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## Chapter 11

### HOW SHALL WE SING TO GOD?

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We are, more times than not, a people defined by our music. We fight over it in the church. We change congregations because of worship music style, with little concern for the theology of the new or the old congregation. Whole denominations are embroiled in debate over worship music style with no clear outcome in sight.

We who are church music directors and worship pastors are being asked to become administrators of activities with ever-increasing diversity. Some of us have actually become intoxicated by the apparent power that we wield. After all, well-performed music, large performing ensembles, and large listening audiences do touch a desire for glory in all of us. The postmodern life is often so gray and futile that we would gladly escape to the glory of the fourth chapter of Revelation every Sunday, and we demand that music serve this goal.

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with well-performed music, large performing ensembles, and large listening audiences. Still, other church musicians sense that we are in a runaway train headed straight for a broken bridge. I am one of the latter, and thus much of my purpose in this chapter will be to encourage ecclesiastical authorities and thoughtful laity to reflect soberly on the crisis before us. My prayer is for a deep reformation in church music—that all alike will be led to insist, within their own spheres of influence, that comprehensive biblical principles be brought to bear on every detail of worship music.

Indeed the real crisis is this: *Ecclesiastical authorities, while recognizing that music is important to congregational life, usually fail to see that its biblical role puts it squarely within the ministry of the Word as a partner to preaching.* For, as the apostle Paul told us, the word of Christ dwells richly within us with all wisdom when we teach and admonish one another *with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs* and sing with gratitude in our hearts to *God with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs* (Col. 3:16). We church musicians are not likely to lead the charge simply because we run a perpetual seven-day treadmill with our tongues hanging out. There is little time to get off the treadmill, and, in fact, this is the way most of our congregations apparently want it. Our congregations are concerned that we make them feel a certain way when they come to church. In the rampant uncertainty of the postmodern world, parishioners understandably want stability in church life (even though they claim to want diversity). If we church musicians paused for a moment and realized how much music belonged within the ministry of the Word, we might alter our practices in a way that would disrupt the general bonhomie.

Ours will be a difficult task because music literacy in our surrounding culture is at an all-time low, even though we hear more music in our day-to-day existence than in any culture preceding ours. This task requires, clearly, that we understand both the Bible and music. Although this chapter is primarily about *sola Scriptura* and how it affects worship music, the musician with a full quiver of musical skills will be in the best position to implement the necessary changes. There is simply no substitute for hard-won musical skills, and this comes only with thousands of hours of ongoing study.

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

## THE SCRIPTURES AND MUSIC

If we were to ask people what the purpose of music in worship is, the answers would be as varied as if we asked them to name their favorite baseball team. But the problem is not that Scripture is not sufficient. The Bible gives clear marching orders in this area, as well as a plethora of applied examples. Some of our present confusion may arise from a peculiar translation issue. In the *New American Standard Bible*, Colossians 3:16 reads, “Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God.” Other translations, such as the *New International Version*, remove the “psalms, hymns and spiritual songs” from the “teaching and admonishing one another,” placing them squarely and exclusively with “sing ... with gratitude in your hearts to God.” Depending on one’s casual reading of this text, worship music could vary considerably.

The real clue, however, is not so much in the word order as in the words “psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.” Here we need to think a bit about the intended first-century readers of this text. The addressee of this book is “the saints and faithful brethren in Christ who are at Colossae” (Col. 1:2). At the end of the book (4:16), Paul commands them to pass the letter on to the church in Laodicea. The church at Ephesus was also acquainted with the formulation “psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” (Eph. 5:19). In each case, not only did Paul write to them in Greek, but they were primarily Greek readers, and their Old Testament most likely would have been the Greek Septuagint, which labeled the 150 Psalms alternatively as “Psalms” or “Hymns” or “Spiritual Songs.” Taken by itself, this detail speaks strongly for the old Reformed practice of singing the entire Psalter on a regular basis, a practice we would do well to reconsider.

