the typical charismatic church so they can enter into trance-like states and produce such phenomena as laughter, tears, howling, “tongues,” and so on), but is certainly out of keeping with the examples of musical expression found in the Scriptures. Leonard Payton writes, “When ‘simple’ is a virtue placed in rank above ‘biblical,’ it is not long before we are writing a different gospel on the tablets of our hearts” [“Reforming Worship Music,” *Modern Reformation Magazine*, Mar/Apr 1994, from website <http://www.remembrancer.com/ace/> *The WRS Journal*, 7:2, Late Summer, 2000

LPrefworship.html]. We’ll talk more about the *understanding* aspect of singing shortly, but for now, the Word is to dwell richly (“abundantly,” “in great measure”) in the believer. The term “fullness” is the biblical description of life in Christ, not an arbitrary minimum daily requirement! John 1:16 reads, “And of His fullness we have all received, and grace for grace.” Bumper sticker Christianity, mindless repetition of one liners, and “in a nutshell” theology just don’t add up to fullness no matter how many become ecstatic when the emotions overrule the mind orientation of the Word.

Second, you exalt the Lord in worship when you exercise discernment in preparation and performance. Paul commands in Ephesians 5:5, “Walk circumspectly.” This general command governs every aspect of our lives, but is especially important in those areas where emotions can overrule principle. Music is a prime example, and worship music in particular. The believer ought to respond in joy, gratitude, and faith to what God has done. We are not, however, at liberty to carelessly or arrogantly think that God is pleased with whatever we do, however we do it, just because it’s us that’s done it. In a way, we tend to think that God is like the human parent who “ooh’s” and “aah’s” over his child’s picture of the giraffe (that looks like a wilted purple sunflower with black spot) and hangs it proudly on the refrigerator. We think that God should be proud of our effort, now matter how sloppy it is! When my daughter hastily and carelessly produces a scribbled representation of an indiscernible something, I don’t hang it up on the wall. She knows that for me to keep it, *she must do her best to conform her drawing to the reality*. She may not do it perfectly, but if she does her work with her

most careful skill (even if it still looks like a wilted sunflower), then she gets approval, and her drawing is accepted gratefully. So God holds us accountable for the light we've been given, and what we do with it.

God also looks upon the heart attitude of the worshipper as a major issue. Vance Havner's observation about preachers applies in the area of worship as well: "A preacher can be as straight as a gun barrel theologically — and just as empty." Quite apart from any discussion of style, when you come to worship with a careless attitude, an self-glorifying attitude, or a "y'all-bear-with-me-'cause-I-ain't-practiced-much" attitude, you are not walking carefully before God, and you can't expect that He will be pleased with your offering. I am inclined to believe that the immature Christian who sincerely delights in the Lord through heartily and thoughtfully singing a theologically shallow chorus is more pleasing to God than the "mature" believer who goes through the motions of singing praise in a theologically dense hymn of antiquity. Hopefully, of course, the immature believer will grow in understanding and ability to express the feelings of his heart in a more biblically substantive and appropriate way. Growth is the goal, not stagnation, whatever one's maturity level!

Third, you exalt the Lord when you worship with gratitude (Ephesians 5:20a). Paul commands in 1 Thessalonians 5:18, "In everything give thanks, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." This does not mean that every song you sing should be light hearted or upbeat. After all, "many are the afflictions of the righteous" (Psalm 34:19)! Spirit-filled music should accurately reflect life in the Spirit. Every psalm, hymn, and spiritual song

ought to be an expression of gratitude and faith in your Redeemer regardless of the circumstances in which you sing. The book of Lamentations is a good example of this principle. In the middle of the whole dark lament (3:22-24) comes one of the most glorious statements of faith in the Scriptures: "Through the LORD's mercies we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness. 'The LORD is my portion,' says my soul, 'therefore I hope in Him!' " "We must fight the tendency of our fallen hearts to always cry out "I need," focusing rather on "God provides." Psalm 34:19 concludes the thought about many afflictions with, "...but the LORD delivers him out of them all."

Fourth, you exalt the Lord when you worship in Jesus' name (Ephesians 5:20b). This is simply because doing so humbly acknowledges that you cannot come into the presence of God on your own merits, just as in prayer. Consider Acts 16:16-34. Paul and Silas find themselves beaten and bound "in the inner prison." Late into the night, the two evangelists sing hymns and pray while all the prison listens (v. 25). Their testimony for Jesus' sake was powerful indeed, for when the Lord broke the bonds of the prisoners, and the jailer set about taking his own life, Paul's words out of the darkness produced a curious response in the man. Notice that he did not seek confirmation of the prisoners' whereabouts. Nor did he begin an investigation of how the chains had all been loosed and the doors opened. He immediately humbled himself before God's servants and asked, "What must I do to be saved?"! Their answer was consistent with what they had been singing: Christ is the Cornerstone of the faith. Notice also that it wasn't the

singing that converted the man and his household. It didn't even get his attention, really: it took an earthquake to wake him up! Rather, it was the preaching of the Word (v. 32). Undoubtedly, though, the jailer had heard at least a few of the hymns sung by Paul and Silas before he retired to his bed. Observe that he knew right where to come when he needed the his soul's need for Christ met. What does the music you like to worship with (both text and style) say about Christ? What does it say about you, His servant? Are you using His name in vain?

John Angell James (1785-1859) had the following to say about preaching, and I think it applies equally well to the musical expression of our hearts as we lift up our voices in worship:

Preach Christ, my brethren, and for Christ's sake. Exalt Christ, not yourselves. Exhibit Christ, in the divinity of His person, the efficacy of His atonement, the prevalence of His intercession, the fullness of His grace, the freeness of His invitations, the perfection of His example; in all His mediatorial offices and Scripture characters; and as the Alpha and Omega of your whole ministry. Christ has Himself told you the secret of popularity and success where He said, "And I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men unto me." With this divine lodestone magnetize your sermons: here lies the attraction.

MUSICAL WORSHIP EDIFIES OTHER BELIEVERS

Allen Bloom writes:

Though students do not have books, they most emphatically do have music. Nothing is more singular about this generation than its addiction to music. Today, a very large proportion of young people between the ages of ten and twenty live for music. It is their passion; nothing else

excites them as it does; they cannot take seriously anything alien to music. When they are in school and with their families, they are longing to plug themselves back into their music." [*The Closing of the American Mind*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), p. 68. Quoted by Leonard Payton, "Reforming Worship Music."]

