

## **What's In A Song? Tuning Our Hearts**

By Kevin Twit

*“Don’t become so well adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without thinking.”* Romans 12:2 paraphrased in *The Message*. [1](#)

Recently public television aired a documentary entitled, “The Merchants of Cool.” The program revealed how the various media conglomerates shape our understanding of what “cool” is, and then steer the buying taste of our youth in this regard. Working with college students, I found this very relevant and so I invited some students over to watch the program. The show featured people like MTV’s vice president of brand strategy who described how they go about identifying what “cool” is, and then how they sell that message to our youth. After watching the program, one student said something I found quite perceptive. We were talking about how we as Christians can be set free from slavery to the culture’s idea of what it means to be cool. This student raised his hand and asked, “How can we be set free from trying to be cool when churches seek to hire ‘cool’ youth directors? All I could say was, *“That’s a good question.”* It is an excellent question!

The culture does squeeze us, even in the Church. When we come together in worship it is to have our sanity restored. It is about the restoring of what God says is true about life, rather than being squeezed by the message our culture preaches. Worship is about restoring our sanity because we so often live in a sort of insanity! When we believe that we earn God’s favor by what we do, when we believe we can manipulate God to do whatever we want, we are not living in line with reality. That is living in a fantasy world. The world we actually live in is the world in which God loves us because of His great mercy in Christ. Yet we rarely live like that.

Worship is about opening our eyes to see Jesus for who he is, as beautiful and believable. This is what changes us! Worship is formative. It molds us and shapes us as the people of God. In Romans 12, Paul urges us to no longer be conformed to, or squeezed into the mold of, the world in which we live. The basis he gives for this is the mercy of God. As the mercy of God in the person of Jesus Christ sinks into our hearts, we are changed.

Thomas Chalmers was a great pastor, seminary professor, and leader in the Free Church of Scotland in the 19th century. He mentored men like Robert Murray McCheyne and Horatius Bonar (the hymnwriter), and he preached a landmark sermon entitled, “The Expulsive Power of a New Affection.” It is a wonderful sermon in which he points out how we never lose our hold on one love until a new love comes along. [2](#) He says that the only way to dispossess the heart of an old affection is by the expulsive power of a new one. I often talk about this with my college students. A person never really gets over a crush until a new love comes along. Our hearts can be drawn from one affection to another, but they will never lose their longing to cling to something.

This is why John Calvin said that our hearts are like idol factories. We will worship something. We *will* love something and until a new more beautiful, more believable, love comes along, we will inevitably cling to idols! But the Gospel comes to us and it brings an expulsive power—the expulsive power of a new affection. A new affection comes in, as we see Jesus as more beautiful and believable and it drives out these other affections! It is in worship, through the preaching, the singing, and the sacraments, that our hearts are drawn from other “beauties” as our eyes are opened to see Jesus for who He really is.

During my time in the ministry, I have come to appreciate the power of hymns to help us meditate upon the reality of God’s grace in worship and mold us as the people of God. When my students actually begin to read the words, they can’t believe that they used to regard hymns as lifeless and dull. As one student put it, *“These songs convey emotion. Sorrow, loneliness, surprise, overwhelming joy!”*

*They are all here, and my generation doesn't associate any of those qualities with hymns."*

Unfortunately, sometimes this rich theological poetry is connected to tunes that fail to express the emotion of the lyric to my students. The words are so rich that we have begun to write new tunes for some of them. And I take whatever opportunity I can to urge gifted composers to search out powerful hymns that have tragically dropped out of use, or even to write new hymns.

Hymns take a truth from Scripture and let us sit in it for a while. They engage intellect, imagination, and emotion. The hymns are mini-meditations upon the mysteries of the Gospel that drive us to worship. They offer a story, something very attractive to postmodern people, and invite us to come in and see if it might be our story, too. For instance, I love to introduce students to the hymns of Anne Steele. She was an 18th century English Baptist hymn-writer who spent 50 years as an invalid. I believe she wrote some of the most remarkable hymns about the power of the Gospel in the midst of grief and pain that you will ever find. Yet her hymns unfortunately have vanished from almost every modern hymnal. When people sing her words they find themselves in her story. They find they can fellowship with a woman who lived 300 years. Suddenly the Kingdom of God becomes huge to them!

Hymns are theology on fire. They are theology expressed in beautiful, poetic language that gets at the heart, and engages the imagination. They help us to sit for three or four minutes in the mysteries of the Gospel that fill us with wonder. The hymn-writers really glory in these paradoxical statements. One of my favorite examples is in a hymn by Augustus Toplady (the author of "Rock of Ages"). He writes, *"O love incomprehensible, that made Thee bleed for me. The Judge of all hath suffered death, to set His prisoner free."*<sup>3</sup> To sit in that thought, even for a little while, changes you! And the more you meditate upon it, the more it overwhelms your heart.

C.H. Spurgeon once said *"When I cannot understand anything in the Bible, it seems as though God had set a chair there for me, at which to kneel and worship; and that the mysteries are intended to be an altar of devotion."*<sup>4</sup> These mysteries are what the hymns love to dwell upon. Hymns are mini-meditations on the ironies of the Gospel that drive us to worship. They are an opportunity to meditate upon a mystery like *"And can it be, that Thou my God should die for me?"*<sup>5</sup> until it begins to really sink into our heart.

If we ever lose our sense of wonder, we will be conformed to the culture. If we ever lose our sense of the beauty and the amazement, we will be conformed to the culture, we will be conformed to the flesh. Hymns, you see, are not only opportunities for our meditation, they were often the *result* of meditation. It used to be that it was the pastors who would write the hymns. Often they would write a hymn at the end of a week of meditating upon their sermon.

For instance, John Newton's hymn Amazing Grace is actually a result of his meditating all week upon 1 Chronicles 17, God's covenant with David. We even have the notes from Newton's sermon the day that he first taught his people that hymn! <sup>6</sup> You might remember how David wants to build a house for God, but God tells him, *"You aren't going to build me a house – I'm going to build your house! I have been traveling in a tent with my people and until they are settled, I won't be settled! David, I'm putting my house on hold because I am putting you first!"*<sup>7</sup> Isn't that the heart of the Gospel – that God puts us first? As David sits in that, he is blown away, and as Newton sits in that, he too cannot help but cry "Amazing grace!"

Hymns are powerful. They sneak into our soul. As William Cowper sings, *"Sometimes a light surprises the Christian while he sings; it is the Lord who rises with healing in His wings."* William Cowper was well aware of the power of hymns as he writes in a letter to a friend, *"It is a noble thing to be a poet. It makes all the world so lively. I might have preached more sermons than even Tillotson did and better, and the world would have been still fast asleep. But a volume of verse is a fiddle that puts the universe in motion."*<sup>8</sup> Hymns have this ability to sneak in undetected and surprise us! And we desperately need the truth of the mercy of God to break through, to reform us, to restore our sanity, to

open our eyes to help us see Jesus as beautiful and believable — in short, to shape us as a people of God. The hymns have power to do just that.

In her book, *A Royal Waste of Time*, Marva Dawn tells of Vaclav Havel, a playwright who is also the president of the Czech Republic. He was asked, how the revolution to overthrow communism in the Czech Republic was bloodless and yet had experienced real staying power. He simply replied, “*We had our parallel society. And in that parallel society, we wrote our plays and sang our songs and read our poems, until we knew the truth so well that we could go out into the streets of Prague and say, ‘We don’t believe your lies anymore!’ And communism had to fall.*” [9](#)

Isn’t that a beautiful picture of what worship should be about? We gather to sing our songs so we will know the truth so well that we can go out into the world and we say, “*We don’t believe your lies anymore! We won’t be squeezed into your mold!*” And so we can speak to our fearful heart and say, “*Heart, I don’t believe your lies anymore!*” (or as Charles Wesley put it, “*Arise my soul arise! Shake off your guilty fear!*”) because Jesus can trump even what my heart says! And Jesus *does* trump our hearts as He becomes beautiful and believable to you. That is why we gather in worship. That is why I urge you, use the hymns of the church! God is using them to mold us to the truth, restore our sanity, and open our eyes to see Jesus as beautiful and believable.

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[1](#) Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1993), 328. [back](#)

[2](#) From Tim Keller’s unpublished syllabus, “Preaching The Gospel in A Postmodern World,” 2000, pg. 18 quoting from Thomas Chalmers “The Expulsive Power of a New Affection” from *The Works of Thomas Chalmers*, Vol. 2, (New York: Robert Carter, 1830). [back](#)

[3](#) *Diary And Selection of Hymns of Augustus Toplady* (Leicester, England: Gospel Standard Baptist Trust Ltd., 1969), 99. [back](#)

[4](#) W. Williams, *Personal Reminiscences Of Charles Haddon Spurgeon* (London, The Religious Tract Society, 1895), 198. [back](#)

[5](#) Charles Wesley [back](#)

[6](#) Richard Cecil, *The Life Of John Newton* (Fearn, Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 2000), 365. [back](#)

[7](#) Dale Ralph Davis, *2 Samuel* (Fearn, Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 1999) 71. [back](#)

[8](#) William Cowper and James Thomson, *The Works of Cowper and Thomson* (Philadelphia: J. Grigg, 1845), 290. [back](#)

[9](#) Marva Dawn, *A Royal “Waste” Of Time* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1999), 334. [back](#)

# Why We Still Need Hymns In A Postmodern World:

## The Formative Power Of Worship

Rev. Kevin Twit (July 2003)

### Introduction: Is There Really A New “Movement” Going On?

Lori’s testimony *“Coming from a typical praise chorus-reliant high school youth group I sort of turned my nose up as I was handed a notebook of hymns at my first visit to RUF. I didn’t understand a lot of the poetic and imagery-driven lyrics and the word hymn automatically meant boring music. But as the weeks passed, I found myself falling in love with the old hymns and the idea of putting new (and very beautiful) music to them. The words are so profound and full of truth one can’t help but be broken. Singing hymns has seriously changed my life and freed me from feeling frustrated by surface lyrics that focus on how I feel about God, which is always changing. Hymns have allowed me to center my worship on the Gospel, which in turn compels me to love the God I am prone to hate and wander from.”*

What’s going on? See “The Younger Evangelicals” by Robert Webber, “Bobos in Paradise” by David Brooks, and “The New Faithful” by Colleen Carroll. Webber writes, *“I find three trends in the worship of the younger evangelical. They are (1) a reaction to entertainment worship, (2) a longing for an experience of God’s presence, and (3) a restoration of liturgical elements of worship.”*