I once examined the entire worship music repertoire of my congregation, most of which I had inherited, placing each song under one of three biblical categories: (1) “teaching”; (2) “admonition”; and (3) “singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God.” Of some four hundred praise choruses and hymns, I found that most of them fit within category three, with about thirty in category one, and fewer than ten in category two. This may reflect our American spirit—the notion that we are free and that nobody can tell us what to do, least of all a worship leader. A new gnosticism’ has crept in, convincing us that feeling good is an inextricable component of orthodoxy. Admonition just does not fit “orthopathos,” an orthodoxy of shared feelings and experiences.<sup>2</sup>

Having stumbled onto this feature of my own congregation’s worship music diet, I then went to the 150 Psalms to see what the proportions of these categories would be. I read the Psalms with three colored highlighters in hand. I used one highlighter to mark teaching, one for admonition, and one for gratitude to God. More skillful Bible scholars than I will anticipate what I found: There was simply no way to separate the categories. Consider Psalm 103. The way we “bless the Lord” is to reel off a *long* list of blessings:

- He forgives all our iniquities
- He heals all our diseases
- He redeems our lives from destruction
- He crowns us with lovingkindness and compassion
- He satisfies our years with good things, and so on

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

## **WORSHIP MUSIC AND THEOLOGY**

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

In 1 Chronicles 6, we learn that the chief musicians Heman, Ethan, and Asaph came from the three separate clans of Levi. It may be that musical skill and wisdom necessitated drawing from the whole tribe rather than from a narrower pool, as was the case with the priests. Toward the end of the same chapter, we find that the Levites were

given towns and accompanying fields scattered throughout the entire land of Israel. Thus, the land of Israel would have been sprinkled with “local” Levitical musicians. First Chronicles 24 and 25 indicate that the priests and the musicians had two-week tours of duty at the temple in Jerusalem. This raises the fascinating question, “What were they doing the rest of the year?” Part of this is answered in the authorial ascription of some of the psalms. It was Asaph who thundered that God owns “the cattle on a thousand hills” (Ps. 50:10). If a modern church musician wrote a worship text like Psalm 50, he would probably not get it published in the contemporary Christian music industry. And Heman’s Psalm 88 is incontestably the bleakest of all the psalms. In short, Levitical musicians wrote psalms, and those psalms plainly were not obligated to accommodate the gnostic, emotional demands of the twentieth-century evangelical church.

We know Solomon composed 1,005 psalms, most of which are lost (1 Kings 4:32). Nevertheless, this demonstrates that the writing of psalms was apparently a flourishing activity at the time. We also know that Solomon “was wiser than Ethan the Ezrahite, Heman, Calcol and Darda, the sons of Mahol” (v. 31). If Solomon had not existed, *two of the wisest men in Israel would have been musicians!* They were teachers of the highest order. This leads me to suspect that Levitical musicians, scattered throughout the land, served as Israel’s teachers. Furthermore, the book of Psalms was their textbook. And because this textbook was a songbook, it may well be that the Levitical musicians catechized the nation of Israel through the singing of psalms.

A Levitical musician reached maturity at age thirty, not age twenty as in the case of the unspecialized Levite (1 Chron. 23:3, 5, 24). One wonders what the state of church music today would be were musical leadership withheld until age thirty. If we are serious about *sola Scriptura*, we might view such an age restriction as a prudent guideline. Luther spoke of the Psalms in his Bible translation preface as a “small Bible reduced to the loveliest and most concise form so that the content of the whole Bible exists in them as a handbook.” He recognized that all the great theological ideas of the Bible were found in its songbook, and, as a result, Lutheran hymnody of the Reformation brought the gospel to bear on every aspect of life.

We no longer have the Levitical ceremonial law, and yet the larger teaching role of the Levitical musicians will not cease until the second coming of the Lord. The apostle Paul understood that well, when, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he told us that the way the word of Christ richly dwells within us with all wisdom is that we teach and admonish one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. The word of Christ richly dwells within us with all wisdom when we sing with thankfulness in our hearts to God with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs (Col. 3:16). Paul took the teaching of the Old Testament as so self-evident that he was not compelled to elaborate. Why should he? He had the “God-breathed” Psalms already in hand.

