

Worship & Music Today

Terry L. Johnson

*Senior Minister of
The Independent Presbyterian Church
Savannah, Georgia*

The Current Battle

Amongst conservative Presbyterians these days a debate is heating up, and shall before long burst into open conflict over the worship of the church. While division is always a scandal in the church, this is one occasion when at least we can say that the subject is worthy of a good fight and even a denominational realignment. Nothing that we do is as important as our worship. The first four of the Ten Commandments provide proof enough of that, concerning themselves with the who, how and when of worship. If there is to be a fight, let it not be over the budget, or education, or form of government, or the drapes in the chapel. Let it be over how God is to be worshiped. This battle is one which must be waged, whatever the cost.

Generals typically fight the last war, and massacre their troops in the process. None of the Civil War generals, Southern or Northern, adjusted to the existence of the minnie, the rifled bullet which vastly improved the effective range of the infantryman's musket over that of his father's smooth-bore. The First World War is a tragic monument to the failure of the generals, Britain's Haig chief among them, to adjust to the invention of the rapid-firing machine gun. The generals of the Second World War were slow to adjust to the creation of the tank (hence the Maginot Line), the admirals to the invention of the aircraft carrier (hence the sinking of the Prince of Wales), the air force commanders to the invention of radar. In each case the leadership was caught fighting the last war. That is to say, they fought the current war using the strategy, the tactics, and sometimes the weaponry of the previous war. The winner in the next conflict is he who most quickly and effectively recognizes that the new war, even if fought against the same enemy, is being waged on a different battlefield.

The devil, like smart generals, never fights on the same front. He and they are always shifting their lines. At the turn of the century the devil launched an all-out attack on the Scriptures, seeking to undermine the confidence of the people of God in the word of God. Those taking the broader, more "reasonable", more liberal view invariably justified their doing so in terms of outreach. Modern men can no longer take the detail of the Biblical revelation seriously, they said. Science has discredited its account of creation, its historical data, its primitive cosmology, its angry and vengeful God, and so on. Consequently, if we are ever to commend the Christian faith to modern people, we must frankly admit the Bible's flaws and proclaim the essence of the Christian message, which is the fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man, and the infinite value of the human soul. Friederich Schliermacher, the father of theological liberalism, was an evangelist. His aim was to reinterpret Christianity so as to render it palatable to its "cultured despisers," to steal a phrase from the title of his most famous work. Indeed nearly *every heresy in the history of the church has been promoted in the name of evangelism.*

Christian periodicals today make frequent reference to the "worship wars" being waged in evangelical churches. Read Brian Longfield's *The Presbyterian Controversy*, a brilliant, highly readable account of the modernist fundamentalist conflict of the 1920's, and you will be spooked by the parallels in the language used by the liberals then and the advocates of innovation and novelty in worship today. It seems to be the same battle, having merely shifted to a new front. What few seem to suspect is becoming clearer to us almost daily. None dare call it what it is. But what can we say about worship that is designed to entertain worldly people, that debases congregational singing, that eliminates Biblical exposition, that drops all but token prayer, that ignores the sacraments, that introduces dance, skits, video clips, an MTV format, and happy talks. They call it being "user friendly."

They justify their novelties, of course, in terms of outreach. "We're reaching the lost," they say. Maybe they are. Or maybe on a new front, unbelief is amongst us once more.

Unbelief

Last time we said some strong things about the innovations and novelties in worship of the last several decades. Why would we say that it amounts to unbelief? We do so for two reasons.