“My grandmother saved it, my mother threw it away, and now I’m buying it back”

Roots and wings! *“The challenge is to provide roots and wings – to bring young people into a sense of connectedness with the past that doesn’t rob them of their vision of the future.”* Gerard Kelly  
“Retro-future”

### **I. Worship Is Formative – Lex Orandi Lex Credendi (The law of prayer is the law of belief.)**

*“And we, who with unveiled faces all gaze upon the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit”* 2Corinthians 3:18

The expulsive power of a new affection! Worship shapes and molds us! Our hearts are drawn from other “treasures” as our eyes are opened to see Jesus for who He really is. Thomas Chalmers (19th century Scottish Presbyterian) called this the “expulsive power of a new affection.” By that phrase he means that you never really get over one love until a new one comes along. In worship we seek to have Jesus become more beautiful and believable to us. (Bill Lane’s wonderful phrase!) See “Thou Lovely Source Of True Delight” by Anne Steele (18th century), *“Thou lovely Source of true delight, Whom I unseen adore. Unveil Thy beauties to my heart, That I might love Thee more!”*

Worship restores our sanity! We seek to have God restore our sanity so that we can live in line with the truth of the gospel rather than in accordance with the fantasy world in which we must earn God’s favor and manipulate Him to do whatever we want. Our basic problem as believers is that of idolatry, we too often worship a “god” who is so much less than the God of the Bible. But the gospel heals us of our idolatry by showing us that we already have what we are trying to get from our idols. Whether it be power or security or meaning, we already have it in Jesus. When we see this, and the truth of it connects to our hearts, we are transformed!

The longing for experiencing God. Postmoderns long for experience with God and the hymns are some of the richest expression of Christian experience we have – they are a real doorway into sensing the truth on our hearts rather than just “knowing” it in our heads! See Wesley’s “Arise My Soul Arise” for a great example of crying out to God to sense what we confess. *“Arise my soul arise, Shake off thy guilty fears, The bleeding sacrifice, On my behalf appears.”* This communion hymn is a pleading with the soul to feel what we see displayed in the sacraments!

## **II. Hymns Help Us Grow Up!**

Hymns teach us the rich theology we really need! If we have a limited view of who God is and what the gospel is, our experience of it will be limited as well. Why does Paul write the longest explanation of the gospel to people who are (literally) world-famous for their faith? (Romans 1:8) Because as Luther said, we leak the gospel and it needs to be beat into our heads over and over again!

Hymns stretch us! Postmoderns despise a watered-down, content-less gospel! “People think if we make it easy on young adults, we’ll draw them in, [but reality] is the very opposite. Youth are looking for a cause, a reason to live. They need something to give their lives to. A Christianity that says, “Go to church on Sunday and be a good person” – that’s no cause! Christianity doesn’t say go to church on Sunday, Jesus said, “He who loses his life will find it.” In other words, “If you don’t love me above all things, you’re not worthy of me.” But few people are given that message.” Rosalind Moss (quoted in “The New Faithful” by Carroll) Don’t be afraid of content in our worship services! Sometimes we might even have to ask someone what a line means. But who says that everything we sing must be instantly accessible? Is there no value to learning songs that take some work? Why is “Henry Lyte’s “Jesus I My Cross have Taken” one of my students favorite hymns? I think it is because it offers us orientation to what the Christian life really is all about and doesn’t sugar-coat things at all!

*“Jesus I my cross have taken, all to leave and follow Thee. Destitute, despised, forsaken, Thou from hence my all shall be Perish every fond ambition, All I’ve sought or hoped or known. Yet how rich is my condition! God and heaven are still my own.*

*“Let the world despise and leave me, They have left my Savior, too. Human hearts and looks deceive me; Thou art not, like them, untrue. O while Thou dost smile upon me, God of wisdom, love, and might, Foes may hate and friends disown me, Show Thy face and all is bright.”*

## **III. Hymns Focus Us Where The Focus Needs To Be!**

Hymns are mini-meditations on the “paradoxes” of the gospel that drive us to worship. C.H. Spurgeon once said “When I cannot understand anything in the Bible, it seems as though God had set a chair there for me, at which to kneel and worship; and that the mysteries are intended to be an altar of devotion.” I think that is good advice. Hymns are an opportunity to sit in a mystery like “And can it be that Thou my God shouldst die for me?!” until it begins to enter into our heart! Another great example is Augustus Toplady’s “O Love incomprehensible, that made Thee bleed for me. The Judge of all hath suffered death, to set His prisoner free!” The greatest mystery is not why is there evil, but why God would suffer for His enemies?! If we ever lose our amazement at that, then we are in deep weeds!

Many hymns actually are born out of meditation upon scripture – an art we desperately need to relearn! Tim Keller (pastor at Redeemer Church in NYC) says meditation is thinking a truth in [into your heart] and then thinking it out [thinking out the implications of this truth for your life etc.] That is what the hymns help us do as they take their theme and turn it over and let us gaze upon it from all different angles. And they often will suggest (though by no means do they ever exhaust) ways in which this truth should change our lives. In this way they model how to meditate upon scripture and the truths of the gospel. This is not just a happy coincidence, it is born out of the fact that hymns are usually the result of meditation in the first place! A great example of this is “How Sweet The Name Of Jesus Sounds” by John Newton (18th century.) We have the notes from Newton’s sermon the day he introduced this hymn to his congregation and it reveals that his text was “Thy Name is as ointment poured forth” (Song of Solomon 1:3). As he reflected upon that text all week he saw it’s fulfillment in Jesus and the implication for the trials and tribulations of the Christian’s life. When was the last time you got that much out of meditating on Song of Solomon 1:3?

Hymns remind us that we can only approach God through the shed blood of Jesus (1Pet 2:5) It is amazing how little the gospel is celebrated in some modern choruses. The idea that we only approach God as Christians through the blood of Christ is (I hope) assumed but it is too rarely mentioned! And when the cross is mentioned, it is only *mentioned*, it is never explained or unpacked or gazed upon. The major theme is wanting to see God’s face and His glory, but the cross is the way we see God’s face and it is the fullest expression of His

glory! (Luther called this the “theology of the cross” and we need to relearn this theology – especially in Middle Class America!) We need deeper and richer, and longer, looks at the cross and all that it means! As Luther advised, “*For every one look you take of your sin, take 10 looks at the cross!*” But we rarely look at our sin, perhaps because we don’t look at the cross enough! Because if you really look at your sin without seeing the cross as huge – it will devastate you!

Hymns focus us on God’s promises more than upon ours! **We grow by feeding on God’s character revealed and by feasting on His promises.** Many modern choruses, with their almost constant emphasis on what we want to do, (“Lord I just want to ...”) fail to teach us to rely on God’s love for us as 1John 4:16 says (“We know and rely on *God’s* love for us”). We need to recall Augustus Toplady’s hymn “Rock of Ages” (originally titled “A living and dying prayer for the holiest believer on earth”): “*Could my zeal no respite know, could my tears forever flow, all for sin could not atone, thou must save and thou alone!*”

# EVANGELISTIC WORSHIP

June, 2001  
TIM KELLER

## THE WORSHIP WARS

One of the basic features of church life in the U.S. today is the proliferation of worship and music forms. This in turn has caused many severe conflicts both within individual congregations and whole denominations. Most books and articles about recent worship trends tend to fall into one of two broad categories.<sup>1</sup> "Contemporary Worship" (hereafter CW) advocates often make rather sweeping statements, such as "pipe organs and choirs will never reach people today." "Historic Worship" (hereafter HW) advocates often speak similarly about how incorrigibly corrupt popular music and culture is, and how they make contemporary worship completely unacceptable.<sup>2</sup>

### Contemporary Worship: Plugging In?

One CW advocate writes vividly that we must 'plug in' our worship in to three power sources: "the sound system, the Holy Spirit, and contemporary culture."<sup>3</sup> But several problems attend the promotion of strictly contemporary worship.

First, some popular music *does* have severe limitations for worship. Critics of popular culture argue that much of it is the product of mass-produced commercial interests. As such, it is often marked by sentimentality, a lack of artistry, sameness, and individualism in a way that traditional folk art was not. Second, when we ignore historic tradition we break our solidarity with Christians of the past. Part of the richness of our identity as Christians is that we are saved into a historic people. An unwillingness to consult tradition is not in keeping with either Christian humility or Christian community. Nor is it a thoughtful response to the post-modern rootlessness which now leads so many to seek connection to ancient ways and peoples.

Finally, any worship that is *strictly* contemporary will become 'dated' very, very quickly. Also, it will necessarily be gauged to a very narrow 'market niche.' When Peter Wagner says we should 'plug in' to contemporary culture, *which* contemporary culture does he mean? White, black, Latin, urban, suburban, 'Boomer,' or 'GenX' contemporary culture? Just ten years ago, Willow Creek's contemporary services were considered to be 'cutting edge.' Today, most younger adults find them dated and 'hokey.'<sup>4</sup>

Hidden (but not well!) in the arguments of contemporary worship enthusiasts is the assumption that culture is basically neutral. Thus there is no reason why we cannot wholly adapt our worship to any particular cultural form. But worship that is not rooted in any particular historic tradition will often lack

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<sup>1</sup> As one of many examples, see Michael S. Hamilton, "The Triumph of the Praise Songs," *Christianity Today* (July 12, 1999) vol.43, no.8, p.28. He speaks of 'Reformers' who value tradition and look for greater unity among churches through common liturgical forms and of 'Revolutionaries' who promote contemporary music and who encourage broad diversity in worship style.

<sup>2</sup> Representative figures who emphasize historic continuity, tradition, high culture, and theological exposition in worship are Marva Dawn, *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down* (Eerdmans, 1995) and David Wells, "A Tale of Two Spiritualities" in *Losing Our Virtue* (Eerdmans, 1998.) (See also the web page for "Church Music at a Crossroads": <http://www.xlgrou.net/cm.ac>.) Examples of those urging a move to contemporary worship with emphasis "visual communication, music, sensations, and feelings" are Lyle Schaller "Worshipping with New Generations" in *21 Bridges to the 21st Century* (Abingdon, 1994) and C.Peter Wagner, *The New Apostolic Churches* (Regal, 1998.)