Most worship music traditions have failed miserably to see this teaching mandate. The revivalist music of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and contemporary Christian music have both been significant offenders on this score.

Consider the well-known chorus, *Bless His Holy Name*.

Bless the Lord, O my soul,  
and all that is within me  
bless His holy name.  
He has done great things.  
He has done great things.  
He has done great things,  
bless His holy name.<sup>4</sup>

It is true that the opening sentence of the chorus is a verbatim quote of Psalm 103:1, and that is to be applauded. Beyond that, however, the remaining twenty-one verses of Psalm 103 are compressed into a scant eight words that give the vague notion that we should bless the Lord because of the great things He has done. What those great things are is left to the imagination, not the plain teaching of Scripture. The problem is that true, biblical gratitude must have its basis in objective facts or doctrine. If it doesn't, it is mere sentimentality.

Worship music teaches whether or not we want it to do so. It behooves us, therefore, to approach the writing of worship music texts with as much theological clarity and as much linguistic skill as possible. In the 150 psalms, we find all the great biblical doctrinal themes presented poetically—themes such as our depravity, the Atonement, our redemption, God's creation and providence, and so on. Whatever else Paul's admonition means, even a loose reading indicates that our worship music must regularly touch the entire superstructure of Christian doctrine.

### **BUT HOW DO WE WORK OUT THIS TRUTH?**

The moment that we turn our thoughts to the fleshing out of this concept, we run into some huge style barriers. There are styles that simply cannot carry various texts, and often those individuals who are most fond of those styles will be the first to admit that the words do not fit their preferred style. Thus, the usual response is that the texts do not belong in worship because they do not *feel* "worshipful." It seldom occurs to the style adherent that perhaps there is actually something wrong with the style, not the words. I would say axiomatically, *Any style that is not able to carry texts whose presence is demanded biblically is an inappropriate style for Christian worship.* Furthermore, encouraging diversity of styles merely allows individual worshipers to gratify their own appetites, dismissing those worship songs that are not in their preferred styles.

What is style? In order to apply biblical principles to style and worship music, we need to understand what the Bible says about style, as well as what style is. Style, per Se, is something common to all humanity and, as such, belongs squarely in the realm of common grace. The sun and the rain come down on the good and the evil alike. All

humans, all cultures, exhibit “style” or aesthetic behavior.

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

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

### **STYLE AND THE DOCTRINE OF CREATION**

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

First, we see God making tangible objects and enjoying them. He makes them, apparently, merely for His pleasure. We need to linger on this point a bit because it runs against the grain of American pragmatism, which is deeply entrenched in our intellectual presuppositions and in our methods of church life, even among those of us who repudiate the technique-oriented views of the church growth movement. We still tend to order our regular assembling together according to norms that are acceptable to our culture. And of all the various veins of philosophy, we need to remember that pragmatism is the only indigenous, uniquely American innovation.

God is self-sufficient. He needs nothing. Without the presence of necessity, there is no pragmatism. Pragmatism solves problems and fulfills needs. But God created the cosmos for His own pleasure. It was an act of undiluted aesthetic delight, a work of art. He did not have an unfulfilled need. He set the wild donkey free (Job 39:5). He made the ostrich with wings that “flap joyously” (v. 13). The heavens are the poetry<sup>5</sup> of His fingers (Ps. 8:3). Throughout the process of creation, we see God periodically taking a step backward to view His work, then noting, “It is good,” not “That does what I need it to do,” or “That functions well.” If there is a human analogy to this aspect of God, it is not the engineer or the salesman but, rather, the artist.

“Then God said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth’ (Gen. 1:26). I would suggest that we know only two things about the nature of God to this point and

that these two features are equally significant for understanding human nature: first, He made things merely for the purpose of delighting in the process of making as well as in the completed object of that process; second, He is a singular being who, nonetheless, has some mysterious plurality to His nature.