First, at the heart of the changes is a loss of confidence in the gospel. This is the line of continuity between the modernists of the 1920's and today's innovators. Sometimes this loss of confidence is stated with fascinating sophistication. We live in a post-modern world, they might say. Modern people don't understand Christian terms like God, sin, and salvation. All truth for them is subjective, personal, and relative. Consequently the gospel must be reinterpreted for the 1990's. These and similar insights are provided, some of which can be quite helpful. But for many, the bottom line is that the gospel as historically understood cannot be preached any longer. A new message must be constructed from it, one that addresses felt needs, one that provides help in our quest for wholeness, one which can aid us in accomplishing our goals and fulfilling our dreams. Christ the Savior becomes Christ the Helper, Christ the Encourager, Christ the Therapist. The Bible becomes the launch pad for Helpful Talks on Relevant Issues. The Scriptures are not expounded. Instead they are plundered for useful themes, for Encouraging Messages. The gospel, in the process, is compromised and lost.

Unbelief in one area spills over into another. Such messages, naturally enough, must have an appealing context within which they are presented. Traditional worship is foreign to modern

people. It's a turn-off. What then can we do get them to come hear our Helpful Talks? The medium that contemporary folks understand, particularly the young, is rock music, video, and dramatic entertainment. They relate to the Talk Show, the sit-com, the MTV. Consequently, if we are to reach the Boomers and Generation Xers, we will need to adapt this sort of format for our Encouraging Messages. Hymnals will have to go because they are strange to the 1990*s culture. So will organs. So will prayer. So will Bible reading and exposition. So will the sacraments. So will the Lord's Day. (Many modern people would rather go to church on Saturday night and leave Sunday open for other things). We'll use rock bands to set the mood. We'll use skits and video clips for illustrative effect. We may even use "liturgical dance" to round out the format. If we provide a quality program (we won't call it entertainment), they may come and hear our Helpful Talks which will lead to "decisions for Christ."

It all makes a sort of perverse sense, doesn't it? But the innovators have drifted a long way from the conviction that the gospel itself, the gospel message of sin, of Christ, of blood sacrifice on the cross, of repentance and faith, of Christian discipleship is the power of God unto salvation (Rom. 1: 16). What has become of the conviction that the simple gospel simply preached carries its own transforming power and needs no supplementation? Where is the confidence of the Apostle Paul who says "God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe" (1 Cor. 1: 21). How are they saved? Through the message *preached*. Indeed he says,

And my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God (1 Corinthians 2:4,5).

Why do our contemporaries think that they must overthrow thousands of years of tradition, going back to the temple, to the synagogues, to the early church, and to the Scriptures themselves as understood and interpreted by the church fathers and the Reformed heritage? Why do they emasculate the gospel message and replace it with pop psychology and “practical” preaching? Why do they throw out Reformed worship and its expository preaching, its Psalm-singing, its Sabbath day context, its biblically enriched prayers of praise, confession, thanksgiving and intercession, its mood of reverence and awe? Because of unbelief. Because they no longer have confidence in the power of the gospel message, of gospel preaching, or of gospel worship. And all this they do in the name of evangelism! But it might be called idolatry because the real god being served here is the god of success. This is a harsh thing to say, but I think that in many cases it comes down to this. The only unforgivable sin in this cult is the sin of empty seats. I have seen the fear of “failure” in the eyes of my peers in the ministry. They are pursuing crowds, full auditoriums, and “relevance” at all costs. Regrettably the cost may be the gospel itself.

Idolatry

The second reason why we are convinced that the innovations and novelties introduced to worship services in the last two decades are driven by unbelief and approach idolatry is because they undermine the integrity of worship services as worship services, transforming them into something else. Therapy, entertainment, lectures, and concerts all have their place in the whole scheme of life. But when they are allowed to usurp the place of worship, and yet one still present the newly-misshaped substitute as worship, then one has become an idolater.