<sup>3</sup> See C.Peter Wagner, who says that contemporary worship: "is 'plugged in' to three important power sources: the sound system, the Holy Spirit, and contemporary culture" p.3 of "Another New Wineskin--the New Apostolic Reformation" in *Next* (Leadership Network: Jan-Mar, 1999.) That is a good description of tradition-eschewing contemporary worship.

<sup>4</sup> The critique of Willow Creek as a 'dated' and 'Boomer' model can be found in Sally Morgenthaler, "Out of the Box: Authentic Worship in a Postmodern Culture," *Worship Leader*, May-June, 1998, p.24ff. This and an interview with musician Fernando Ortega in *Prism* Nov/Dec 1997 are indications of some major cracks in the foundation of evangelical assumptions about what kind of services will reach young secular people. However, if a church abandons 'Boomer' contemporary music for more alternative rock, won't it be in the same position in another 10-15 years that Willow Creek is in now? More historic worship forms have a better claim to durability.

the critical distance to critique and avoid the excesses and distorted sinful elements of the particular surrounding, present culture. For example, how can we harness contemporary Western culture's accessibility and frankness, but not its individualism and psychologizing of moral problems?

### **Historic Worship--Pulling Out?**

HW advocates, on the other hand, are strictly 'high culture' promoters, who defend themselves from charges of elitism by arguing that modern pop music is inferior to traditional folk art.<sup>5</sup> But problems also attend the promotion of strictly traditional, historic worship.

First, HW advocates cannot really dodge the charge of cultural elitism. A realistic look at the Christian music arising from the grassroots folk cultures of Latin America, Africa, and Asia (not commercially produced pop music centers) reveals many of the characteristics of contemporary praise and worship music--simple and accessible tunes, driving beat, repetitive words, and emphasis on experience.<sup>6</sup> In the U.S., an emphasis on strictly high culture music and art will probably only appeal to college educated elites. Second, any proponent of 'historic' worship will have to answer the question--'whose' history? Much of what is called 'traditional' worship is rooted in northern European culture. While strict CW advocates bind worship too heavily to one present culture, strict HW advocates bind it too heavily to a *past* culture. Do we really believe that the 16th century Northern European approach to emotional expression and music (incarnate in the Reformation tradition) was completely Biblically informed and must be preserved?

Hidden (but not well!) in the arguments of traditional worship advocates is the assumption that certain historic forms are more pure, Biblical, and untainted by human cultural accretions. Those who argue against cultural relativism must also remember the essential relativity of all traditions. Just as it is a lack of humility to disdain tradition, it is also a lack of humility (and a blindness to the 'noetic' effects of sin) to elevate any particular tradition or culture's way of doing worship. A refusal to adapt a tradition to new realities may come under Jesus' condemnation of making our favorite human culture into an idol, equal to the Scripture in normativity (Mark 7:8-9)<sup>7</sup> While CW advocates do not seem to recognize the sin in all cultures, the HW advocates do not seem to recognize the amount of (common) grace in all cultures.

### **Bible, Tradition, and Culture**

At this point, the reader will anticipate that I am about to unveil some grand 'Third Way' between two extremes. Indeed, many posit a third approach called "Blended" worship.<sup>8</sup> But it is not so simple as that. My major complaint is that both sides are equally simplistic in the process by which they shape their worship.

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<sup>5</sup> Marva Dawn does an excellent job of distilling Ken Myer's concerns about pop music in her chapter "Throwing the Baby Out with the Bath Water" in *Reaching Out*, p.183ff.

<sup>6</sup> See "The Triumph of the Praise Songs," *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Too often, advocates for 'high culture' or 'pop culture' worship music try to make their advocacy a matter of theological principle, when their conviction is really more a matter of their own tastes and cultural preferences. For example, when pressed, HW advocates admit that jazz is not really a product of commercial pop culture, but qualifies as a high culture medium which grew out of genuine folk roots and requires great skill and craft and can express a fuller range of human experience than rock and pop music. (See Calvin M. Johansson, *Music and Ministry: A Biblical Counterpoint* (Hendrickson, 1984) pp.59-62 on "Folk Music and Jazz.") On their own principles, then, there is no reason for traditionalists not to allow jazz music in worship, yet I see no Tradition-worship proponents encouraging jazz liturgies! Why not? I think that they are going on their own aesthetic preferences.

<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, for many people 'blended' worship consists of a simple, wooden 50-50 division between contemporary songs and traditional hymns. This is often quite jarring and unhelpful. It is more of a political compromise than the result of reflection about your community's culture and your church's tradition. A far better example of a 'Third Way' is Robert E. Webber, *Blended Worship: Achieving Substance and Relevance in Worship* (Hendrickson, 1996.) Webber is talking of a more organic blend of liturgical elements, content-ful preaching, and a variety of music forms. In many ways my essay agrees with Webber's basic thrust. We would not use the term 'blended worship,' however, because it usually connotes the political compromise mentioned above. On the problems of 50-50 music division, see comments at end of the paper, under "Selecting Worship Music".

CW advocates consult a) the Bible and b) contemporary culture, while HW advocates consult a) the Bible and b) historic tradition. But we forge worship best when we consult a) the Bible, b) the cultural context of our community,<sup>9</sup> and c) the historic tradition of our church.<sup>10</sup> The result of this more complex process will not be simply a single, third "middle way." There are at least nine worship traditions in Protestantism alone.<sup>11</sup> That is why the book you are reading provides examples of culturally relevant worship that nonetheless deeply appreciates and reflects its historic tradition.

This more complex approach is extremely important to follow. The Bible simply does not give us enough details to shape an entire worship service. When the Bible calls us to sing God's praises, we are not given the tunes nor the rhythm. We are not told how repetitive the lyrics are to be or not to be, nor how emotionally intense the singing should be. When we are commanded to do corporate prayer, we are not told whether those prayers should be written, unison prayers or extemporary prayers.<sup>12</sup> So to give any concrete form to our worship, we *must* "fill in the blanks" that the Bible leaves open. When we do so, we will have to draw on a) tradition, b) the needs, capacities and cultural sensibilities of our people, and c) our own personal preferences. Though we cannot avoid drawing on our own preferences, this should never be the driving force (cf. Romans 15:1-3.) Thus, if we fail to do the hard work of consulting both tradition and culture, we will--wittingly or unwittingly--just tailor music to please ourselves.

## THE SEEKER-SENSITIVE WORSHIP MOVEMENT

Sally Morgenthaler's interview with young pastors (Chris Seay, Mark Driscoll, Ron Johnson, Doug Pagitt, Clark Crebar) in *Worship Leader* (May/June 1998) "Authentic Worship in a Postmodern Culture" and Fernando Ortega's interview in *Prism* in Nov/Dec 1997 are indications of some major cracks in the foundation of evangelical assumptions about what kind of services will reach 'secular' people.

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<sup>9</sup> A good case for a balanced view of consulting culture within an evangelical view of the authority of Scripture is made by Andrew F. Walls in "The Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator of Culture" and "The Translation Principle in Christian History" in his *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of the Faith* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996.)

<sup>10</sup> A good case for a balanced view of consulting tradition within an evangelical view of the authority of Scripture is made by Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon for Evangelical Theology* (Eerdmans, 1993), pp.83-101. He writes that Christian humility makes us recognize the reality of our biases and prejudices when coming to Scripture. This means it is unbiblical (in our doctrine of sin) to think we can find the Biblical "way" without consulting our own tradition and other tradition to check our own Scriptural findings. See also John Leith, *Introduction to the Reformed Tradition*, (John Knox, 1981) Chapter I - "Traditioning the Faith."

<sup>11</sup> James F. White, *A Brief History of Christian Worship* (Abingdon, 1993) p.107, identifies the Protestant worship traditions as follows:

16th cent:	Anabaptist, (Continental) Reformed, Anglican, Lutheran
17th cent:	Quaker, Puritan/Reformed
18th cent:	Methodist
19th cent:	Frontier
20th cent:	Pentecostal

<sup>12</sup> John M. Frame (*Worship in Spirit and Truth*, Presbyterian and Reformed, 1996) does a good job of showing how great a variety of forms the basic Biblical elements can take. Some have argued against the use of choirs and solos on the basis of the 'Regulative Principle', namely, that they are not prescribed by Scripture. But Frame asks, if some are allowed to pray aloud, while the rest of the congregation meditates, why can't some be allowed to sing or play aloud, while the rest of the congregation meditates? (p.129) Why would song be regulated in a different way than prayer and preaching? Some have argued against using hymns and non-Scriptural songs on the basis of the Regulative Principle. But Frame asks, if we are allowed to pray or to preach using our own words (based on Scripture), why can we not sing using our own words (based on Scripture)? (p.127) Why would song be regulated in a different way than prayer and preaching? Some have argued against the use of dance in worship, but aside from many apparent references to dance in worship in the Psalter, Frame asks, if we are exhorted to raise hands (Neh.2:8; Ps.28:2; 1 Tim.2:8), clap hands (Ps.47:1), and fall down (1 Cor.14:25) is it not expected and natural that we accompany words with actions? (p.131) We can't preach, surely, without using our bodies to express our thoughts and words, so how can we arbitrarily 'draw the line' to exclude dance? Frame points out that the real way to make decisions about these issues (such as dance) is wisdom and love--namely, what will edify? In other words, if you think that dancers in leotards will be too distracting and sexually provocative for your congregation, just say so--don't try to prove that the Bible forbids it. It is a bad habit of mind to seek to label "forbidden" what is really just unwise.

The crisis (that is here? coming?) in the church growth movement due to the fact that the attack on seeker-sensitive worship is coming from inside, that is, from the pastors of fast growing 'mega-churches' (though the name and category is eschewed) filled with under-30's. These pastors claim that the Willow Creek inspired services supposedly adapted for the unchurched were calibrated for a very narrow and transitory kind of unchurched person: namely, college educated, white, Baby Boomers, suburbanites. The increasingly multi-ethnic, less rational/word-oriented, urban oriented and more secular generations under the age of 35 are not the same kind of 'unchurched' people. The critique is that Willow Creek 'over-adapted' to the rational, a-historical 'high modern' world-view.

The younger pastors say that Willow Creek services do several things that alienate the seekers of *their* generations.