The addictive tendencies of today's music audience demonstrates an introspective approach that is especially inappropriate in worship. Unfortunately, "worship" has been redefined in many contemporary churches to mean only the music portion of the service, or perhaps music and testifying. It is the feeling of euphoria that people are after — a feeling that music can definitely provide. Payton observes that "The more a person is inclined to subjective thinking, the stronger music's influence will be on that person. As a culture, we are progressively devaluing objective reasoning while giving subjectivity higher and higher priority." What this adds up to is a worship that is increasingly self-oriented. It should be obvious from even a casual glance at the Scriptural record that worship is a community activity that is designed not only for a common voice lifted unto God, but unto each other (read Ephesians 5: 15-21 again). In other words, worship activities — especially music in this study — that do not edify others are unacceptable to God.

But how are we to define what is edifying? After all, what may edify one person may not do so with another: or so the usual argument runs when the question of music styles comes up. Typically the person who posits this maxim does so with the air that his or her statement is unassailable. Such, however, is not the case. Once again, we are not discussing a

matter that man thought up all on his own. We are talking about something that God invented and for which He gave objective rules! If we are bound by God's definition of *edifying*, then we have something by which we may judge the value of a particular piece or genre of music which we may consider using in worship.

First, you edify others when you worship with Spirit motivation. If you are not "filled with the Spirit," your worship expressions in music and otherwise are so many empty words to one another. Being filled with the Spirit means that you are walking in readiness to hear the Spirit's voice through His word. Simply put, filling is demonstrated by an immediate response to the Spirit of God. (What gets *your* attention?) Such a response results in joy, obedience, humility — indeed, all the fruits of the Spirit, thereby demonstrating the reality of your new life in Christ. As in any other area of instruction, exhortation, or correction, if your musical statements (however theologically sound and musically appropriate) to one another are not the outpouring of the Spirit's work in you, your words lack the conviction of the person who really knows God and has experienced His power firsthand. If you simply sing because it is expected of you at a particular time in the service and mechanically sing the song because that's the one that was chosen, you are merely giving out secondhand information that lacks any of the edifying power of which Paul writes in his letter to Ephesus. Secondhand information is not worth very much! Trust rather the Spirit's moving in the officers of the Church who chose those hymns and that liturgical form, and take the choices before you as from the Spirit. Sing to those around you, and in your own heart,

with the conscious goal of being the Spirit's mouthpiece through the music. I believe the reason so many find little value in substantive hymns is because their hearts know little of the real depth of life in the Spirit. Feelings and signs are not dependable indicators of the Spirit's work — rather His Word confirmed in the heart of the believer who is walking unmoved through the trials of this life (Psalm 55:22).

Another aspect of Spirit motivation may be best understood by taking a brief look at its opposite: fleshly motivation. The late sports promoter Bob Briner wrote in his book *Roaring Lambs*, "Culturally, we're lambs. Meek, lowly, easily dismissed cuddly creatures that are fun to watch but never a threat to the status quo. It's time for those lambs to roar." [Quoted by Candi Cushman, "Salt or Sugar?" in the May 13, 2000 issue of *World*, p. 21.] While such thinking appeals to human pride, it certainly has nothing to do with being motivated by the Holy Spirit of Christ, who said, "Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves" (Mat. 10:16). Jesus is the Lion who roars, not the flock! Worship styles and content motivated by such pride (even when "sanctified" by the desire for "relevance") cannot promote godliness, only carnality. Lust for excitement and emotional intensity are not substitutes for genuine spiritual joy. Yet much of contemporary worship is determined to use carnal weapons to do God's work (2 Cor. 10:4). Wes King, this year's co-winner of Dove's song of the year award, told *World* magazine, "When I got nominated and sold a fair amount of records, everybody started going, 'Okay, let's groom this guy.' I found myself go-

ing to this lesbian atheist who was going to tell me how to talk in interviews. They wanted me to extract anything and everything about my faith that was offensive. But Jesus went around offending everybody” (“Salt or Sugar?”, p. 19). Mr. King had the courage to leave his label. But many others do not act on such conviction. That any believer would seek to come into God’s presence through the medium of such spineless, worldly relevancy reveals a heart more concerned with man’s ways than God’s.

A second way to edify others is to worship with mature understanding. Paul’s words are “understand the Lord’s will” (Eph. 5:17). Hebrews 6:1 reads, “Therefore leaving the elementary teaching about the Christ, let us press on to maturity....” And Colossians 4:5 commands, “Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity” (KJV - “redeeming the time”). There are a couple a facets to this understanding and maturity that helps us use our time well by edifying one another in worship. Paul begins with the idea of circumspection (Eph. 5:16). *Circumspectly* means to conduct yourself accurately, with care and diligence. Christians who are sloppy in their theology — including musical expressions of that theology — don’t honor God! The worship band, “warm-up to worship” mentality only communicates that biblical Christianity is superficial (if you have to have an external stimulus to get you going about God’s worth, you don’t run very deep!): hardly something worth offering to the world, which has enough superficiality to go around.

Next, Paul discusses discernment. This is how the Lord declares you are to be relevant in your worship — not by

finding the lowest common denominator that people will tolerate, but by seeking what the Lord desires. The problem with peer pressure (the principle behind “seeker sensitive” worship) is that pooling ignorance just compounds ignorance! Paul declares in 1 Corinthians 14:15, “I will sing with the Spirit and I will sing with the understanding also.” You are not at liberty to lose yourself in feel-good music and call it worship. Biblical worship has the mind engaged at all times in reverent meditation upon God as He reveals Himself. So, “try the spirits, whether they be of God,” and do your homework to know what style and content the Lord wills from His people as they worship Him. I guarantee you that it will look and sound nothing like the world. Leonard Payton notes, “As we find we are feeling good about something that is not biblical, then we must confess the rebellion of our emotions and then repent of it..” *Understanding* is more than just being able to parrot someone else’s thought. It involves the exercise of your own perception and insight as you prayerfully and humbly depend upon the guidance of the Spirit of God. Human dogma, from whichever side of the debate it may come, destroys discernment.

Finally, the third and most important way you edify others in worship is when you worship with the mind of Christ, in His name, and in the fear of God (Eph. 5:18). The mind of Christ is a mind of mutual submission in the body; of the stronger looking out for the weaker; of humble, holy fear of the Father; of walking united in all that Jesus’ name encompasses. The mindset of Christ is others-oriented, not self-absorbed. Michael Hamilton, though, looks with approval upon the divisiveness of current music practices:

Hymn reformers still cherish the pre-baby-boom hope that the ideal of Christian unity can be achieved in worship. Praise-and-worship musicians, by contrast, bring the baby-boom assumption that different groups will all need their own kind of music. . . . Increasingly, we are grouping ourselves with the musically like-minded. This is the root, stem, and branch of the new sectarianism that is flowering in American church life. (CT, July 12, 1999, p. 34.)