When God brought man into the picture, the first thing Adam did was name the animals. Adam did not have to study grammar and spelling; he made up the rules and sounds just as they pleased him. Furthermore, he could just as easily have called a camel a *nahotsdowth* or a *stroile* if it seemed appropriate.<sup>6</sup> It appears that the names were merely a matter of Adam's pleasure: "And whatever the man called a living creature, that was its name" (Gen. 2:19). This is a variant on "and it was so" seen in the first chapter. So we see both in God and in the man created after His image the tendency to make objects just for pleasure and beauty. In both cases, there is no apparent human audience; the audience seems to bring no bearing to what the aesthetic object shall be. The essence of the aesthetic object is based solely in the pleasurable intentions of the Creator (God) or of the maker (man).

This brings us to our first principle of style that is found in the creation: *There is style, culture, or art that has intrinsic goodness, a goodness based on beauty itself.* This principle has come down to us in the activity of high art, or high culture. This is "art for art's sake." In its most rarefied state, high art is art made simply for its beauty (as understood by the individual maker) without regard for any audience.

For the most part, high-art composers have been outside the church for about 250 years, since the death of J. S. Bach, who was the supernova of the great Lutheran tradition of biblical church musicians. There are two reasons for this.

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

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

With this divestiture of high culture, the church gave up leadership in the development of culture and has since tried, with tongue hanging out, to keep up with the world. Those who stand ready to cast aspersions on contemporary Christian music should soberly and penitently consider the fact that such music actually filled a regrettable void.

## STYLE AND THE NATURE OF GOD

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

*Unlike high art, there is a type of art made by people who know each other for people who know each other, and this art is used to enhance their being together* It is an art or style presupposition that is ever conscious of the audience, with the well-being of that audience in mind. Wholesome community, not beauty, is the chief end of this type of art. Therefore, this should be spoken of as folk art.<sup>7</sup> Here, goodness could be described as "extrinsic." Plato is probably the chief proponent of this assessment of art. He maintained that anything that brought about undesirable behavior in the citizen should be censored by the republic. The early church Fathers, almost to a man, also held this view of style, most specifically of musical style.

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

### POP CULTURE: THE GREAT MODERN PARASITE

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

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

wise” (Gen. 3:6).

There are two threads to be considered here: the first is that Eve coveted—she wanted something that was not rightfully hers; second, by eating of that tree, she opened the Pandora’s box of ever-increasing knowledge resulting in technological wonders that we cannot control. And those technological wonders have had a profound and devastating effect on our ability to maintain cultural objects that cause us to think on things that are true, honorable, right, pure, lovely, of good reputation, excellent, and worthy of praise (Phil. 4:8).

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

This third type of culture is not fundamentally concerned with beauty of form, as in high art, or in wholesomeness of community, as in folk art. It is concerned primarily with dollars and cents; therefore, it is not surprising to discover that several Christian music companies are publicly traded on the New York Stock Exchange.

The artist is not primarily held accountable to God for a transcendent standard of beauty, nor to a local community with ethical responsibility. Rather, the artist answers most directly to the shareholder. As the technology driving commercial music emerged, church leaders and seminary professors failed to realize how integral music was to the ministry of the Word. They left a gaping hole that business interests were all too ready to fill. In other words, music technology created a new entertainment market niche while ecclesiastical authorities stood by flat-footed.

## **COMMON OBJECTIONS**

The first objection runs something like this: “But aren’t all the people who work in these Christian music companies believers, and don’t they want to serve the Lord with their music?” Yes, their intentions may be good. The problem is not with their intentions but with their lines of accountability. There is no potential for church discipline when these people spread marginal or outright false teaching. Whenever anyone teaches in the church, as Christian musicians certainly do, they display a low view of human depravity when their teaching ministry is accountable to shareholders rather than to ecclesiastical authorities. When such is the case, we have high-visibility moral lapses inside the Christian music industry that are handled with patchy results.<sup>8</sup> Has this crisis overtaken us because our church discipline is flaccid and because we are lax in protecting the doctrinal purity of the church through its music component of the ministry of the Word?