- a) It removed transcendence from its services by utilizing light, happy music and tone, complete accessibility of voice, using dramatic sketches that create a nightclub or TV-show atmosphere. But their generations hunger for awe.
- b) It ditched connection to history and tradition and went completely contemporary in all cultural references, from sermon illustrations to decoration to antiseptic 'suburban mall/office building' setting. But their generations hunger for rootedness, and love a pastiche of ancient and modern.
- c) It emphasized polish and technical excellence and slick professionalism and management technique, while their generations hunger for authenticity and community rather than programs.
- d) It emphasizes rationality and practical 'how-to' maps, while their generations hunger for narrative and the personal.

## **A SOLUTION: EVANGELISTIC WORSHIP**

### **Two models, with problems**

The most thoughtful members of the Seeker Friendly Service movement agree that the straight "seeker service" is not really worship, and therefore new believers are brought out of the seeker service into a weekly worship service for believers. The critics, on the other hand, generally see the worship service as the place for renewing and edifying believers who then go out into the world to do evangelism. The two models then, seem to be:

*Seeker service (evangelism)--> Worship service (edification)*

*Worship service (edification)--> World (evangelism)*

There are pragmatic problems with both models. The SFC model is financially very expensive, it is hard to assimilate new Christians out of seeker services into real worship services. And if the main worship service is very oriented toward seekers, the Christians often feel under-fed.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand the critics

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<sup>13</sup> Some disadvantages of the SFC approach:

1) Expense issue. It is extremely expensive and difficult to do seeker services well. Essentially, they don't "work" unless the unchurched person feels the art is as good as what they could pay to see in a theater. Many SFC attempts are mediocre, and unless you hit a "home run" every time, the effect is quite discouraging.

2) Sunday issue. Also, when Sunday is the day for seeker-focused services, it gives the world the impression that this is the people of God in worship, that "this is all there is." And it isn't good for Christians to have to squeeze their weekly worship into a weeknight evening, between two busy days of labor. It robs Christians of a whole day for worship and renewal (I Cor 16:1.)

3) Assimilation issue. Regular weekly seeker-focused services can also create a large assimilation problem. If a person comes to Christianity through a seeker service, he or she may settle into that environment for weekly worship. Supposedly, the new Christian is to be invited out of the "seeker" service into worship, but the jump is not easy to accomplish. In one church, new believers through the seeker service could not be assimilated into the regular worship, because the "believers worship" was so

cannot avoid the charge that they are not proposing any alternative to the current evangelistically ineffective church. One critic is very typical when he writes: "'While we [the seeker-friendly church] try to entice the world to come to church to hear the Gospel, the New Testament proclaims a powerful church worshipping God going out into the world in order to reach the lost (cf. The book of Acts.) True revivals have historically proved...that a revived and healthy church reaches a dying and lost world through its own awakened people."<sup>14</sup> This view says, "evangelism will take care of itself as long as we have great worship". But the history of revivals also shows us innovations in outreach.

The Great Awakening was marked by two men who were remarkable innovators--George Whitefield in evangelism and John Wesley in organization. Many criticize seeker services because they are "not worship" and contain many elements of "entertainment". Often they call us to look, instead at the revivals of the past. But they do not criticize George Whitefield for attracting huge crowds to his own "seeker programs". He drew people into open air meetings with a kind of preaching that was unparalleled at the time in its popular appeal--his humor, his stories, his dramatically acted-out illustrations, and his astounding oratorical gifts drew tens of thousands.<sup>15</sup> At the time he was labeled an "entertainer". His meetings were *not* worship nor did they replace worship, but they were certainly critical to the revival. They provided Christians with a remarkable place to do friendship evangelism. His meetings were all over the city on virtually everyday of the week. Whitefield's evangelism was enormously aggressive and passionate. His preaching was racy and popular yet pointed toward the transcendent and holy God. Yet his public meetings shared many of the characteristics (and criticisms) of seeker services today.

Whitefield and Wesley did not become instruments of revival by simply being great expository preachers and renewing historic worship.

My main problem with the two models, however, is *theological*. They both assume that worship cannot be highly evangelistic. I want to show that this is a false premise. Churches would do best to make their "main course" an evangelistic worship service, supplemented by both a) numerous, variegated, creative, even daily (but not weekly) seeker-focused events, and b) intense meetings for Bible study and corporate prayer for revival and renewal.

### **Theological basis**

God commanded Israel to invite the nations to join in declaring his glory. Zion is to be the center of world-winning worship (Isaiah 2:2-4; 56:6-8.) "*Let this be written for a future generation, that a people not yet created may praise the Lord...so the name of the Lord will be declared in Zion, and his praise in Jerusalem when the peoples and the kingdoms assemble to worship the Lord*" (Psalm 102:18.) Psalm 105 is a direct command to believers engage in evangelistic worship. The Psalmist challenges them to "*make known among the nations what he has done*" (v.1.) How? "*Sing to him, sing praise to him; tell of his wonderful acts*" (v.2) Thus believers are continually told to sing and praise God before the unbelieving nations. (See also Psalm 47:1; 100:1-5.) God is to be praised **before all the nations**, and as he is praised by his people, the nations are summoned and called to join in song.

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totally oriented toward long-time Christians who are immersed in the evangelical sub-culture and inhabit a very different world than the new Christian. (See Ed Dobson, *Starting a Seeker Sensitive Service* (Zondervan, 1993), p.83) And if the seeker service becomes the worship service of the new believers, either those new Christians will not be fed properly, or the service will inch over into becoming more of a contemporary worship service, and will lose its effectiveness in outreach.

4) Friendship evangelism issue. The most effective way to reach a non-believer is for a Christian to share the gospel with him or her in the context of a friendship. But if a Christian wants to bring a non-Christian friend to a seeker-focused weekly service, he or she will have to come out twice a week, once to take the friend to church, and once to get his or her own nurture.

5) Nurture issue. We said a church may have one seeker-sensitive service that is heavily focused on the unchurched, but which serves as the weekly worship for believers. As time goes on, however, the Christians often hunger for something "deeper". In response to complaints, the pastor often "gets more meaty" and begins to lose the non-Christians.

<sup>14</sup> John H. Armstrong, "The Mad Rush to Seeker Sensitive Worship", *Modern Reformation*, Jan/Feb 1995, p.25.

<sup>15</sup> Harry S. Stout, *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism*. (Eerdmans, 1991.)

Peter tells a Gentile church, "*But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.*" (I Peter 2:9.) This shows us that the church is challenged to the same witness that Israel was called to--evangelistic worship. A key difference: in the Old Testament, the center of world-winning worship was Mt. Zion, but now, wherever we worship Jesus in spirit and in truth (John 4:21-26) we have come to the heavenly Zion (Heb.12:18-24.) In other words, the risen Lord now sends his people out singing his praises in mission, calling the nations to join both saints and angels in heavenly doxology. Jesus himself stands in the midst of the redeemed and leads us in the singing of God's praises (Hebrews 2:12), even as God stands over his redeemed and sings over us in joy (Zeph. 2:17.)

## **Biblical cases**

### I Corinthians 14:24-25.

Paul is addressing the misuse of the gift of tongues. He complains that tongues speaking will cause unbelievers to say they are out of their minds (v.23.) He insists that the worship service must be comprehensible to them. He says that if an unbeliever "*or unlearned one*" (an uninitiated inquirer) comes in, and worship is being done "unto edification", "*he will be convinced by all that he is a sinner and will be judged by all*" (v.24.) Of what does this conviction consist? "*The secrets of his heart will be laid bare*" (v.25.) It may mean he realizes that the worshippers around him are finding in God what his heart had been secretly searching for, but in the wrong ways. It may mean the worship shows him how his heart works. The result: "*so falling on his face, he will worship God, exclaiming, 'God is really among you'*" (v.25.)

### Acts 2

When the Spirit falls on those in the upper room, a crowd gathers (v.5) because a) they are hearing the disciples praising God ("*we hear them declaring the wonders of God*" v.11), and b) and also because this worship is "*in our own tongues*" (v.11.) As a result, they are first made very interested ("*amazed and perplexed they asked one another, 'what does this mean'*" v.11), and later they are convicted deeply ("*they were cut to the heart and said...'Brethren, what shall we do?'*" v.37.)

### Comparison

There are obvious differences between the two situations. I Cor 14 pictures conversion happening on the spot (which is certainly possible.) In Acts 2 the non-believers are shaken out of their indifference (v.12), but the actual conversions (v.37-41) occurred at the end of an "after meeting" in which Peter explained the gospel (v.14-36) and showed them how to individually receive Christ (v.38-39.) It is often pointed out that the tongues in the two situations are different. But students usually are looking so carefully at what the two passages teach about tongues and prophecy that they fail to note what they teach about worship and evangelism. We can learn this:

1. Non-believers are expected to be present in Christian worship. In Acts 2 it happens by word-of-mouth excitement. In I Cor 14 it is probably the result of personal invitation by Christian friends. But Paul in 14:23 expects both "*unbelievers*" and "*the unlearned*" (literally "a seeker"-- "one who does not understand") to be present in worship.
2. Non-believers must find the praise of Christians to be *comprehensible*. In Acts 2 it happens by miraculous divine intervention. In I Cor 14 it happens by human design and effort. But it cannot be missed that Paul directly tells a local congregation to adapt its worship because of the presence of unbelievers. It is a false dichotomy to insist that if we are seeking to please God we must not ask what the unchurched feel or think about our worship.
3. Non-believers can fall under conviction and be converted *through* comprehensible worship. In I Cor 14 it happens during the service, but in Acts 2 it is supplemented by "after meetings" and follow-up evangelism. God wants the world to overhear us worshipping him. God directs his people not to simply

worship, but to sing his praises "before the nations." We are not to simply communicate the gospel to them, but celebrate the gospel before them.

### Three practical tasks

#### 2. Getting unbelievers into worship.

The numbering is not a mistake. This task actually comes second, but nearly everyone thinks it comes first! It is natural to believe that they must get non-Christians into worship before they can begin "doxological evangelism". But the reverse is the case. Non-Christians do not get invited into worship unless the worship is already evangelistic. The only way they will have non-Christians in attendance is through personal invitation by Christians. Just as in the Psalms, the "nations" must be directly asked to come. But the main stimulus to building bridges and invitation is the comprehensibility and quality of the worship experience.