This statement reveals the spiritual poverty of contemporary worship music philosophy on several counts. First, it forgets that unity around worshipping the name of Jesus has nothing to do with pre-baby-boomers: it is the message of Jesus himself (John 17) and his apostles (1 Corinthians 2:2 - “For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified”). Biblical worship is not a market-driven activity. It has to do with being compelled by the love of Christ. Secondly, this philosophy has as its center the *wrong* center! We ought to be grouping ourselves with the *spiritually* like-minded who lift up the name of Jesus and His finished work. To rejoice in musical sectarianism because it seems to have pragmatic benefits is nothing more than sin. Many of those who fancy contemporary worship music are the same people who cry out that Christians shouldn’t be so divisive as to separate over doctrinal issues — yet they hypocritically divide over something as superficial as whether or not they like another’s style of music. The mind of Jesus is nowhere to be found in this statement. The Root of the Church is Christ, not baby-boomer preferences.

Note that the mind of Christ shows itself in the goals of singing to one another: showing gratitude to the Lord as a

community (Psalm 100:4 - “Enter into His gates with thanksgiving, *and* into His courts with praise. Be thankful to Him, *and* bless His name.”), exhorting and encouraging one another unto godliness, submitting to one another as instruments of the Spirit. And all of this “in the fear of the Lord,” not a party atmosphere.

PRINCIPLES TO WORSHIP BY

Michael Horton writes of his congregation:

Many of our people know their way around so-called contemporary forms of entertainment and worship much better than do those who have just recently determined to enlist these forms in Reformed worship. They therefore hardly fit the stereotypical image of the fuddy-duddy who resists worship change in principle. For them, in fact, the singing of praise songs is old news, and the singing of the Psalter is fresh and bracing. Like someone who is used to fast food but then sits down at an elegant feast, those who are drenched in popular mass culture often, at the very least, find rich communities of faith more interesting. [“Beyond Style Wars: Recovering the Substance of Worship,” *New Horizons*, April, 1999, from website http://opc.org/new_horizons/NH99/NH9904a.html]

Horton is right on the mark. Mainline denominations are failing everywhere because they have attempted to serve up popular culture and ideals in a liturgical setting. Why do so many evangelicals still think that by warming up the world’s leftovers they can influence society unto godliness? After all the years CCM has been around, where is the evidence that any real significant change for righteousness (as biblically defined) has come about? Leonard Payton’s thought is penchant on this point:

When we come to contemporary Christian music, the literature is rife with inaccurate handling of Holy Scripture. Even more subtle is the neglect of a full-orbed treatment of God's attributes.... I do not believe that most writers of contemporary Christian music are devious. Still, by its very presence, something is often inculcated or "preached" that, as Reformed believers, we should resist. And we should resist it not with a frowning censure but with better music and better texts. ["Reforming Worship Music"]

Well said, but how does that work out in practice (especially in the "better music" department)? Our goal here is not to simply jettison every song written after 1970 or so! Our goal is practice discernment and scrutinize, by divine standards, every piece of music we employ in worship. Though we've talked a great deal about those standards already, perhaps the following thoughts will help in the application process.

First, your worship must show forth the image of God in the righteous culture it portrays. Does the music reflect life in the Spirit accurately? Musical expression is an image of the society that produces it. Note the differences in classical music periods as society in Europe shifted its philosophical base: from the simple and raucous nature of medieval forms to the orderliness of the baroque period to the impressionism of the classic period to the dissonance of the modern period. Church music has followed the similar patterns of change, usually reflecting the ecclesiastical climate of the day. Note, too the chaotic nature of the societies that produced rock, the depression that produced the blues, the lifestyle that nurtured country music, and the various cultures that brought about all sorts of folk and ethnic music. Can there be a music that is an

expression of Godly culture (Psa. 137:4)? Is there such a thing as "Christian Music"? (See Tim Fisher, *The Battle for Christian Music*, Greenville, SC: Majesty Music, chapters 2 & 3.) Is life in the Spirit chaotic? Depressed? Lonely? Dissonant? Sensual? Trite? Dull? Lifeless? Monotone? Giddy? Frivolous? Mediocre? Materialistic? Self-absorbed? What culture do your music preferences declare you to be a part of? Compare 1 Corinthians 14:8, 15; & James 4:1.

Second, your worship must show forth the image of God in the righteous testimony it declares. The biblical principle is one of newness, found in 2 Corinthians 5:17, "Therefore, if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature; old things are passed away; behold, **all** things are become new." *New* here has the idea of new in quality, rather than in time. A radical change takes place in the regenerated person. Just as no part of him was exempt from depravity, so no part is exempt from the new life in Christ. When it comes to our music, Robert Berglund rightly observes: "If any style of music . . . creates feelings, ideas, emotions, values, or moods that are of, by, or for the unchanged way of life, such music is out of place in the changed life experience" (*A Philosophy of Church Music*, Chicago: Moody Press, 1985, p. 12). Fisher notes, "Scripture teaches this progression in our lives through salvation: New Birth > New Creature > New Song" (p. 9). Any life song that does not cause men to reverence our Lord is not the song of the regenerate (Psalm 40:2, 3; compare also 1 Peter 1:14, 15).

Third, the principle of the *imago dei* in action bears upon the creation of better music and texts. The creative principle inherent in the *imago dei* is quite simple. We must "originate with artistic excel-

lence,” following the example of our Creator. Our music programs must encourage “the full development and use of the best creative gifts the church has to offer.” “Music that is maudlin, sentimental, mediocre, and poorly made has no place in the church” (Calvin Johannson, *Music & Ministry: A Biblical Counterpoint*, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1984, pp. 15 & 20). As believers, we represent God in everything we do. What we do and how we do it sends a direct message to the world around us about the God we serve. Johannson puts it this way:

God the Creator as shown forth by the church musician’s music is often a frightening prospect! We image God in the music we do. When the program is hit-or-miss, we show forth a God who lacks purpose and direction; when our work is not well prepared, we image a God who is lazy and slothful; when the performance preparation is a last-minute affair, we show forth a procrastinating God; when our performance of music lacks vitality or artistic grace, we show God to be inert; when our musical choices revolve around our favorite style or body of composition, God is seen as rigid and unbending; and, above all, when the music we choose lacks creativity in the fullest sense (to break new ground imaginatively and with integrity), we image forth a God of “creative” mediocrity....