The second objection might run like this: “Isn’t popular music just today’s folk music?” This is, in reality, a good objection, since pop music forms often closely

resemble folk music forms. If, however, we bear in mind that form and beauty are not the chief ends of folk music, the difference between folk and pop music will be clearer. Our God is at least as concerned with *why* we do something as with *what* we do, for out of the heart “are the issues of life” (Prov. 4:23 KJV). It is a noble desire to “become all things to all men, that [we] may by all means save some” (1 Cor. 9:22). But I would caution that to “become all things” does not mean to embrace the world’s culture uncritically.<sup>10</sup> Remember, folk culture is primarily communal. Pop culture is primarily profit driven. Contemporary Christian music is a half-billion-dollar-a-year industry.

There was a time when contemporary Christian music was folk music, a time when a bunch of hippies at Calvary Chapel and at Peninsula Bible Church bought guitars, learned a few chords, and then, out of the overflowing gratitude of their hearts, began to make up simple expressions of their faith. Their work was not especially strong, either musically or textually. Still, the movement was born in the wholesomeness of Christian community. The early Maranatha praise songs show the characteristic rough edges of music first made in the garage with little concern for future popular culture fame and wealth. It is regrettable that this simple sense of ministry and shepherding has been replaced in large measure by an ethos of stardom.

A similar movement occurred over a two-hundred-year period in Reformation Germany. During that time, nearly 100,000 hymns were written!” Comparatively few of them are with us today, and most have graciously been forgotten. That time furnished us with “A Mighty Fortress,” “Now Thank We All Our God,” “When Morning Gilds the Skies,” “All Praise to God, Who Reigns Above,” and “Praise to the Lord, the Almighty.” I would suggest that we might not have these exquisite hymns if there had not been the other 99,500 that quickly went into the wastebasket.

The point is that the good usually comes into being in the midst of necessary mediocrity. For this reason, we should encourage those who want to praise God and edify the saints by making new songs, even if those songs often seem vacuous and insipid. Music is not canonical. We can set aside something that is less than perfect later on. Inviolable traditions are idols. Traditions that keep the good and add the new are alive and healthy. We should view the music of the Jesus People in the late sixties and early seventies as a wholesome development, even though very little of it should be used in corporate worship today.

#### THE GREAT CONTEMPORARY CHURCH MUSIC REVOLUTION

As the music of the 1970s Jesus People grew in popularity, its commercial viability ignited a metamorphosis, one that removed it from local control inside the community of a local church to corporate control.

How odd it is that the current visible church is embracing diversity and multiculturalism uncritically, completely setting aside the wisdom of the early church Fathers. There are congregations all around the country now that have multiple worship

services, each in a different style to cater to the appetites of different target groups. What emerges is a conglomeration of separate congregations under one roof, each sub-congregation expecting that its felt needs be met. This often results in a group selfishness that does anything but integrate the whole body of Christ.

Moreover, the lyrics in many of the praise choruses often contradict Scripture. Consider the chorus “Highest Place” directly associated with Philippians 2:9: “Therefore God exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the name that is above every name (NIV).

We place You on the highest place,  
for You are the great High Priest;  
We place You high above all else,  
and we come to You and worship at your feet. 12

The trouble is that these lyrics indicate it is Christians—not God—who exalt Jesus to the highest place, directly contradicting the Scripture on which the song is based.

The larger problem with much commercial Christian music is not what is said but *what is left unsaid*. Two of the common troubling types of music that emerge feature God as hero and God as felt-need meeter. In itself this is not wrong, but it is consistently done at the expense of other essential doctrines.. Unfortunately, the gospel of the New Testament is offensive. It is a stumbling block. The fact that Christ died for sinners according to the Scriptures is the baseline article of our faith. And yet the blood sacrifice for sin, that doctrine that shows how disgusting our depravity really is, receives conspicuously short shrift in commercial Christian music.<sup>13</sup> It just plain doesn't sell.