Christians will instantly sense if a worship experience will be attractive to their non-Christian friends. They may find a particular service wonderfully edifying for *them*, and yet know that their non-believing neighbors would react negatively. Therefore, a vicious cycle persists. Pastors see only Christians present, so they lack incentive to make their worship comprehensible to outsiders. But since they fail to make the adaptations, Christians who are there (though perhaps edified themselves) do not think to bring their skeptical and non-Christian friends to church. They do not think they will be impressed. So no outsiders come. And so the pastors respond only to the Christian audience. And so on and on. Therefore, the best way to get Christians to bring non-Christians is to worship as if there are dozens and hundreds of skeptical onlookers. And if you worship as if, eventually they will be there in reality.

#### 1. Making worship comprehensible to unbelievers.

Our purpose is not to make the unbeliever "comfortable". (In I Cor. 14:24-25 or Acts 2:12 and 37--they are cut to the heart!) We aim to be *intelligible* to them. We must address their "*heart secrets*" (I Cor 14:25.) That means we must remember what it is like to not believe; we must remember what an unbelieving heart is like. How do we do that?

a) *Worship and preaching in the "vernacular"*. It is hard to overstate how ghetto-ized our preaching is. It is normal to make all kinds of statements that appear persuasive to us but are based upon all sorts of premises that the secular person does not hold. It is normal to make all sorts of references using terms and phrases that mean nothing outside of our Christian sub-group. So avoid unnecessary theological or evangelical sub-culture "jargon", and explain carefully the basic theological concepts, such as confession of sin, praise, thanksgiving, and so on. In the preaching, showing continual willingness to address the questions that the unbelieving heart will ask. Speak respectfully and sympathetically to people who have difficulty with Christianity. As you write the sermon, imagine a particular skeptical non-Christian in the chair listening to you. Add the asides, the qualifiers, the extra explanations necessary. Listen to everything said in the worship service with the ears of someone who has doubts or troubles with belief.

b) *Explain the service as you go along*. Though there is danger of pastoral verbosity, learn to give 1 or 2 sentence, non-jargony explanations of each new part of the service. "When we confess our sins, we are not groveling in guilt, but dealing with our guilt. If you deny your sins you will never get free from them." It is good to begin worship services as the Black church often does, with a "devotional"--a brief talk that explains the meaning of worship. This way you continually instruct newcomers in worship.

c) *Directly address and welcome them*. Talk regularly to "those of you who aren't sure you believe this, or who aren't sure just what you believe." Give them many asides, even expressing the language of their hearts. Articulate their objections to Christian living and belief better than they can do it themselves. Express sincere sympathy for their difficulties, even when challenging them severely for their selfishness

and unbelief. Admonish with tears (literally or figuratively.) Always grant whatever degree of merit their objections have. It is extremely important that the unbeliever feel you understand them. "I've tried it before and it did not work." "I don't see how my life could be the result of the plan of a loving God." "Christianity is a straightjacket." "It can't be wrong if it feels so right." "I could never keep it up." "I don't feel worthy; I am too bad." "I just can't believe."

d) *Quality aesthetics.* The power of art draws people to behold it. Good art and its message enters the soul through the imagination and begins to appeal to the reason, for art makes ideas plausible. The quality of music and speech in worship will have a major impact on its evangelistic power. In many churches, the quality of the music is mediocre or poor, but it does not disturb the faithful. Why? Their faith makes the words of the hymn or the song meaningful despite its artistically poor expression, and further, they usually have a personal relationship with the music-presenter. But any outsider who comes in, who is not convinced of the truth and who does not have any relationship to the presenter, will be bored or irritated by the poor offering. In other words, excellent aesthetics *includes* outsiders, while mediocre or poor aesthetics *exclude*. The low level of artistic quality in many churches guarantees that only insiders will continue to come. For the non-Christian, the attraction of good art will have a major part in drawing them in.

e) *Celebrate deeds of mercy and justice.* We live in a time when public esteem of the church is plummeting. For many outsiders or inquirers, the deeds of the church will be far more important than words in gaining plausibility. The leaders of most towns see "word-only" churches as costs to their community, not a value. Effective churches will be so involved in deeds of mercy and justice that outsiders will say, "we cannot do without churches like this. This church is channeling so much value into our community through its services to people that if it went out of business, we'd have to raise everybody's taxes." Mercy deeds give the gospel *words* plausibility (Acts 4:32 followed by v.33.) Therefore, evangelistic worship services should highlight *offerings* for deed ministry and should celebrate through reports and testimonies and prayer what is being done. It is best that offerings for mercy ministry be separate, attached (as traditional) to the Lord's Supper. This brings before the non-Christian the impact of the gospel on people's hearts (it makes us generous) and the impact of lives poured out for the world.

f) *Present the sacraments so as to make the gospel clear.* Baptism, and especially adult baptism, should be made a much more significant event if worship is to be evangelistic. There may need to be opportunity for the baptized to offer personal testimony as well as assent to questions. The meaning of baptism should be made clear. A moving, joyous, personal charge to the baptized (and to all baptized Christians present) should be made. In addition, the Lord's Supper can become a converting ordinance. If it is explained properly, the unbeliever will have a very specific and visible way to see the difference between walking with Christ and living for oneself. The Lord's Supper will confront every individual with the question: "are you right with God *today? now?*" There is no more effective way to help a person to do a spiritual inventory. Many seekers in U.S. churches will only realize they are not Christians during the fencing of the table after an effective sermon on the meaning of the gospel. (See below for more on addressing unbelievers during communion.)

g) *Preach grace.* The one message that both believers and unbelievers need to hear is that salvation and adoption are by grace alone. A worship service that focuses too much and too often on educating Christians in the details of theology will simply bore or confuse the unbelievers present. For example, a sermon on abortion will generally assume the listener believes in the authority of the word and the authority of Jesus, and does not believe in individual moral autonomy. In other words, abortion is "doctrine D", and it is based on "doctrines A, B, and C." Therefore, people who don't believe or understand doctrines ABC will find such a sermon un-convicting and even alienating. This does not mean we should not preach the whole counsel of God, but we must *major* on the "ABC's" of the Christian faith.

If the response to this is "then Christians will be bored", it shows an misunderstanding of the gospel. The gospel of free, gracious justification and adoption is not just the way we enter the kingdom, but also the way we grow into the likeness of Christ. Titus 2:11-13 tells us how it is the original, saving message of "grace alone" that consequently leads us to sanctified living: "*For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say "no" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in the present age, while we wait for the blessed hope--the appearing of our great God and savior Jesus Christ.*" Many Christians are "defeated" and stagnant in their growth because they try to be holy for wrong motives. They say "no" to temptation by telling themselves "God will get me" or "people will find out" or "I'll hate myself in the morning" or "it will hurt my self-esteem" or "it will hurt other people" or "it's against the law--I'll be caught" or "it's against my principles" or "I will look bad". Some or all of these may be true, but Titus tells us they are inadequate. Only the grace of God, the logic of the gospel will work. Titus says it "teaches" us, it argues with us.

Therefore, the one basic message that both Christians and unbelievers need to hear is the gospel of grace. It can then be applied to both groups, right on the spot and directly. Sermons which are basically moralistic will only be applicable to either Christians OR non-Christians. But Christo-centric preaching, preaching the gospel both grows believers and challenges non-believers. If the Sunday service and sermon aim primarily at evangelism, it will bore the saints. If they aim primarily at education, they'll bore and confuse unbelievers. If they aim at praising the God who saves by grace they'll both instruct insiders and challenge outsiders.

### 3. Leading to commitment.

We have seen that unbelievers in worship actually "close with Christ" in two basic ways. Some may come to Christ during the service itself (I Cor. 14:24-25.) Others must be "followed up" very specifically.

a) *During the service.* One major way to invite people to receive Christ during the service is as the Lord's Supper is distributed. We say: "if you are not in a saving relationship with God through Christ today, do not take the bread and the cup, but, as they come around, take Christ. Receive him in your heart as those around you receive the food. Then immediately afterwards, come up here and tell an officer or a pastor about what you've done, so we can get you ready to receive the Supper the next time as a child of God." Another way to invite commitment during the service is to give people a time of silence after the sermon. A "prayer of belief" could be prayed by the pastor (or printed in the bulletin at that juncture in the order of worship) to help people reach out to Christ.<sup>16</sup> Sometimes it may be good to put a musical interlude or an offering after the sermon but before the final hymn. This affords people time to think and process what they have heard and offer themselves to God in prayer. If, however, the preacher ends his sermon, prays very briefly, and moves immediately into the final hymn, no time is given to people who are under conviction for offering up their hearts.

b) *After meetings.* Acts 2 seems to show us an "after meeting." In v.12 and 13 we are told that some folks mocked upon hearing the apostles praise and preach, but others were disturbed and asked "what does this *mean?*" Then Peter very specifically explained the gospel, and, in response to a second question "*what shall we do?*" (v.37), explained very specifically how to become Christians. Historically, it has been found very effective to offer such meetings to unbelievers and seekers immediately after evangelistic worship. Convicted seekers have just come from being in the presence of God, and they are often most teachable and open. To seek to "get them into a small group" or even to merely return next Sunday is asking a lot of them. They may be also "*amazed and perplexed*" (Acts 2:12), and it is best to "strike while the iron is hot". This is not to doubt that God is infallibly drawing his elect! That knowledge helps us to

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<sup>16</sup> An example: "Heavenly Father, I admit that I am weaker and more sinful than I ever before believed, but, through your Son Jesus, I can be more loved and accepted than I ever dared hope. I thank you that he lived the life I should have lived, and paid the debt and punishment I owed. Receive me now for his sake. I turn from my sins and receive him as Savior. Amen."

relax as we do evangelism, knowing that conversions are not dependent on our eloquence. But the Westminster Confession tells us that God ordinarily works through secondary causes, normal social and psychological processes. Therefore, to invite people into a follow-up meeting immediately is usually more conducive to "conserving the fruit of the Word."

After meetings may consist first of one or more persons who wait at the front of the auditorium to pray with and talk with any seekers who come forward to make inquiries right on the spot. A second after meeting can consist of a simple question-and-answer session with the preacher in some room near the main auditorium or even in the auditorium (after the postlude.) Third, after meetings should also consist of one or two classes or small group experiences targeted to specific questions non-Christians ask about the content, relevance, and credibility of the Christian faith. After meetings should be attended by skilled lay evangelists who can come alongside of newcomers and answer spiritual questions and provide guidance as to their next steps.