The question each church musician faces is not, “Shall I?” but, “What will be the image set forth?” (pp.28, 29)

Fourth, we must follow the example of the Spirit. He points to Christ. Jesus said, “[The Spirit of Truth] will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you” (John 16:14). The task of the Holy Spirit is to point us to the Savior, not asking for attention to Himself. Our music choices should follow this

example. Simply stated, if the music (or the performance of it) becomes the center of attention, whatever the style, it is no longer spiritual. Tim Fisher states it well: “Christian music is that music in which text, music, performers and performance practices are conforming to the image of Jesus Christ” (p. 16). “Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31). The results of not heeding this principle are ably summed up by Elder Brad Gsell of Charlotte, North Carolina:

We too long have viewed the service of worship as a time when people virtually come in for a show. The Pastor talks, the choir and soloist sing, and depending on how the people like the show [determines] largely whether they will come back. This is antithetical to a proper understanding of worship. It is God’s people, all of them, who are to actively worship — selflessly giving praise to their Creator and Savior. If God’s people could get this understanding of their place in worship, we would soon cease to hear such statements as “I didn’t get much out of the service today,” or “I didn’t enjoy the choir’s anthem at all.”

The fifth and final principle specifically focuses upon the lyrics in the worship of God. Better lyrics will resound in the church when we make it our determination to be bound by the words of the Scriptures. Moses commanded the people in Deuteronomy 32:45, “Set your hearts on all the words which I testify among you today, which you shall command your children to be careful to observe — all the words of this law.” The psalmist makes the application perfectly: “Your statutes have been my songs in the house of my pilgrimage” (Ps. 119:54). While this does not require only word for word set-

tings (which translation/language would you use?), it does require that the substance of the church's songs must be blatantly scriptural, rather than the imaginations of man's sentimentality (however sincerely meant). You can't worship "in spirit and in truth" when the lyrics are not "truth"! Donald Hustad wrote somewhere:

Christians today are hungry for experience; they don't seem so willing to think about or grapple for their faith. Today's superficial music makes for a superficial view of God.... We need to make disciples rather than inspiration junkies.... Good hymnals are more than just songs. They are compact handbooks of theology in poetry form. These hymns are noble forms of prayer, adoration, thanksgiving, and dedication. They supply thought and words to enlarge and enrich our personal vocabulary of worship.

Granting that there are contemporary songs that are Scripturally sound, many never delve beyond the surface of the Christian faith. Just as a child does not continue to speak in an infantile manner as he or she matures, so the believer's vocabulary should deepen and develop along the lines God has drawn. Or, to use another analogy, dessert is wonderful, but you wouldn't want your diet to consist of it. The problem today is that so often all believers want is candy, and not meat and potatoes. Have your candy every once in awhile if you will, but keep the percentage low for your spiritual health's sake!

CONCLUSION

The Church must offer a sacrifice of praise unblemished by the world. Will our music reflect the "new song" of the worshipper of Yahweh, or the trite superficiality of the children of this world? Regardless of our personal preferences (af-

ter all, our preferences are still subject to the lusts of the flesh), our music must give the clear, unmixed testimony that we are the children of God. More than that, it must declare back to God His own glory. Musical worship exalts our God and edifies others when we sing with grace in our hearts to the Lord. A.T. Robertson commented that worship is "Lyrical emotion in the devout soul." Graceless worship is godless worship! May God give us the grace and discernment to be firm against trying to sing God's song in a heathen way, for how can sweet water flow from a bitter well? Worship Him in spirit and in truth, in His way, with His zeal. May the words of the psalmist be true of us: "He has put a new song in my mouth — praise to our God; many will see and fear, and will trust in the LORD" (Psa. 40:3). 

Then David and all Israel played *music* before God with all *their* might, with singing, on harps, on stringed instruments, on tambourines, on cymbals, and with trumpets.

1 Chronicles 13:8

**WORSHIP THROUGH CORPORATE
PRAYER**

by Eifion Evans

To worship is “to offer up spiritual sacrifices to God through Jesus Christ”, words found in 1 Peter 2:5. Corporate prayer may be an element in worship, and deserves careful evaluation in days when much of what passes as worship lacks a sense of God’s majesty, and substitutes self-centered aspirations for a good time. Preaching on Psalm 2, Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones highlights the difference:

Do you still believe in the wrath of God? There are people in England – evangelicals – who think modern man needs entertainment. There is a mania for singing, for drama, for mime. “People cannot take preaching”, it is said, “Give them singing, Teach them how to dance...” In the name of God I say that is to do violence to Scripture. The church is not here to entertain. It is here to call people to “be wise” to “be instructed” ... We are not here to be popular, but to tell the naked truth: “Serve the Lord with fear, rejoice with trembling (v.11).”¹

This is not to imply that worship and prayer are merely cerebral, since the whole personality is to be involved, but it does suggest that a God-centered attitude of the heart is of prime importance.

What, then, of corporate prayer in worship? In the first place, this is clearly warranted from Scripture. John Calvin refers to Christ’s calling the temple ‘a house of prayer’:

For he taught by this term that the chief part of his worship lies in the office of prayer, and that the temple was set up like a banner for believers so that they might, with one consent, participate in it... the prayers of the church are never ineffectual, for God always furnishes his

people occasion for singing with joy... For he, who promises that he will do whatever two or three gathered together in his name may ask [Mat. 18:19-20], testifies that he does not despise prayers publicly made, provided ostentation and chasing after paltry human glory are banished, and there is present a sincere and true affection that dwells in the secret place of the heart... the chief use of the tongue is in public prayers, which are offered in the assembly of believers, by which it comes about that with one common voice, and as it were, with the same mouth, we all glorify God together, worshipping him with one spirit and the same faith.²

On the Lord’s Day, every part of divine service is to be sanctioned and regulated by God’s Word, and each element is to be an act of worship, preaching no less than praying. In Reformed worship it was the minister who led in prayer, and ideally members of the congregation echoed wholeheartedly, though silently, the sentiments to which he gave expression. Ezra 9 and 10, and Nehemiah 8 and 9 are examples of such congregational involvement and response in worship. Such a practice imposed a heavy responsibility on the minister to prepare his own heart and to be familiar with the spiritual needs of his congregation if his ministrations were to be effective. Some excelled in this more than others, as this report of Thomas Hooker’s public prayers testifies:

He affected Strength, rather than Length; and though he had not so much variety in Publick Praying, as in his Publick Preaching, yet he always had a seasonable Respect unto Present Conditions. And it was Observed, that his Prayer was usually like Jacob’s Ladder, wherein the nearer he came to an End, the nearer he drew towards Heaven; and he grew into such Rapturous Pleadings with God, and Praysings of God, as made some to say,