This problem is not new. The nineteenth century revivalists were the first to alter the shape of worship services in the name of something other than worship, namely (surprise!) evangelism. Revivalism chased the whole legacy of metrical psalms and hymns out of the church in favor of simple, emotive, story-telling gospel songs, as churches mimicked the successful soul-winning format of Finney and Moody. Out went long prayers and sermons and in came song leaders, special music, celebrity testimonials, anxious seats and altar calls. Hardly a Baptist church in America, not to mention more than a few Methodist and Presbyterian churches, failed to adapt a part or whole of the revivalist format. Even Psalm-singing Presbyterians felt compelled to rework Psalm texts to fit revivalistic tunes. The 1912 *Psalter* had the “frozen chosen” singing Psalm 65 to “Stand up, Stand up for Jesus,” Psalm 105 to “O Zion Haste,” Psalm 138 to “On Christ the Solid Rock I Stand,” and still other Psalms to other late-Victorian favorites. Ironically, some of the strongest resistance to Psalm-singing today comes from those who identify the innovative music style of revivalism with tradition. The “old favorites” to them are not David's Psalms or even Watt's hymns, but Sankey's novelties.

These 19th century revivalistic services were the first “seeker-sensitive” services. Bill Hybel's Willow Creek is, in one sense, doing nothing new. If the small Baptist church in which I was reared may serve as an example, all that might bore an unbeliever was eliminated in favor of a light and winsome format. A gregarious song leader led us in first and last stanzas of rollicking gospel songs. Warm greetings were extended, exciting announcements were related, and extensive use was made of humor. All was designed to put the unbeliever at ease. Naturally little time was given to prayer or Bible reading. There was no corporate confession of faith or sin, no Psalms sung, and few great hymns used. The service concluded with numerous stanzas of “Just As I Am,” which in case anyone missed the point, underscored what we were really there to do.

All that today's innovators have done is target the 1990s instead of the 1890s. They sense the tent-meeting, carnival-like sound and feel of the above-described service and have rewritten the script for our time. They don't like long prayers, long Scripture readings, long exposition sermons, or long communion services any more than did the revivalist. They too wish to create a pleasant, winsome mood, but use soft rock rather than Moody-Sankey, or even the Peterson-Gaither genre to do so. Rather than George Beverly Shea warming up to the crowd, David Letterman does.

What's wrong with this? In the first instance, if God is to be worshiped in “spirit,” that is, with our whole heart, we cannot approach God with a divided mind. Our goal cannot be something other than worship, anymore than I can worship God and balance my checkbook at the same time. Why? Because He demands our whole heart. True worship is not that which is conducted in Jerusalem or Samaria, but in every place with the right attitude (spirit) and form (truth). Consequently my aim cannot be to gather a crowd, please a congregation, entertain worldlings, or fill an auditorium or else I make a god of man. Remember the Pharisees. Their single-minded devotion to evangelism, being willing to cross “sea and land” to make a single convert was sharply condemned by Jesus (Mt. 23: 15). Half-hearted, double-minded “worship” is not worship at all. An omniscient God can only be properly worshiped with all our heart, soul, mind and strength.

But beyond this, a god who is pleased with worship that is conducted with a casual mood, with light and lively music, with “in my hip-pocket” confidence, with entertaining flippance, is not the God that the Bible would recognize. A church in Utah that has been at the center of controversy in the PCA uses hard rock music with lyrics celebrating “I'm a Jesus freak,” uses video clips, comedy routines, dramatic skits, and cocky “up front” leadership. My question is, what has this to do with worship of the God of the

Bible? Something very fundamental has been lost here, namely the creature/Creator distinction. God is in heaven; we are on earth, consequently our words are to be few (Eccl. 5:2). Indeed, silence is recommended (Hab. 2:2), never mind ridiculous, narcissistic, and adolescent lyrics. Can God be approached in any manner whatsoever? Can I dribble a basketball down the center aisle, as did one PCA pastor, to kick-off morning worship? Can I crack a few jokes to warm up the crowd? Can we feature ballerinas as our call to worship? How about a clip from the latest episode of *ER*? Is what we want what God wants? (Is. 55:8,9) Is there no distinction between the creature and the Creator? Is not the failure to make this vital distinction the fundamental error that leads to idolatry, to worshiping and serving “the creature rather than the Creator? (Rom. 1:25)”