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

#### SO WHAT ARE WE TO DO?

Like David Wells, “I begin by reserving my deepest suspicions for those who want answers to the difficulties I have mentioned. The desire for answers is innocent enough, but the spirit in which they are demanded frequently is not.”<sup>14</sup> The fact is, the problems in worship music are deep, and they are manifold. They have grown steadily over a quarter of a millennium, and they will not be solved overnight. Reformation is needed, and the process will not bring quick results, Indeed, the suggestions I am about to offer are merely the starting point, seen through the glass dimly.

We need to recognize that there is no present worship music tradition that inculcates the word of Christ musically to such a degree that His word dwells in us *richly*. Some traditions are worse than others, but we must concede that God will not bless us for

confessing other Christians' sins. Therefore, *the first step is to repent and to cry out for God's mercy.* I would go so far as to say that if this step is not taken seriously and continuously, there is no reason to anticipate God's blessing on our efforts, nor is there any reason to take the measures I am about to propose.

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

*Prudential wisdom would encourage us to consider not buying and using commercial Christian music.* On the face of it, this measure might seem Draconian, in part because it will force us to home-grow our own contemporary worship music, and the bald fact remains that music literacy has dropped to such a dismal level that skilled composers are not frequently to be found in local congregations. The local church will have to review its vision in light of this failing and take steps to remedy it. As worship music begins to flex its biblical muscles, we will quickly find that our general music literacy is woefully inadequate to the task.<sup>15</sup> This will take a generation or two, thousands of hours of careful music study, and many dollars to remedy. The church has left the job of music education to the public school and to the whim of individuals. But public schools do not train very good worship musicians.

*We will need to review the way we spend our time in corporate worship.* Each Sunday, we will need to ask, "Did the music ministry today cause the word of Christ to dwell in us richly? Did we teach and admonish one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs? Did we sing with gratitude in our hearts to God for Christ's finished work on the cross?" My guess is that we will quickly find that we do not sing together enough to accomplish these biblical demands. One of the canons of the church growth movement is that services that extend beyond an hour are not seeker sensitive and are, therefore, to be avoided at all costs. There are one hundred sixty-eight hours in a week. What do we say about the lordship of Christ when we spend only one of those in corporate worship?

## A PRACTICAL RESPONSE

By now pastors might feel a bit withered. The assignment is reaching Herculean proportions. Some may be thinking, *How will Aunt Maude, who plays the piano*

*voluntarily (and not very well), pull this off? Others may think, The college kids I've hired to do the worship band won't have a clue about this. Still others may think, I see my pastoral responsibility for oversight in this task, but I'm already overworked, and I do not have the budget to hire a real worship musician even if I could find one. Furthermore, what little music education I've had has not prepared me to deal with any of these problems.*

The worship music load I have described cannot, generally, be carried by a preacher. The biblical church musician has the ministry of the Word and prayer just like the pulpit preacher, but with musical means. He needs a training corollary to that of the preacher. He needs to operate under the same standards of accountability and scrutiny as the preacher. And like the ox and the preacher, he must not be muzzled while he is treading out the grain.

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

*First, retake ecclesiastical authority over the music and over every word sung in corporate worship and in small groups.* When approached with a doctrinally inadequate special music project (usually an accompaniment track from some favorite commercial Christian artist), the pastor must be able to say, as Erik Routley did, "You can't have it because it is not good for you."<sup>16</sup> Remember, worship music is an issue of shep herding. *Second, vociferously denounce the widely held notion that entertainment is good whereas boredom is bad.* Gene Edward Veith points out that the word "bored" did not enter English vocabulary until the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, Veith shows that the corresponding biblical concept of boredom is sloth. In other words, boredom is primarily the hearer's problem, not the speaker's. Until this point is won, much biblical teaching and admonition will remain off limits.

*Third, read Calvin Johansson's excellent book Discipling Music Ministry.*<sup>18</sup> Recognizing that pastors' reading lists are already overburdened, I restrict my recommendation to one small book. A wise man once said, "with all thy getting, get understanding" (Prov. 4:7 icjv). Johansson's small volume catapults the pastor into understanding.