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The Like the Master of the Feast, he reserved the best Wine until the Last. ³

What mattered most was the individual worshiper's spiritual appetite and awareness. *Appetite* speaks of a hunger for God and a single-minded, one might almost say obsessive, desire for closer communion with Him. *Awareness* implies confession of sin, both personal and corporate, and a concern for the advance of God's kingdom. Such a solemn exercise demands careful preparation, and in the days of the Puritan fathers, certainly, this involved time and effort on the Saturday evening. Chapter XXI of George Swinnock's treatise, *The Christian Man's Calling* has as its title, 'How to exercise ourselves to godliness on a Lord's-day'. He counsels his readers to prepare for this 'market-day of the soul':

The main preparation of the heart for a Sabbath, lieth in removing the filth of sin, and in quickening and awakening grace... "Prepare to meet thy God", O Christian! Betake thyself to thy chamber on the Saturday night, confess and bewail thine unthankfulness for, and unfruitfulness under, the ordinances of God; shame and condemn thyself for thy sins, entreat God to prepare thy heart for, and assist it in, thy religious performances; spend some time in consideration of the infinite majesty, holiness, jealousy, and goodness of that God, with whom thou art to have to do in sacred duties... ponder ... meditate ... continue musing and blowing till the fire burneth... If thou wouldst thus leave thine heart with God on the Saturday night, thou shouldst find it with him in the Lord's-day morning ... When thou goest to prayer, let it be in hope to get thy heart nearer to heaven. ⁴

Without diligent preparation, the soul was in danger of deserving Christ's strictures on the worshipers of his day, Mk

7:7-8 "This people honour me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. And in vain they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men." William Greenhill comments on a similar passage in Ezekiel 33:31, 'they come to you as people do, they sit before you as my people, and they hear your words, but they do not do them; for with their mouth they show much love, but their hearts pursue their own gain':

What worshipping was this of God, to give him an ear, and the world their heart! ... When men draw near to God in any duty of his worship, he principally looks which way the heart stands, whether that be real, and towards him. ⁵

Stephen Charnock searches the heart of each would-be worshiper:

Do we resign our spirits to God, and make them an entire holocaust, a whole burnt-offering in his worship? ... When God holds out his golden sceptre to encourage our approaches to him, stands ready to give the pardon of sin and full felicity, the best things he hath, is it a fit requital of his kindness to give him a formal outside only, a shadow of religion, to have the heart overpowered with other thoughts and affections...? If apprehensions of his excellency did possess our souls, they would be fastened on him, glued to him... Were our breathings after God as strong as the pantings of the hart after the water brooks, we should be like that creature, not diverted in our course by every puddle... Nourish right conceptions of the majesty of God in your minds... We honour the majesty of God, when we consider him with due reverence, according to the greatness and perfection of his works; and in this reverence of his majesty doth worship chiefly consist. ⁶

Examples of special occasions for corporate prayer are found in both Old

and New Testaments. Ezra called the exiles to fast and pray for a safe return to Jerusalem (8:21-23). Daniel called his friends together to “seek mercies from the God of heaven concerning” king Nebuchadnezzar’s dreams (2:17-18). In Acts 4, when Peter and John had been charged “not to speak at all or teach in the name of Jesus”, verse 24 reports that the company of believers “raised their voice to God with one accord”, acknowledging God’s sovereign control and power in seeking boldness to speak God’s Word. A short time later, according to Acts 12:5, 12, the church was gathered to offer earnest prayer for the release of Peter from prison. Heartfelt concern for the prosperity of God’s Kingdom is collectively expressed in such Psalms as 44, 79, 80, 85. Precious promises are to be pleaded by God’s people when they seek His face for the restoration of His favor after declension, as in Deut. 4:29-31 and 2 Chron. 7:14. Daniel’s pleading with God, recorded in chapter 9, is based on promises he found in Jeremiah (29:10-14). In this Gospel Day, the material blessings of the Old Covenant, progeny and land, are transposed into spiritual blessing, conversions and graces.

Compared with earlier generations of Reformed Christians, today’s evangelicals are grossly individualistic. Something of collective responsibility and aspiration has been lost. The peace of Jerusalem is seldom prayed for as a corporate blessing, in the way Psalm 122 portrays so powerfully. Yet Joel 1:14 is still part of Holy Writ: “Consecrate a fast, call a sacred assembly; gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land into the house of the Lord your God, and cry out to the Lord.” The British Parliament instituted in the 1640s a monthly Fast Day from the conviction that

...we are likely to be blessed by the providence of God, bringing good out of evill, with twelve Nationall, solemne, publike Fasts every yeare, which (if rightly kept) will be as the twelve Gates of the New Jerusalem, spoken of, Revel.21. Every Fast will be as a Gate to let us in, into a part of the New Jerusalem of Mercy, and happiness promised to the people of God, here upon earth. ⁷

A sermon by Gilbert Tennent on 2 Chron.20:3-4, preached at Philadelphia, January 1748, draws attention to this:

Another duty included in fasting, as it respects the soul, is prayer. Fasting and prayer are frequently joined in Scripture. Prayer contains not only petition for the mercies we need but praises for mercies received. Our petitions should be both believing and vehement and, therefore, we are bid on a day of fasting to cry unto the Lord (Joel 1:14). ⁸

Who will say that the cause of God today does not call for such measures? With so much confusion about claims that are being made for experience-orientated movements, the need for a genuine outpouring of God’s Spirit is greater than ever. Elements of subjectivism, emotionalism, mysticism and post-modernism pervade the thinking and practice of so much contemporary religion. Only a recovery of the sense of God’s ineffable greatness and glory will remedy the situation. When this prevails, the corporate prayers of God’s people will take on fresh urgency and effectiveness. It was this kind of conviction that motivated Joseph Sewall of Boston in 1742. Preaching on the text, Ez. 36:37, “Thus says the Lord God, “I will also let the house of Israel inquire of me to do this for them”, he said:

We are assembled to ask God for the plentiful effusion of His Spirit upon His people and more particularly, for the flock

who usually worship God in this place. We are gathered to bless His name for spiritual blessings already received in the remarkable revival of His work among us and in many other towns. We are also met together to entreat the Lord that He will preserve us and His people from everything that has a tendency to quench His Spirit and obstruct the progress and success of His good work and that it may go on and prosper until the whole land shall be filled with the blessed fruits of the Spirit. This is an important errand indeed! O that there was a Spirit in us to cry mightily to God for this great blessing while we humble ourselves before the Lord for our past unfruitfulness and all those sins whereby we have grieved the Spirit of God! We have formerly once and again observed such days of prayer to seek the Lord for spiritual blessings, the comprehensive sum of which is the gift of the Holy Ghost. And may we not hope that God is now giving a gracious answer to those supplications which have been in this way offered to Him in years past? And ought not this encourage us now to pray more earnestly? Yes, most certainly!⁹