I am very sorry to say that I recognize neither their worship nor their deity. He is not familiar to me. What they do is irreverent and our God must be worshiped with “reverence and awe” (Heb. 12:28). The argument, “what is reverent for me may not be for you,” is not to be taken seriously. Relativism will only go so far in relation to the Absolute. When we “rejoice” in His presence, it is with “trembling” (Psalm 2:11). When we hear His word, we “tremble” (Is. 66:2). The heart attitude of Biblical worship is reflected in this and other bodily movements such as bowing and kneeling (Psalm 95:6), and even lying prostrate (Rev. 1:17, 4;10, 5:8,14). Can we agree that this is serious, sober, awe-ful worship? Can we agree that precious little of this is going on anymore? The God of the Bible is not mellow. He is not “fun”. He is not one of the guys. Their inability to recognize this about Him convinces me that we are no longer dealing with differences in personal taste. The issues have become more fundamental than that. Worship must be worship. And our God is still a “consuming fire” (Heb. 12:29).

Sincerity

The obvious rebuttal to the claim that unbelief and even idolatry is rampant in the worship of the church today goes something like this: How can you be so judgmental? How can you claim to know people*s hearts? How can you say that people who so sincerely worship God are wrong? Look at all the people who have been saved through these “seeker-driven” services. Look at all the lives that have been changed. How can you condemn something that is so clearly blessed by God?

These are powerful and serious arguments. So let me attempt to work through them carefully and get to the heart of the issues.

First, sincerity is really not the issue. I admit to being skeptical about some of the motives of some of those involved in leading some contemporary services. But I agree it would be presumptuous to judge the hearts of those who are in the pews. I have no doubt that many of those worshiping in such services have a deep love of Christ and come to worship with deep piety and earnestness. But one is seriously misunderstanding the issue if one thinks that the motives of worshipers are being attacked. They are not. Motives are not the issue. Sincerity is not in question.

However, second, sincerity in neither theology nor doxology is the final standard of evaluation. After all, one may be sincerely wrong. We all believe this of course, but it is interesting how quickly folks will flee to the “sincerity” refuge when under assault. Never mind the substance of the concerns being raised. It is easier to disqualify those concerns categorically by playing the sincerity card. It is easier to become indignant and say “how dare you judge.” Simply rule the critics out of court rather than try to prove

the invalidity of their arguments. Sincerity trumps biblical discussion and even rational thought.

Yet listen to the Apostle Paul. He says of his countrymen,

For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge. (Rom. 10:2)

Yes, those among the nation of Israel had a “zeal for God,” but it wasn't consistent with the truth of God. Great zeal for the deity is shown by Muslims, Hindus, and peoples of other religions. But zeal or sincerity alone is not enough to justify either a belief or practice. People, even Christian people, even modern American Christian people, can be sincerely wrong.

Respecting worship itself, Jesus said to the Samaritans of their worship, “you worship that which you do not know” (Jn 4:22). Worship, He explained, must be both “in spirit” (so in answer to the Samaritan woman's question, it doesn't matter if you worship in Jerusalem or Samaria, just so long as your heart is right), and “in truth” (in a manner consistent with God's self-revelation and not in the manner of her ignorant Samaritan countrymen).

In other words, form counts. Sincerity counts too. But, as noted, sincerity is not at issue. Hearts are not being judged. Intentions are not being debated. Worship must be “in spirit.” This is a given. But it *must* also be “in truth”. There are right and wrong ways of worshiping God. *That* is what is at issue today and it is a legitimate issue to raise now and always. If it can be said of a group of worshipers at a given place that they are sincere that is wonderful. But we must also be able to say that they are worshiping with reverential and Biblically sanctioned forms. Sincerity alone means nothing. While perhaps it might be said that one's heart intent is more important than form, or has priority over it, it may not be said

that God is indifferent to form. *God commands right forms as well as pure hearts.*

Third, success in “religion” measured by nickels and noses (or even “decisions”) by itself means nothing at all. We all believe this as well, or at least we say we do. But again, when the theological tug-of-war starts, Evangelical and Reformed people inevitably begin to lisp the mantra of success. Look at how big! Look at how much! This is noted as though the mere mentioning of the fact ought to end all discussion. Look at how many they’ve reached, it is said, implying that the critics ought to hang their heads in shame for raising their nit-picking concerns.