**Appendix A**

*All for Jesus: Essays Celebrating Redeeming Grace for the 50th Anniversary of Covenant Theological Seminary.* Published in 2006 by Christian Focus Publications of Scotland

**Gospel-Centered Worship and the Regulative Principle**

By Mark L. Dalbey

**Introduction**

Because of a misspelled name on my electronic ticket, I was spending an unknown number of extra days in Ghana, West Africa, following a two-week mission trip in 2003. I had been there with four others on Covenant Theological Seminary's January mission trip leading a workshop on worship for pastors and worship leaders in the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Ghana, West Africa (now known as the Global Evangelical Church). It was my third visit to Ghana and my second time leading worship workshops there. I spent what ended up being four extra days in the home of pastor Seth Gbewonyo, enjoying warm hospitality and gaining deeper insight into family and church life for Presbyterians in Ghana. Seth had been a student at Covenant Theological Seminary and had taken the class I teach on Christian worship. Because of my delay, Seth and I were able to continue our ongoing discussion of the kind of worship that is pleasing to God and what that might look like in Ghana as compared to the United States.

My trips to Ghana stretched and challenged my understanding of what is known as the Regulative Principle of Worship (RPW). I grew up in a family of German ethnicity and Scottish Presbyterian ecclesiology and worship. My father was an ordained pastor in the former United Presbyterian Church of North America, which had its roots in the Scottish Presbyterian history of worship practice based on a strict adherence to the RPW. For seven years after seminary, I also served as a chaplain and Bible instructor at Geneva College in Pennsylvania, where that same Scottish Presbyterian tradition continues to the present day in the practice of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America of singing only the psalms without instrumental accompaniment in corporate public worship. The RPW is based on the teaching of the Westminster Confession of Faith 21.1, which states that "the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the holy Scripture."<sup>1</sup> Yet the confession also states in 1.6 that "we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the word; and that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the Church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the word, which are always to be observed."<sup>2</sup> As I reflected on the very different contexts of Presbyterian worship in my Scottish Presbyterian heritage and in Ghana, West Africa, I found myself wondering how these two sections of the Confession fit together. This was especially intriguing to me because the primary influence on the development of the ecclesiology and worship of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Ghana came from the Scottish Presbyterian missionaries who helped establish the church.

During my two mission trips to Ghana, I had the opportunity to worship in ten churches and to attend a four-day prayer gathering. Some of the features of Presbyterian worship in Ghana were different than those from my own background and experience as a Presbyterian in the United States. The Presbyterian churches in Ghana make use of a common lectionary in which each week's Scripture readings from the Old Testament, the Gospels, and the Epistles are the same throughout the denomination. This, along with the weekly praying of the Lord's Prayer and professing of the Apostles' Creed, reflects a more ordered and fixed liturgy than some North American Presbyterian churches. Other

expressions of the biblical elements of worship were more indigenously African. All of the churches gave a prominent place to the use of drums and other percussion instruments, including one church that used only percussion instruments for the accompaniment of congregational singing. The polyphonic rhythms, together with the vocal harmonies, were expressions of a musical language rooted in the Ghanaian culture.

During times of congregational prayer, the people worshipping together would pray out loud all at once. In one church of approximately five hundred people, the pastor asked the members of the congregation to stretch out their hands toward the brothers and sisters from the United States and ask for the Lord's blessings and traveling mercies for us. So, five hundred people stretched their hands toward us and prayed aloud simultaneously in a very moving expression of corporate prayer. During the receiving of the offering, the members of the congregation sang songs of joy while moving rhythmically down the aisles to present their offerings to God. In another congregation, approximately 1500 people sang and danced joyfully to the front with their offerings, giving obvious expression to their cheerfulness of heart. This was all done in a very orderly way that took less than five minutes. At some point in each of the services, usually during the congregational songs of praise, many of the people danced down to the front—first the men, then later the women. At one church, the people sang a song praising God for his saving grace and asking him to bless their children with the same gracious gift of salvation. This story-song celebrating God's covenantal blessing was then acted out: the men and women formed a circle and danced in front of the worship area, into which the children were invited, as the people cried out to God to pass on his blessing to their children.

How do these African Presbyterian expressions of worship fit into a proper understanding of the Regulative Principle of Worship? To what level of detail should we expect the RPW to shape a worship service? Is the RPW tied to a particular historical expression, or is it applicable across time and geography? How should the RPW be applied as the Gospel goes out geographically to the nations and across time to future generations? Is the goal in worship to be faithful to the RPW, or is the RPW a God-given tool for achieving the greater Gospel purposes of corporate public worship?

### The Regulative Principle of Life

A biblical understanding of the RPW is rooted in the nature of God. He has all authority as the sovereign omnipotent ruler of the universe. He is the One who reveals what he wants his creatures to know and how he wants them to live. He made people in his image for fellowship with himself and established the parameters of that fellowship. A desire to know and follow what God has revealed concerning how we are to live life before him is the proper posture of creatures. In every area of life, we are to live for God's glory; this includes corporate public worship.

God speaks with authority and clarity in his inspired, infallible, and inerrant word. He is the One who makes known what pleases him in all areas of life. This could be called the "regulative principle of life." God's will for such matters as marriage (Eph. 5), ruling over and caring for the creation (Gen. 1–2), the role of governing authorities (Rom. 13), and the utilization of spiritual gifts in the church (1 Cor. 12–14)—to name a few—is communicated in the Bible. God gives specific commands, examples, and principles that apply to various areas of life in his creation and kingdom. In some areas, he may give more specific instruction than in others. That is his prerogative as the Sovereign One. All of life is to be lived before the face of God and offered up as a living sacrifice to him (Rom. 12:1–2). This life outside of corporate public worship could be called "all of life as worship."

All of life as worship and corporate public worship on the Lord's Day are sometimes put at odds with one another as though one must be chosen over the other. The Bible does not confirm this attitude, but rather presents more of a fluid motion throughout the seven-day week. One day in seven is set apart for corporate public worship, where God's appointed means of grace converge to strengthen and equip God's people for the other six days that are to be lived to the glory of God in families, workplaces, neighborhoods, and in every area of life as wide as God's creation. The worshipful living of those six

days then overflows into corporate public worship on the Lord's Day as God's people gather to celebrate the triumphs of His grace, confess their shortcomings and sin, and be renewed in covenant fellowship with God.

### God's Regulating of Worship: Doing Worship the Way God Wants

When we consider corporate public worship, therefore, it is vital that we study God's Word to discover what is pleasing to him when we gather on the Lord's Day. As we approach the Bible to find instruction on corporate public worship, we must bring a proper biblical hermeneutic to the search. Obviously, we do not treat the Bible as if it were a dictionary and turn to the letter "W" to read all we need to know about worship. The Bible is an organic, progressive, unfolding, dramatic story of God creating and then redeeming a people who have intimate fellowship with him and with one another. While the offering of sacrificial animals was at one time the right way for God's people to approach him in worship, Christians agree that, at this point in the story—that is, after the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who was the perfect sacrifice—this is no longer the case. We must remember our place in the overall story and worship God accordingly.

Once Adam and Eve fell into rebellion and sin and were driven from the garden of Eden, sinful people could only approach a holy God through an atoning sacrifice that made provision for the forgiveness of sin by this same gracious God. This principle is at the heart of what we often call Gospel-centered worship—that is, worship that gives central place to the good news that, through God's gracious provision of an atoning sacrifice, sinners are forgiven and restored to fellowship with the true and living God. Jesus makes clear to his disciples (Luke 24) that Moses, the Psalms, and the Prophets all spoke concerning himself. God's regulating of corporate public worship is for the purpose of Gospel-centered worship fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

In the Old Testament sacrificial system under Moses, God gave detailed instructions and requirements concerning the way sinful worshipers were to approach him in his holiness. These instructions are the core of Gospel-centered worship. They involve specific descriptions in Exodus and Leviticus of the place and arrangements of worship in the tabernacle, the people offering the sacrifices through the priesthood, and the kinds and varieties of sacrifices and the ways in which they were offered. Nothing was to be added or subtracted from God's regulating of worship without the potential of severe consequences, as seen in the deaths of Nadab and Abihu in Leviticus 10:1–3 when they offered "strange fire" containing unauthorized incense. The three main sacrifices included the sin offering for the removal of guilt, the burnt offering for the consecration of the whole of life to God, and the peace offering for restoring fellowship with God. All of these, together with Passover, find their fulfillment in the sacrificial death of Christ on the cross and are therefore serving Gospel purposes in the Old Testament. It is interesting to note that we do not find the same level of detail with regard to other aspects of Old Testament worship—such as prayer, singing, and instruction in the Word—as we find for the sacrificial system<sup>3</sup>.

As we turn to the New Testament, we see the detailed regulation of the sacrificial system under Moses now applied to a right understanding and preaching of the full biblical doctrine of the person and work of Christ. The apostle Paul in Galatians 1:6–9 states that, if anyone preaches another Gospel than the one he has preached, that person is to be eternally condemned. The apostle John states that, if anyone denies that Jesus is the Christ, that person is of the antichrist (1 John 2:22); John later indicates that, if anyone does not acknowledge that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, then that person, too, is of the antichrist (1 John 4: 3). The most impassioned concern about detail in both the Old and New Testaments seems to relate to the person and work of Christ as either foreshadowed in the sacrificial system or fulfilled in his incarnation, life, death, and resurrection. In other words, the strict regulation of worship and the insistence upon correct doctrine in worship is for the purpose of serving the centrality of the Gospel. The other elements of worship—including prayer, song, and teaching and preaching—have

greater freedom of expression and are less regulated so long as they faithfully present the Gospel as centered in the person and work of Christ.

In the New Covenant, Christ is presented as the perfect sacrifice and Passover lamb (Heb. 10:10–14; 1 Cor. 5:7); the new tabernacle and temple (John 1:14, 2:18–22); the great high priest (Heb. 4:14–16); and the one who opens the way and leads his people into the New Jerusalem (Heb. 12:22–24). Christ's sacrificial death and work as mediator restore fellowship with God and true worship of him. The teaching of Jesus himself in John 4:19–26 reveals the heart of worship that pleases God. In a discussion of the proper place of worship, Jesus communicates to the Samaritan woman that the Father is seeking true worshipers—those who will worship him in spirit and in truth. Worshipers in spirit are those who worship from the depths of their hearts, with all of their affections completely set upon God. Worshipers in truth are those who follow all that God has revealed about how he desires to be worshiped.