Little more than a century later, such an answer to prayer was realized in Charles Spurgeon's congregation:

Spurgeon came to London conscious that God had been hiding His face from His people. His knowledge of the Bible and of Christian History convinced him that, compared with what the church had a warrant to expect, the Spirit of God was in a great measure withdrawn, and if God continued to withhold His face, he declared to his people, nothing could be done to extend His kingdom. It is not knowledge, nor talent, nor zeal, he would say, that can perform God's work. "Yet brethren, this can be done — we will cry to the Lord until He reveals His face again." "All we want is the Spirit of God. Dear Christian friends, go home and pray

for it; give yourselves no rest until God reveals Himself; do not tarry where you are, do not be content to go on in your everlasting jog-trot as you have done; do not be content with the mere round of formalities." Before many months had passed ... what a change took place in the prayer meetings! Now instead of the old, dull prayers, "Every man seemed like a crusader beseeching the New Jerusalem, each one appeared to storm the Celestial City by the might of intercession; and soon the blessing came upon us in such abundance that we had not room enough to receive it."¹⁰

While corporate prayer that honors God calls for preparation and discipline, it also holds out the promise of great blessings for God's people. 

¹ Quoted in Iain Murray, *D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones: The Fight of Faith 1939-1981*. Carlisle, Pa., 1990, p.734.

² *Inst.* III.29,30, 31.

³ Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe, *The Practice of Piety: Puritan Devotional Disciplines in Seventeenth-Century New England*. Chapel Hill, 1988, p.106.

⁴ *The Works of George Swinnock*, vol.i. Carlisle, Pa. 1992, pp. 229, 230, 243.

⁵ William Greenhill, *An Exposition of Ezekiel*. Carlisle, Pa. 1994, loc.cit.

⁶ Sermon on Jn. 4:24, called 'A Discourse on Spiritual Worship', in *The Complete Works*, vol. i. Edinburgh, 1864, pp. 324, 337, 341.

⁷ Quoted in John F. Wilson, *Pulpit in Parliament: Puritanism during the English Civil Wars, 1640-1648*. Princeton, 1969, p.63.

⁸ *Sanctify the Congregation*, (ed.) Richard Owen Roberts, 1994, p.310.

⁹ *Ibid.* p.255.

¹⁰ Iain Murray, *The Forgotten Spurgeon*. London, 1966, pp.42-3.

GIVING BACK TO GOD AS AN ACT OF WORSHIP

by Dennis Piwowarczyk

Giving is so important to Christianity that God has ordained an office to see it carried out in the church: the office of deacon. Deacons have been given a responsibility to handle gifts which have been given for the Lord's work. They are charged with passing on gifts to those who have a particular need. Giving is important to the Christian church.

When we give a gift it is to express love, concern, appreciation and thanks. You might give a gift covered with special wrapping paper and a lively yellow-colored bow, which you know is your friend's favorite color. Maybe its a dozen long-stemmed roses for your spouse with a special card . A practical gift for your aged Uncle and Aunt would be a gift certificate at a local supermarket.

Yet all these are virtually nonexistent in comparison to God's giving of Himself. James 1:17 states: "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning."

What has God given to you? Different skills, talents, a marriage partner, jobs, health, fellowship in His house. But most of all God gave you His Son Jesus, who offered Himself up on the cross for the sins of those who know Him as Lord and Savior, that you would have eternal life (John 3:15). God gave us redemption from sin (Heb. 9:12), salvation through Christ (Heb. 5:9), a kingdom (2 Peter 1:10-11), everlasting joy (Isa. 51:11), and comfort (2 Thess. 2:16-17). In the Lord's prayer we ask God to give us His kingdom, exercise His will, provide our daily bread, forgive our sins, and to deliver us

from temptation and all kinds of evil.

Do you ever take for granted all or much of what God has given you? Are you becoming lax in daily prayer, daily study of the Scriptures, participation in the Lord's house, or in tithing? The temptations of this sin-filled world become more attractive, and your spiritual sword becomes dull. Before you know it, your giving as an act of worship is nonexistent. You find yourself becoming fat with the deceitful lusts of this world. Yet you also find yourself unfulfilled, spiritually empty, and far from God. Do you need to review your giving back to God as an act of worship? The following are examples from the Bible which address this important issue.

- I. You worship God through giving to the Lord's work. The Israelites gave to God through worship (Ex. 35:21-29).
 - A. Their hearts were stirred, their spirits were willing, and they brought out of love and repentance (v. 21).
 - B. They gave sacrificially; things which they treasured most (vs. 22-24).
 - C. The Israelites gave their personal talents for use, out of love (vs. 25-26).
 - D. Israel's rulers brought precious stones, spices, and oil (vs. 27-28).
 - E. The children of Israel gave a freewill offering (v. 29).

The Israelites gave obediently to the Lord. Do you?

- II. You must give sacrificially. The poor widow was noticed and commended by Jesus (Luke 21:1-4).
 - A. Jesus watches as those who have

extra riches cast but a portion of it into the treasury; a portion not given sacrificially but from their abundance (vs. 1,4).

- B. The widow, though poor, was lively in her giving. She gave out of poverty as an act of worship (vs. 2,4).
- C. The widow will be rewarded for her giving -to God out of her heart (vs. 2-3).

The widow was commended by Christ for her unselfish giving. She will hear the words, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant!" (Matt. 25:21). Do you give out of your abundance, or sacrificially?

III. You must give joyfully. The Macedonian churches were commended for their unselfish giving (2 Cor. 8:1-5).

- A. They sought God's will, and received His grace (vs. 1).
- B. Despite being poor, their belief in God gave them a joy and abundance which they sought to share with others (vs.2).
- C. They gave beyond their ability (generously and sacrificially), and begged Paul to let them participate (vs. 3-4).
- D. They gave freely for God's glory and desired His will to be done (vs. 5).

As you review your life and what God has done for you, do you openly share your joy and abundance with those less fortunate? When you give, do you expect something in return? Is this Biblical giving? Is your giving for the glory of God, or for a tax write off at the end of the year?

IV. Jesus gave back to God the Father as an act of worship.

- A. Jesus was obedient to the Father,

and did His will (John 6:38).