But of course, “success” is not a reliable barometer of truth either. The most successful religious movement of the last two decades is not user friendly Evangelicalism. It's not even roller-ball paced Pentecostalism. It is Mormonism. They've grown to over ten million adherents, now ranking fifth among American religious groups. Is God blessing them? Shall we gauge God's approval by their growth rate? How about the rapidly expanding New Age groups? How about the numerically advancing Muslims?

Thankfully very few of us will go that far. We recognize that one can have “success” in this world and that success, whether in business, athletics, or church growth is not a sign of divine approval. Yet we Evangelicals appeal to success in a way that is almost instinctive, demonstrating in the process that we are the children of our age more than we'd care to admit. We, like the rest, find ourselves bowing before the gods of relativism and materialism.

Fourth, without hesitation we would acknowledge the considerable legitimate fruit among the user-friendly, innovative churches of our time. Indeed many have been saved, and many others rescued from floundering Christian lives through the

ministries of these churches. We wouldn't deny that for a moment. Some do a much better job than we do of reaching the lost, especially in the short run.

But the same sorts of things could be said of early monasticism and each revival of monastic zeal throughout the history of the church. Monks were the great leaders, scholars, and missionaries of the church for over a thousand years. Because we recognize their contribution to Christendom must we also endorse everything for which they stood? Can we not admire their zeal and commitment while we also lament their ascetic spirituality, their separation from society, and their attitudes toward marriage? God often looks past the errors of His servants and blesses His word in spite of the messengers. The same is true today. God continues to bless His word. It will not return to Him void (Is. 55:11). We can acknowledge the good that is being done by charismatic and evangelical brethren while lamenting the corruption of their worship and calling them to reform.

We are all responsible to live by the light that we have. In our view, both the Bible and the history of the church are against the innovators and their novelties, however sincere or successful they might be. We may or may not have yet proven this assertion. But the point is that it is on these grounds, the Bible and history, that the evaluation must be made, not nickels, noses, and heat. There is a standard by which worship may be measured. By that standard we must and shall all be judged.

Whither the Sabbath?

Now that “Super Bowl Sunday” (a.k.a. “the Lord's Day”) is past, and all the understandable excitement about the game is behind us, perhaps we might now raise the awkward question, “Whither the Christian Sabbath?” Time was when American Protestants all agreed: Sunday's 24 hours were to be “remembered” by services of worship, and “hallowed” by laying aside secular employments and recreations. Respecting Sabbatarian restrictions, the Methodists were as strict as the Presbyterians, who were as strict as the Baptists, who were as strict as the Congregationalists. No work, no play, no entertainment, and no shopping was allowed on God's holy Sabbath. Sunday was to be spent in morning and evening worship, and the time between services committed to the “holy rest” of devotional reading, naps, and works of mercy. When the fundamentalist/modernist debates raged in the 1920s this was the one area in which they all agreed, liberal and conservative alike. The Sabbatarian consensus held until the 1960s, and then suddenly collapsed, and how great was the fall.

Even in the best churches the best people in those churches camp out in front of the TV all Sunday afternoon to watch the games, and then rush home from evening worship in order to see the last of them. With the man in the pew, the NFL's rout of the fourth commandment is complete. He no longer even thinks of Sunday as especially the “Lord's day.” His conscience doesn't bother him in the slightest.