Who worships this way? Only the God-man Jesus Christ worships the Father fully in spirit and in truth. True worship is, therefore, about the Gospel of Christ. The question of where one is to worship is no longer relevant. Even the question of how one is to worship is secondary. The primary question in worship is through whom? Only those who are joined to Christ by grace through faith can worship in spirit and truth and be the kind of worshipers whom the Father is seeking. Once again, true worship is about the Gospel of Christ; all of the details concerning how we worship are to serve the overarching and primary goal of worship—a holy God coming near to his sinful people with the all-sufficient grace of his Son's redemptive work to restore those people into intimate fellowship with himself as true worshipers.

The RPW, then, serves the Gospel purposes of corporate public worship by keeping the focus on the proper understanding of and biblical instruction regarding the sacrificial work of Jesus Christ, and by revealing the absolute necessity of our union with him by grace through faith in order to worship God in the way that he desires. Additionally, the RPW serves the Gospel by revealing that God also regulates worship in his insistence that his Son be intimately and personally connected to every aspect of a corporate public worship service. Hebrews 2:10–12 makes clear that Jesus Christ is the one who stands in the midst of the worshipping congregation declaring God's name and singing God's praise. As the uniquely qualified and now ascended God-man, Jesus is to be at the center of every element in every worship service in every local church where God, in a glorious dialogue, meets his redeemed and adopted children, of whom he is not ashamed. It is Jesus who declares everything in the service that comes from God and is spoken to his people. That includes the call to worship, the declaration of forgiveness, the reading of the Word, the preaching of the Word, the invitation to the Lord's Table, and the benediction of blessing on the people. Jesus also connects himself to everything that the congregation does in response to the glorious declaration of the Gospel in worship. He stands in the midst of the worshipping congregation and sings the Father's praises, leads the people in prayer, sits with them at the table of the Lord, gives testimony to the grace of God in his people, and, as the One who became sin for us, he is even able to lead the corporate confession of sin. Christ-centered worship, then, is essentially about: 1) the correct expression of doctrinal truth regarding the person and work of Christ, and 2) true worshipers being in vital union with Christ. Undergirding both of these, however, and giving power to the proceedings, is the fact that the Lord Jesus Christ himself is present in worship through the Holy Spirit declaring God's name and singing God's praise!

Gospel-centered worship at its best is saturated with the biblical doctrine of Christ our sacrifice and priest, our vital union with him by grace through faith, and his personal presence in every aspect and element of the worship service in each local church. This Christ-centered, Gospel-centered focus is foundational to worship that is pleasing to God. Only once we understand this are we then able to begin the discussion of how the RPW relates to the actual structure and elements of a service of corporate public worship. All too often, we want to apply the RPW immediately to the elements, style, and arrangement of the service before considering the Christ-centered and Gospel-centered nature of what

God requires and regulates in worship. The structure, style, and arrangement of the elements he commands are to serve the Christ-centered and Gospel-centered goal of corporate public worship. This is the heart of worship that pleases him.

With that foundation established, we can now discuss what God desires with regard to the specifics of a worship service. While most everyone agrees that the Bible does not give us an inspired account that reveals the detailed structure of a worship service for all times and all places, some have argued that the Mosaic sacrificial system itself serves as such a structure for New Covenant worship services.<sup>4</sup> While rightly emphasizing that the three main sacrifices of the Old Covenant have ongoing relevance to Gospel-centered worship, using the details of these sacrifices as the precise pattern for New Covenant worship seems to be an overextension of their primary purpose, which is to point to the sacrificial work of Jesus Christ. And while there is a kind of “Gospel flow” in moving from the cleansing of the sin offering to the consecration of the burnt offering to the communion of the peace offering, there is also a distinctly New Covenant freedom in the expression of the various elements of worship presented in the New Testament.

The best approach to planning worship services that make proper use of the RPW is to discover the commanded elements for New Covenant worship and then structure them in such a way that they serve the Gospel by: 1) being centered in the sacrificial work of Christ, who brings sinners into fellowship with a holy God; 2) nurturing the faith of the worshipers, who are in vital union with Christ; and 3) facilitating the present work of the ascended Christ, who personally meets with his people as he declares God’s glorious name and sings praise to God. What, then, are the commanded elements for New Covenant worship?

While there is no comprehensive list found in the New Testament, there are places where the foundational elements are given by direct biblical command, through apostolic example, or derived from biblical principles. The commands to pray (1 Tim. 2:1); to read and preach the Word of God (2 Tim. 4:2); to sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs (Col. 3:16 and Eph. 5:19); and the celebration of the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor. 11:23–26) seem quite clear and obvious as the foundational commanded elements of New Covenant worship. In a simple yet profound way, the synagogue elements of prayer, Scripture reading and explanation, and song, coupled with the temple focus on sacrifice and covenant renewal, are combined in New Covenant church worship through prayer, Scripture reading and explanation, song, and the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. What was anticipated in the Old Covenant is now fulfilled in the Gospel-centered, Christ-centered worship of the New Covenant. Through apostolic example, we add the element of the offering (1 Cor. 16:2). Additionally, through biblical principle, we might also include professions of faith (such as the Apostles’ Creed), oaths and vows (such as baptismal vows), and personal testimonies, all of which serve as windows into the lives of people being transformed by the grace of the Gospel of Christ.

What overarching principle does God desire us to follow as we use these commanded elements in the structuring, arranging, and planning of a worship service on any given Lord’s Day? Once again, the guiding light is the Christ-centered, Gospel-centered goal of corporate worship. This can be expressed through the concept of a Gospel “storyline,” in which the inherent drama of the Gospel unfolds throughout the movement and flow of the service, from the call to worship through the benediction. In worship, we are invited into God’s holy presence as adopted sons and daughters of whom he is not ashamed because of Christ’s work on our behalf. We come adoring and praising him for his goodness, greatness, and grace. We come confessing our sins and looking to him for forgiveness and strength. We come making requests on behalf of ourselves and others in prayer. We praise and admonish and pray through song. We rejoice in the work of God’s grace in one another as we hear the Gospel story expressed through the lives of fellow believers. We profess enthusiastically together what we believe. We listen to God’s Word read, proclaimed, and applied. We offer our lives and our substance to him. We baptize new converts and children of believers as he adds to our number. We gather in table fellowship remembering what Christ has done in his atoning, sacrificial death in our place. We receive

his good word in the benediction as he sends us forth to live as salt and light for his glory in every area of life. We are captured and transformed into greater Christ-likeness by the Gospel drama represented in a carefully planned worship service that proclaims that Gospel story afresh each week.

Each local church's worship service has a unique Gospel storyline for a particular Lord's Day as songs, prayers, Scripture readings, sermons, testimonies, and other elements are selected and arranged. Worship planners should be able to show and explain how each aspect of the service serves the unique Gospel story of that service. It is also important to root the storyline of each church service in the Gospel storyline of the Bible. Our worship services must be faithful to the story of God's Word. Additionally, it is a mark of a well-crafted service of worship to build bridges from the biblical storyline through the specific worship service into the Gospel storyline that God is writing in the life of every believer. The dramatic movement of worship does not simply go from the call to worship to the benediction of a particular worship service. Rather, the flow is from God's unfolding drama in the Bible into the everyday lives of the gathered worshipers with an eye toward the eternal city where the story finds its ultimate fulfillment. The biblical-theological flow of Scripture roots our weekly worship services in the redemptive work of God in the historical past, as well as in the anticipated and promised eschatological work of the future—a work which is already present in some sense even now as the Holy Spirit brings both past and future together in the present gathering of God's people in local church worship services. This is the kind of worship God desires. Any discussion of the RPW that separates the detailed particulars of a worship service from this dynamic Gospel drama is incomplete and shortsighted.

### A Suggested Five-Fold Approach to the RPW

As I have thought about and studied these topics in detail over the past ten years, I have been developing the following five-fold approach to understanding and applying the RPW. It is still a work in progress, but does, I believe, provide a useful starting point for thinking about and planning corporate public worship services.

#### 1. Commanded Elements

Worship should be pleasing to God and according to his regulations; therefore, we must make use of the biblically commanded elements of worship. These are the basic building blocks of corporate public worship, and, as discussed above, include prayer; reading and preaching of Scripture; singing of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs; the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper; offerings; professions of faith; oaths and vows; and testimonies of God's grace.

#### 2. Biblical Content

The commanded elements must be filled with content that is faithful to biblically revealed truth. A commanded element is not pleasing to God and according to his regulations if it lacks true biblical content. We must not only use the elements God requires, but we must also fill them with his revealed truth.

#### 3. Gospel Shape

Biblically commanded elements filled with biblically faithful content must also be arranged in a Gospel-centered fashion. Commanded elements that are not arranged in a way that serves the Gospel storyline of the particular worship service can be confusing and incomplete. To simply "plug in" new content to the various "slots" in the program (such as hymns, responsive readings, unison prayers, and creeds) without giving them any Gospel-shaped flow does not serve the overall goal of worship that is Gospel-centered and Christ-centered.

#### 4. Variety of Valid Expressions

These commanded elements filled with biblical content and arranged with Gospel shaping can be expressed a variety of valid ways. Pre-written or spontaneous prayers are both valid expressions of prayer. The singing of the Lord's Prayer, the unison praying of the Lord's Prayer, or the structuring of directed prayers around the various petitions of the Lord's Prayer are all valid expressions of the Lord's Prayer. Psalms read in unison, responsively, or sung are all proper expressions of the psalms in corporate public worship. The singing of historic hymns filled with biblical content can be properly done with musical tunes centuries old or with tunes written in the past month. They can be sung without musical instrumentation or with a combination of winds, strings, and percussive instruments. One sermon could be preached in a one-hour service or three sermons could be preached in a three-hour service. The Lord's Supper could be served to the congregation as they sit in rows or at tables, or it could be served as people come to the front of the worship area to receive it from the elders.

### 5. Unique Local Church Contexts

As the Gospel has gone out to the nations and from one generation to the next, the corporate worship of God's people has never been monolithic in style or practice. The reality is that each local church has a unique context in which biblical worship regulated by God is carried out. Each has a unique spoken language, characteristic styles of dress, particular places where people gather for corporate worship, distinct kinds of musical instrumentation and style, particular education levels, specific numbers of children present, characteristic body movements, and many other qualities that make every local church different from every other local church to a greater or lesser degree. While each of these unique contexts must use the commanded elements of worship—giving them biblical content and Gospel shape—the unique historical and geographical place in which worship happens must also be taken into account in any evaluation of worship that is pleasing to God.