- B. Christ's mission was to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:10).
- C. Jesus gave glory to the Father (John 17:1-5).
- D. Jesus came to serve the Father, and sacrifice Himself for us (Mark 10:45). He rendered Satan powerless (Heb. 2:14).
- E. He worshipped the Father and submitted to Him (Luke 22:41-42).

Does your act of worship include obedience, giving glory to, asking God to use you in service, and to sacrifice your time or resources for His glory? After all, your time and resources are gifts from God.

V. There are many benefits from giving back to God.

- A. A deeper love and commitment in serving God will develop in you.
- B. In times of stress your faith will be stronger.
- C. You will have inner peace, joy, and grace ... a sense of fulfillment.
- D. Your focus will be less on physical provision, and more on worship.
- E. There will be a greater desire to share what God has freely given you (1 Cor. 2:12).

As God has given to you generously, you are to give cheerfully, not by necessity or grudgingly. For God loves a cheerful giver (2 Cor. 9:7).

CONCLUSION

In the examples studied today, there are several characteristics common to all. The party involved had first given them-

selves to the Lord as an act of worship. This desire to give glory to God resulted in their giving freely and willingly from their hearts. This giving was not just in money, but in time, effort, and special skills and talents given by God for His glory. God treats you very special and blesses you with countless daily gifts. Are you giving back to Him what He has given to you in His house, your job, and your family? Are you giving to the Lord's work obediently, sacrificially, and joyfully? I encourage you to grow in your giving back to God as a daily act of worship and lifestyle. 

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BOOKS

BOOK REVIEW: *Contemporary Worship Music: A Biblical Defense*, by John M. Frame (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 1997).

By Brad Gsell, M.Div., Minister of Music, Bible Presbyterian Church of Charlotte, NC

All page numbers mentioned are from this book. References from other works are footnoted.

Contemporary Worship Music: A Biblical Defense, by John M. Frame, is a thought-provoking study of this often-controversial subject. Although wide polarization usually marks discussions on this topic, it would do those of us who are very concerned at the declension in modern-day worship to give Frame a fair reading and make sure that our position on the matter is an honest, reasoned Biblical approach, and not one of reaction (colored more than we might care to admit) by personal preferences.

To be sure, this topic is largely a side theme on the central issue of what constitutes true Biblical worship. Frame's earlier volume, *Worship in Spirit and Truth: A Refreshing Study of the Principles and Practice of Biblical Worship*,¹ deals with this. He gives a fairly balanced approach in showing the inherent inconsistencies of those who hold to a very strict understanding of the regulative principle of worship and those who place very few restrictions on their worship.

Early-on, Frame makes a distinction between "contemporary Christian music" (CCM) ("celebrity driven") and "Contemporary worship music" (CWM)

("song-driven") (p. 65). He recognizes freely that many CWM songs are poorly constructed and shallow theologically, but cautions against painting all pieces in this genre with the same brush. He makes the fair assertion that all musical styles throughout history have had many poor quality examples, but time winnows out the bad, and hopefully the few gems remain. CWM has not had the luxury of time to discard the many poor examples.

In several places in both of these books, Frame thankfully recognizes that some styles of music *are intrinsically* unsuitable for worship, due to their associations. He states: "A particular kind of music may be inappropriate for worship, or even associated with worldliness" (p. 20). He states also that some music is "understood by all reasonable Christians as irreverent (or joyless) in a particular context."² Later, he states: "And we know that there are some styles of music (e.g., 'heavy metal' rock) that are so deeply associated with the most degenerate elements of our society that for most of us they could hardly be anything other than counterproductive to worship."³ These statements place Frame clearly on the other side of the divide from those who make the implausible argument that music is amoral.

Frame does however, make some unfortunate concessions on this regard. On page 58 he states: "But in my judgment, the heavy metal style, even with Christian words, at the present time still conveys to most of us the worst in the modern rock concert scene. I cannot hear this style of music, even performed by Christians, without being harassed by emotions of anger, contempt for others,

¹The WRS Journal, 7:2, Late Summer, 2000

justification for drugs, violence, perverted sex, and other forms of rebellion against God. Musically, it draws attention to the artists, as audiences marvel at the increasing outrageousness of each performance. This atmosphere may be acceptable as entertainment, but it is not easily reconcilable with the purposes of worship.” One must question if Frame truly feels as he says he does why this would be acceptable in any area of life even entertainment. He also mentions supposedly Christian groups such as Stryper, and identifies them as using this same “heavy metal” style. Instead of condemning this, he states that it might be a “good evangelistic tool,” and “it remains to be seen what God’s Spirit will do with it.” John Makujina, a Westminster Seminary doctoral candidate, has recently written *Measuring the Music: Another Look at the Contemporary Christian Music Debate.* He is much more decisive than Frame in condemning the kind of music which has just been described.

As one who has usually been considered very conservative in my acceptance of worship music styles, I must say that Frame has fairly and kindly given credible rebuttals (as well as acknowledgment) to some of the common objections to CCM. On pages 49 and 50 he succinctly states the case argued by many against CWM: 1). Subjectivism — emphasis on the worshipper rather than on God; 2). Humanism — praising a god made to the specifications of human beings; 3). Anti-intellectualism — dumbing-down of worship; 4) Psychologism — emphasis on emotions and therapeutic overtones; 5) Professionalism — a manipulative technique, rather than a servant to true worship; 6) Con-

sumerism — church standards lowered to the level of pop culture, “for that is where the church’s product can find a market”; 7) Pragmatism — it works for church growth so it must be good; 8) Temporal Chauvinism—the highest virtue is being “up-to-date.” Throughout the rest of the book, Frame tends to acknowledge these eight points as being legitimate concerns, but thinks critics are wrong for automatically heaping these objections on all CWM. He points out that many of these same arguments were used against other forms and styles in earlier generations which are now cherished by most conservative worshippers today.

Frame is perhaps remiss in failing to point out the differences in the present use of contemporary and even pop styles and that done in previous decades and centuries. John Makujina, previously mentioned, produces credible evidence that Luther and Wesley’s use of contemporary folk styles was far different than what we see today. Dr. Donald Hustad, professor of music at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, also does a much better job in this regard in his book *True Worship: Reclaiming the Wonder & Majesty.*⁶ In fairness to Frame, it must be remembered that he is approaching the subject as an answer to those he feels have gone *too far* in their condemnation, whereas others are approaching it as a critique of CCM’s excesses and shortcomings.