*Fourth, register complaints with your seminaries over the minuscule and sometimes nonexistent place music holds within their Master of Divinity training.*

*Fifth, within congregational life foster children's choirs that have as a major goal the teaching of great hymn texts.* Start early. Children are not born believing that they should like popular culture while disliking great old hymns. It is amazing how many children enjoy Mr. Rogers's operas. Children will acculturate to what is placed before them. Remember, worship music is an issue of shepherding.

*Sixth, grow worship musicians from inside the four walls of the church under your theologically watchful eyes.* It is true that the guitar can serve some limited use, but

keyboard instruments present much greater musical versatility. Congregations should seriously invest in the continuing education of musicians. We should consider paying for piano lessons as well as instruction in music theory and counterpoint. Music theory is to music what hermeneutics is to theology. Counterpoint is to music what logic is to philosophy. We have a crisis in church music because these disciplines are not part of the life and breath of our musicians. Remember, worship music is part of the ministry of the Word. We would be appalled by a preacher who read at a third-grade level and did not understand grammar, yet we handicap the ministry of the Word when we leave our musicians unprepared.

Should all these measures be implemented, I would not expect overnight and glamorous results. Still, if we care about our children's children, we need to begin to take the tough, disciplined steps now. We need to seriously pray, "Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10). Even better, we might consider singing it.<sup>19</sup>

#### NOTES

1. Ancient Gnosticism was a slippery heresy that evaded definition. At a minimum, however, Gnosticism embraces a secret knowledge derived more intuitively than objectively. For a good exposé of Gnosticism, see Peter Jones, *The Gnostic Empire Strikes Bach* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presb. & Ref., 1992).
2. Kenneth A. Myers, *All Gods Children & Blue Suede Shoes* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1989), 186. Myers notes, somewhat wryly, that evangelicals seem to have more in common concerning the sentimental trappings associated with faith than they do in defining what the nature of that faith is." In other words, what evangelicals have in common is a type of Gnosticism.
3. We need think only of Tobias Clausnitzer's "We All Believe in One True God, Father," Philipp Nicolai's "Wake, Awake, for Night Is Flying," or Martin Luther's "Isaiah, Mighty Seer, in Spirit Soared."
4. Entry #33 in *Praise*, Maranatha Music (1983).
5. Martin Luther translated the word *work* as "poetry."
6. God made Adam with a specific design whereby some things would seem appropriate while others would not. Adam's artistic behavior should not be construed as relativistic or capricious.
7. By "folk" music, we should not automatically think of the style of James Taylor or Gordon Lightfoot or of guitars, tin whistles, and Celtic drums.
8. One is reminded of Nathan's comment to David: "By this deed you have given occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme" (2 Sam. 12:14). As with fallen pastors, the scope of the influence determines the necessary scope of the repentance. For further study, see John H. Armstrong, *Can Fallen Pastors Be Restored?* (Chicago: Moody, 1995).
9. John Styll ("The Christian Music Industry: Under New Ownership," *Worship Leader* [July/August 1995], 29) claims that "contemporary Christian music, generally speaking, is not church music." Yet the church is a folk unit because it is not good for the man to be alone. The irony here is that when our parishioners listen to many hours of commercial

Christian music during the week, they come to expect and desire the same thing in corporate worship.

10. Many Christians who appropriate the goods of popular culture cite Luther as a precedent. A common claim is that Luther used tunes “from the bar.” However, musicological research since 1923 is weighing in heavily for Luther as the composer of his own melodies. Luther did use a musical form called a “bar” form. But this is a technical term referring to the architecture of music, not, as would normally be expected, a place where alcoholic beverages are consumed. Others mistakenly cite Luther’s famous question, “Why should the devil have all the good tunes?” When Luther spoke of the devil metaphorically, it was directed at the pope, not the pub. To rephrase what Luther was saying, “Why should we leave the great old hymns to the Roman Catholics?” It was an apology for the traditional, not for the contemporary’