#### A Sixteenth-Century Case Study: Geneva, Switzerland

John Calvin's approach to worship in the sixteenth century provides a good case study of a Reformer who was passionate about facilitating corporate public worship according to the patterns God requires in his Word. Calvin insisted on using all of the commanded elements (including singing) with biblical content (mostly psalms) in ways that took Gospel shape (Gospel praise and regular celebration of the Lord's Supper), with his own variation on valid expressions (new tunes for versified psalms) in his own unique local church context (Geneva, Switzerland).

The Reformation arrived in Geneva by way of the cities of Berne and Zurich. The liturgy inherited from this process was without music. As part of their own program of reform in Geneva, Farel and Calvin co-authored the "Articles of 1537," in which they tried to institute psalm-singing:

"It is a thing very expedient for the edification of the church to sing some psalms in the form of public prayers through which one may pray to God or sing his praise so that the hearts of all might be moved and incited to form like prayers and to render like praises and thanks to God with similar affection."<sup>5</sup>

The proposal was rejected, and, for a variety of reasons, Calvin was banished from Geneva in 1538.<sup>6</sup> He went to Strasbourg and there came under the influence of Martin Bucer, whose view of the reformation of worship was much more balanced than that of Zwingli, which held considerable sway throughout Switzerland. Bucer advocated the weekly observance of the Lord's Supper, as opposed to the more infrequent observances held by others, and placed an emphasis on the sharing of a meal rather than a mass of sacrifice, as practiced by Roman Catholics. He placed a communion table before the people and on their level, rather than having an altar elevated beyond the people.<sup>7</sup> He also came to quite different conclusions on the use of music in public worship than those of Zwingli. At numerous points in the service of worship, there was congregational singing not only of psalms and hymns of praise, but

also of the Ten Commandments.<sup>8</sup> As a result of Bucer's influence, Calvin came to believe wholeheartedly that the reform of worship was central to the reform of the church and that, with the arrival of the Reformation and the Gospel of grace, there was every reason to sing—and to sing enthusiastically.<sup>9</sup>

After three years in Strasbourg, Calvin returned to Geneva in 1541 with his views on music in worship even more firmly established. Upon his return, he instituted psalm singing. The Geneva Psalter included metrical psalms, the Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed, and the Song of Simeon. As he developed the Psalter from 1542 to 1562, Calvin employed the services of Clement Marot, Theodore Beza, and Louis Bourgeois. These men were gifted in poetry and music and worked to versify the psalms into Western meter and put them to singable tunes.<sup>10</sup> In doing this, Calvin was drawing on the greatness of past expressions of biblical worship—the Psalms—while looking for fresh expressions and applications of biblical worship that connected well with the contemporary culture of his day. The Hebrew meter of the psalms did not easily lend itself to Western meter that was singable. Therefore, Calvin had the words arranged in a way that reflected the essence of the psalms while also adapting them to music that could be sung by the congregation he served in Geneva. He urged his composers to capture the emotion of the psalms in their musical compositions. He also stood against the current of his time in Switzerland by insisting that congregational singing be a vital part of the worship of God's people. Many of the tunes used were of a very lively character.<sup>11</sup> His passion for the singing of the psalms is reflected in the following statement from Calvin as quoted by Ross Miller:

The psalms could incite us to raise our hearts to God and to move us with such ardor that we exalt through praises the glory of his name...And truly, we know through experience that song has great force and vigor to move and enflame hearts to invoke and to praise God with a more lively and ardent zeal.<sup>12</sup>

Calvin showed great creativity and innovation by using children to teach the new versification of the psalms to the worshipping congregation. Miller again quotes Calvin:

If some children, whom someone has practiced beforehand in some modest church song, sing in a loud and distinct voice, the people list with complete attention and following in their hearts what is sung by mouth, little by little each one will become accustomed to sing with the others.<sup>13</sup>

Additionally, Calvin was not cold and stern in his approach to worship. William Maxwell gives insight into this aspect of his character as he quotes a biographer of Calvin named Doumergue:

Finally, after these acts of adoration, these prayers said kneeling, this quickening instruction, the worship culminates in the supreme ceremony of Holy Communion. Calvin has been very greatly misunderstood. For him the complete act of Christian worship is that at which the Lord's Supper is celebrated, and the complete Sunday morning office is that which includes the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Have men said that this worship, the true Calvinian cult, was in its nature poor and cold? Those who were present at it have told us that often they could not keep back tears of emotion and joy. Singings and prayers, adoration and edification, confession and forgiveness of sins, acts ritualistic and spontaneous—all the essential elements of worship were there; and what is not less important, they were combined into an organism that though very simple, was yet both supple and strong.<sup>14</sup>

Here we also see Calvin's desire to celebrate the Lord's Supper on a weekly basis. He even included the singing of psalms during the celebration of the Lord's Supper itself.<sup>15</sup> He designed his order of worship to be a unity of Word and Table.<sup>16</sup> Though Calvin's position was never fully adopted in

Geneva, he ordered his worship services to end with prayer and praise that set the stage for the Lord's Supper—even when it was not celebrated.<sup>17</sup>

To follow in the worship heritage of Calvin, we too must be willing to go where the Scripture directs us. We must have the same desire to be deeply rooted in historical expressions of biblical worship while finding creative and relevant ways to make that Gospel-centered worship glorifying to God and edifying to his people in our time and place.

### The Convergence of the Means of Grace in Corporate Public Worship

God has established corporate public worship in the way that he has for the purpose of his own glory. He receives glory in the praise of his people for his goodness, greatness, and grace. He also receives glory as his people are transformed into greater Christ-likeness through the convergence of the means of grace, which he commands to be brought together and regulated in corporate public worship. Prayer, the reading and preaching of Scripture, and the administration of the sacraments, when combined in Gospel-centered worship, have the power to form and transform the people of God and bring them into greater conformity with the likeness of his Son. God's glory and our edification are also greatly enhanced when the local congregation comes together in the fellowship of Gospel-centered worship in a spirit of unity with one mouth and one heart (Rom. 15:5–6).

### Conclusion

Let us now return full circle to my experiences in Ghana. How am I to respond to the manner of Scripture reading, praying, receiving offerings, and use of drums in that worship context? When the Presbyterians in Ghana brought their tithes and offerings forward while singing songs of joy and dancing with rhythmic body movements, were they using commanded elements filled with biblical content and given Gospel shape in a valid expression consistent within their own unique local church context? I am convinced that the answer to that question is a resounding yes! Does that mean that all Presbyterian churches—or even all Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) churches—must receive offerings in precisely the same manner? I am convinced that the answer to that is a resounding no!

In the PCA and other denominations, churches must consider the element of offering within the overall Gospel storyline of the worship service in their unique local church context. The commanded element of offering is to be filled with the biblical content of joy as it takes Gospel shape through various valid expressions in each local church. That might mean that the offering is placed after the sermon as a response to the indescribable gift of grace in God's Son, and it might be expressed through the singing of a congregational song of joy while remaining seated in the pew or chairs. But the offering might also look quite different than this in a different church with a different context.

As one who teaches classes on worship at Covenant Theological Seminary, I have a deep passion for Gospel-centered worship that is served well by the RPW. I long to see our graduates have a vision for corporate public worship that includes an understanding of Gospel-centered worship as presented in this essay—a vision that enables them to plan and lead services of corporate public worship with great wisdom, discernment, and skill. As the Gospel goes to the nations and to future generations, I pray that an appreciation for the depth and beauty of the Christ-centered and Gospel-centered worship that God desires and regulates by his Word and Spirit will spread as well. In so doing, may it glorify God, edify his people, and draw many others to the joyful task of worshiping him in spirit and in truth.

<sup>1</sup> *The Westminster Standards* (Suwanee, Ga.: Great Commission Publications, 2005), 22.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 4–5.

<sup>3</sup> John M. Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth: A Refreshing Study of the Principles and Practice of Biblical Worship* (Phillipsburg, N. J.: P&R Publishing, 1996), 22–23.

<sup>4</sup> Jeffrey J. Meyers, *The Lord's Service: The Grace of Covenant Renewal Worship* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2003), 85.

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- <sup>5</sup> “Articles Concernant L’Organization de l’eglise et du cultea Geneve, proposes au conseil par les ministres, le 16, Janvier 1537,” in *Ionnis Calvini Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia*, ed. Guillaume Baum, Eduard Cunitz, and Eduard ReussRoss (Brunsvigae: C. A. Schwetschke et Filium, 1863-1900), X.6. Quoted in Ross J. Miller, “Calvin’s Understanding of Psalm-Singing as a Means of Grace,” in *Calvin Studies VI: A Colloquium on Calvin Studies at Davidson College*, ed. John H. Leith (Davidson, N.C.: Davidson College, January 1992), 35–36. Hereafter referred to as Miller, “Calvin’s Understanding of Psalm-Singing.”
- <sup>6</sup> Miller, “Calvin’s Understanding of Psalm-Singing,” 35.
- <sup>7</sup> Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Patristic Roots of Reformed Worship* (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1976), 26.
- <sup>8</sup> Charles Garside, *The Origins of Calvin’s Theology of Music: 1536–1543*, Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, vol. 69, part 4 (Philadelphia, Pa.: The American Philosophical Society, 1979), 11.
- <sup>9</sup> Lawrence C. Roff, *Let Us Sing* (Norcorss, Ga.: Great Commission Publications, 1991), 47.
- <sup>10</sup> Miller, “Calvin’s Understanding of Psalm-Singing,” 35–36.
- <sup>11</sup> Roff, *Let Us Sing*, 59.
- <sup>12</sup> Miller, “Calvin’s Understanding of Psalm-Singing,” 39.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.
- <sup>14</sup> E. Doumergue, *Jean Calvin: Les hommes et les choses de son temps*, 2 vols. (Lausanne: Georges Bridel, 1902), 2:504. Quoted in William D. Maxwell, *Concerning Worship* (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), 27.
- <sup>15</sup> Maxwell, *Concerning Worship*, 72.
- <sup>16</sup> D.H. Hislop, *Our Heritage in Public Worship* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1935), 188.
- <sup>17</sup> Maxwell, *Concerning Worship*, 26.