All Bible-believing Christians should be concerned at the extent to which many worship services have degenerated into “seeker-friendly” entertainment shows. Frame points out that this is a natural result of what we often see in even the most traditional of churches. He states that most Christians today bring “into worship

the attitudes we bring into entertainment. So we focus on the talents of the leaders, their cleverness, skill, literary polish, pleasant personalities—anything but the presence of the Lord himself” (p. 59). Who reading this article has never heard well-meaning church members discuss the sermon or choir anthem in this light, rather than focusing on the presence of the Lord?

Frame does caution against the commercialism and competition of much of CCM. He quotes Jim Long, reporter for CCM magazine: “Christian music is now virtually owned by the secular entertainment industry.”

Frame makes it very clear that it is God who builds His church, not human ingenuity. He also is a critic of entertainment “worship.” However, he rightly states that it is not honest to condemn all music of a certain style just because some of it is obviously driven by improper motives. He points out correctly that ALL musical styles can provide entertainment, so it is invalid to say we shouldn’t use CWM for this reason alone.

Another criticism which he puts to rest in this regard is that many contemporary worship songs are long on the use of the first person pronoun (“I,” “we”), indicating an overemphasis on the worshipper rather than God. He states correctly that the Psalms are full of the first person pronoun, as are numerous hymns which are used by the most conservative. If the Psalms are our ultimate example, where lies the problem?

While condemning entertainment, he looks at the other extreme. Should we have *ugliness* in worship?, he asks (p. 61). The Psalms tell us frequently that we are to delight in God (Psalm 37:4, 40:8, 119:16, 24, 47). Is music which is inac-

cessible or unintelligible a proper vehicle for singing praises to God?

Another criticism Frame challenges is that CWM is simplistic and does not carry the theological weight of our older hymns. He acknowledges CWM’s general tendency to be simple in form, but urges that carefully-chosen CWM be used *along with* our traditional hymns. He also points to hallmarks of traditional church music such as the Doxology, Gloria Patri, Sanctus, etc., which are short, one-verse songs with a long and rich history of use in Protestant worship.

In addition, he gives many examples of CWM which are verbatim quotations from Scripture. CWM often uses direct Scripture passages even more than does our traditional hymnody! Although it is important that we do not wrest Scriptural “snippets” out of context in our singing, we should not fail to see that even in the Psalms we have very simple-as well as more complex-texts (see Psalms 23, 100, 131, 133 for less complex texts; Psalms 68 and 119 for more complex). [This writer includes such CWM songs as “Thou Art Worthy” (Mills), “O Magnify the Lord” (Tunney) and “Be Exalted, O Lord” (Chambers) in our worship repertoire. These are examples of simple—but well-written tunes—combined with verbatim Psalm texts. These have proved to have the added benefit of firmly planting these Scriptures in the hearts and minds of the choir and many in the congregation].

Frame further asks the question as to whether it is wrong to have smaller, more focused doctrinal elements imbedded in the hearts of the congregation (as is done in most CWM), when the longer, more complex group of doctrines found in many traditional hymns, often are not

as easily or readily comprehended in the singing of a longer hymn. He suggests that both have their place.

Frame also states that all aspects of worship are to be intelligible to the worshippers. Few would deny that preaching should be clear, logical and exegetically sound. He deduces that therefore all of worship should be so. He uses I Corinthians 14 and other passages to show this.

He cautions against attitudes which can hinder the choosing of the best music for a particular congregation. The “comfort zone” of church leaders is often the decisive factor, rather than which music best communicates the message. He shows that our own sin, our cultural and educational differences and failure to move past what we are used to are all factors which influence our musical choices. There are also aesthetic considerations which must be examined. There are those who are well educated in the arts who have developed an aesthetic snobbery, which only allows the use of high art music. There are also those with no less snobbery who *disdain* art music. Whether simple or complex, the music we use should be well crafted and accessible to the people (not as a human means to bring results, but as a proper vehicle to enable true worship [and indeed to keep from hindering it!]).

To his credit, Frame is clear in condemning the division of congregations into various services centered around differing worship styles. This greatly compromises the Scriptural teaching that the church is a body (I Corinthians 12, Ephesians 4), rather than just a collection of autonomous individuals.

Paul’s teaching in I Corinthians 9:22 that he has “become all things to all men, that [he] might by all means save some,” is

used by Frame. He is careful to point out that we should not use music and other items in worship that are Biblically wrong, but we must be careful that our personal preferences are not proudly clung to when we should humbly use music which is Scripturally sound, but is perhaps outside our “comfort zone.”

In general, I found much of Frame’s logic to be biblically sound, although I doubt that most churches make such a fine distinction between CCM and CWM. The eight points Frame gives to summarize the critics’ objections to CWM are indeed an accurate picture of where the evangelical church at large is increasingly heading. It shows a serious declension in true Biblical worship. The church has become “seeker” [translated: the whims and desires of the unregenerate] driven. Churches are splintering and polarizing their congregations by offering various worship services based on worship style.

Consecrated Christian musicians who seek to produce music conducive to worship are being replaced by praise bands who are entertainers. A desire to feed on the Word of God is replaced by bagels and latté, strong doctrinal exegetical messages are being shelved for film clips from Hollywood movies and drama teams, and much of the most shallow and trite of the CCM (both musically and spiritually) is replacing well-crafted hymns of various styles. Hustad and Makujina have a stronger message for the church at large.

The value of Frame’s book to those of us who find ourselves alarmed at these eight points is to help us resist mindless stereotyping of all CWM, and to prayerfully and carefully choose worship music which best facilitates true worship. We must not mindlessly settle for music which is stale and unintelligible just be-

cause that is how we have always done it. If we are to be taken seriously, we must be prepared to offer a Biblical response to these eight points which is both fair and accurate, but also uncompromising.



NOTES

¹ Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth: A Refreshing Study of the Principles and Practice of Biblical Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 1996).

² *Ibid.*, 120.

³ *Ibid.*, 141.

⁴ John Makujina, *Measuring the Music: Another Look at the Contemporary Christian Music Debate* (Salem, OH: Schmul Publishing Co., 2000).

⁵ *Ibid.*, Chapter 7 - "On the History of Ecclesiastical Music and CCM."

⁶ Donald P. Hustad, *True Worship: Reclaiming the Wonder & Majesty* (Wheaton, IL: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1998).

⁷ Jim Long, "Can't Buy Me Ministry," *Christianity Today* (May, 20, 1996), 20.

Now at the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem they sought out the Levites in all their places, to bring them to Jerusalem to celebrate the dedication with gladness, both with thanksgivings and singing, *with* cymbals and stringed instruments and harps.

Nehemiah 12:27

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