There is a sense in which I am a realist about this. American entertainment culture is strong. People mean well but are weak. It all seems harmless. It isn't. But it is understandable. Much more ominous is the capitulation of the churches. All across the country and all across our own city churches canceled services, moved services, and adapted services because of the Super Bowl. The

philosophy seems simple enough. If you can't beat 'em, join'em. Churches put up big screen TV's, served chili and soft drinks, called it "fellowship," and declared victory. A potential program failure was turned into a "success." Instead of a handful of diehards a crowd! Fun! Excitement! One prominent church put up *two* screens and held their evening service during half-time! A Presbyterian pastor in Seattle announces, "It's a Super Sunday, 'cause there's the bowl game and 'cause we're in the presence of a God who's crazy about us." Of course.

But wait a minute. Sometimes it helps to ask ourselves some basic questions. What is a Super Bowl? It is a game. It is a child's game played with a ball by grown men. That's all it is. It is just one form of entertainment in a culture addicted to entertainment. It is noteworthy only in that it has become the most popular spectator-sporting event of the year. This means that it brings tremendous pressure on the church to accommodate its presence. After all, *everyone* will be watching it. But note it is not external pressure, but the internal pressure generated by a culture of entertainment. It is not the pressure of persecution. The government is not ordering us to cancel or move services. We are not being threatened with imprisonment or death if we resist accommodation. Again, it is only a game. But *everyone* will be watching it and *everyone* wants to watch it. The only risk for us personally is that we may lose the pleasurable experience of watching a game, and be thought strange by an uncomprehending culture for doing so. The risk for the church is that merely of staging a service to which nobody comes. In other words, the pressures bearing down on us are those of 1) the lust for pleasure, of not wanting to miss out on the fun; 2) the pressure of democratic fashion, of wanting to fit in, to conform, and not be thought different, or strange, or weird; and 3) the pressure of avoiding "failure," of wanting to "succeed." Sadly, these pressures have been enough. The church and its members have capitulated.

We don't show much stomach for resisting our culture. That's the real lesson of Super Bowl Sunday. If the whole Protestant church was flipped by the pressure of entertainment in the 1960s, and for *that* abandoned a 350 year consensus dating to the strict Sabbatarianism of Jamestown's "Dale's Code" (1611), what do you suppose will happen when real persecution begins? Or more subtly, what *are* we doing in the face of the pleasures and pressures of entertainment culture? Is *everyone* going to see *Titanic* or some other trashy teen-age melodrama? Then off go the Christians, kids and all, as well. Is *everyone* wearing immodest clothing? Is *everyone* reading sleazy novels? Is *everyone* dropping off his or her children at day-care? Is *everyone* ordaining women as ministers in the churches? Is *everyone* accepting homosexuality as normal? Is *everyone* open and accepting of all religions as equally valid? What will keep us from caving-in on these issues as well? Today's church, even the conservative Evangelical church, is thoroughly enculturated and compromised. We show no stomach for resisting the hedonistic ("Lets have fun!"), pluralistic (religions and cultures are all the same), egalitarian (men and women are the same), and relativistic (moral choices are all the same; only lifestyles differ) trends in our culture.

When Christians kept the Sabbath they controlled the culture. The reason for this is clear enough. The Sabbath is a culture-shaping ordinance. It forces work and play into six days. It imposes a one and six cycle of activity. The rest of one day requires careful planning over the remaining six. Consequently it has a sanctifying effect on all of the week, and with it, all of the culture. I don't think that we understand, and probably will not understand for a hundred years or so the loss we sustained when we abandoned the Sabbath. But what I suspect is that we surrendered the culture. When we lost the Sabbath we lost nothing less than the entire culture. The collapse of American sabbatarianism was quickly followed by the collapse of the rest of the Christian cultural platform, the moral chaos of the 1960*s, and a crisis of values ever since. The NFL

struggled to survive for the decades prior to the mid-1960*s in part because of Christian American's resistance to Sunday sports. Sports and the malls wore down that resistance and eventually won. Our sorry counter-attack, chili-bean Super Bowl parties in place of worship services, is an embarrassment to serious Christian people, and only underscores the severity of the defeat. We're ministering to the culture, they'll say. But at what cost? At what cost? Shortcuts in ministry which put expedience before principle end up doing more damage than good in the long run. This is not the point at which to minister. It is the point at which to resist. Whither the Sabbath? It's gone, as is a lot more with it.

Propriety

We will, we will praise Him! praise Him!

We will, we will praise Him! praise Him!

*[—Sung as a call to worship at a contemporary church to the tune
“We will, we will rock you”]*

So far we have argued that some of what passes for worship today is in fact idolatry. We have argued that this may be true whether or not those participating in such services are sincere. In fact, we assume that the average idolater of antiquity—say, Phil of Philistia or Mike of Moab—was very sincere indeed. So is Neal of the Nineties today. Whether he is sincere or not does not determine whether a worship service is idolatrous or not. A worship service that cultivates a light, informal, chatty, humorous mood is inherently idolatrous. The God of the Bible may not be approached in such a manner. A god for whom such is acceptable is a false god. Similarly, a worship service that adopts a talk-show or variety show format, or aims to entertain, or fails to read Scripture, preach Scripture, pray Scripture, sing Scripture, confess sin, confess faith, or administer the Sacraments is idolatrous. Buildings called

“worship centers” with theater-like stages and seating designed for performances are more like pagan temples than Christian houses of prayer.

However, not everything done in the name of being “contemporary” is idolatrous. There are some things in today's worship services that are merely unwise or silly, rather than being sinful or idolatrous. It would be unfair to lump all errors of the contemporary movement into one category and view all mistakes as equally heinous.

Common Sense

Most of what I would label as *mistaken* rather than *idolatrous* has to do with a failure to make common sense distinctions. Another way of saying this is to speak of propriety or suitability. There are activities and actions that are appropriate in one setting that are inappropriate in another. For example, the manner in which you cheer for your team at a football stadium is different than at a black-tie awards banquet. It is cheering at both settings, but one is relatively unrestrained while the other is quite restrained. At the awards banquet, one might clap vigorously and even give a standing ovation. But one would probably not leap about, high-five, scream, stand on the chair, or twirl noisemakers.

Similarly, at a wedding one celebrates and rejoices in one manner at the service in which vows are exchanged, and in another manner at the reception. Both are occasions of joy, but the way in which joy is expressed (for example, the music of the service versus the music of the reception, the amount of talking and its volume, etc.) differs.

Or to provide another example, one might dress up and pay top dollar to hear a world class violin solo. But one probably would not go the same trouble to hear a kazoo solo, or even an auto-harp solo. Why? Because these are not serious instruments playing

serious music. They require neither highly-developed skills, nor do they result in a clear, distinctive, appealing sound. The point is, we are able to make these sorts of common sense distinctions about suitable behavior and musical seriousness out there in the world all the time. The same sort of judgments about propriety or suitability must be made in worship as well.

Elitism or Relativism?

The objection that is inevitably raised is that of behavioral or aesthetic elitism. Who is to say what is suitable or appropriate behavior, manners, dress, or music? You say one thing and another says another. Why is one rather than the other right? The answer is, the Bible expects us to be able to ferret these things out. Paul expects the Corinthians to learn lessons on hair length from nature not Scripture. Listen to this: “*Judge for yourselves*,” he says! “Judge for yourselves: is it proper” (*prepo*)... ? Then he directs them to base their judgment on what they can discern from nature. “Does not even nature itself teach you?” he asks (1 Cor. 11:14). Nature! In other words, on the basis of sanctified common sense, we are supposed to discern matters of propriety.

Similarly, Paul tells Titus, “speak the things which are fitting for sound doctrine” (Titus 2:1). To be “fitting” (*prepo*), is to be “appropriate,” “suitable,” or “seemly.” On the same basis women are to adorn themselves with “proper” (*kosmio*) clothing. What is proper? Paul does provide some specifics: it is modest and discreet. What is modest and discreet? Negatively, it means not braiding hair or wearing gold or pearls or costly garments. In other words, it means avoiding ostentatious display. Modesty plus good works “befits” or is “suitable” for godly women (1 Timothy 2:9, 10). There is also speech that is “fitting,” and it excludes “filthiness and silly talk, or coarse jesting.” “Immorality,” “impurity,” and “greed” are deemed to be not “proper” (*aneken*)

(Ephesians 5:3,4). “Judge for yourselves,” Paul invites us. There are judgments respecting propriety which we must make and are able to make. But please note: We are not told and cannot be told exactly where the line is to be drawn that separates the fitting from the unfitting. Ultimately one must make a judgment as to appropriate hair length, modesty in dress, and cleanliness in speech. These are all judgment calls. Yet the Bible assumes that we are able to make them. The precise point along the spectrum of behavior that separates the fitting from the unfitting, the respectful from the disrespectful, the dignified from the undignified, the beautiful from the ordinary is not identified for us. But still we are expected to discern the difference. The existence of areas of gray does not nullify the reality of black and white. There is the suitable, and there is the unsuitable.

“Whatever is... honorable... whatever is lovely... if there is any excellence, and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things” (Phil. 4:8). What specifically is “honorable?” How exactly do we identify the “lovely?” What do these things mean in the real world? They mean somewhat differing things in different places, no doubt. But they don't mean nothing! The honorable, the lovely, the excellent, and the praiseworthy all can and must be discerned and identified (“whatever” is repeated seven times in these verses. I take that to mean, emphatically, *whatever*). Judgments must be made based upon Scripture, nature, and common sense. We are expected to think it through and figure it out.

This is not an easy thing to do in our day for the simple reason that our age hates virtually all distinctions. It refuses to distinguish truth from error, right from wrong, public from private, casual from formal, vulgarity from decency, and so on. The blurring of these lines in society has infected the church as well. This should not surprise us. Society's trends always affect the church and poison its witness.

Propriety and Worship

By this point, some of you will be wondering, where is he going with this? So I'll try now to get to the point. The Bible demands that God be worshiped reverently. But it no more identifies the specifics of reverence than it does the specifics of modesty. There are no biblical guidelines for necklines or hemlines in fashion, and there are no guidelines for music, format, and speech in worship. The Bible does not say that skirts may be worn no more than a half inch above the knee, or two inches, or six inches. It does not direct us to use organs in worship and not use kazoos. It does not commend "classical" music or forbid carnival music for public worship. Yet there is a difference between immodesty and modesty, and irreverence and reverence. They are different and we are expected to discern the difference. There is a difference between music that is suitable and proper and that which is not. There is a difference between a format that is appropriate and fitting, and that which is inappropriate, unfitting, and irreverent.

How then do we "get at" these differences? By asking ourselves fundamental questions of what are we doing and why. What is the nature of the Sunday gathering of believers? It is a public service of worship. Stop right there. That answers a whole lot of questions. It is a public gathering, not a private one. Behavior that is suitable in private may not be suitable in public. It is a worship service. Forms of speech and music that might be appropriate in a business meeting, a concert, a fellowship gathering, a lecture, a prayer meeting, or a ball game might not be in a service of worship. How are we to know? We have to think it through. How? By carefully considering the nature of the assembly, the nature of God, and what the practical requirements of reverence might be. I don't know why it is not obvious to everyone that "We will, we will praise Him" is an inappropriate form of praise. I can't explain this blindness anymore than I can explain the moral and religious blindness of fallen humanity. I just know that it exists and that

what should be obvious isn't. Nevertheless, given a dose of sanctified common sense, we can begin to include and exclude a range of activities, forms of speech and music, and attitudes that are inappropriate, unsuitable, and irreverent.

Propriety in Worship

What would you think if for our next Sunday morning service we selected for our first hymn “Deep and Wide,” sang “Zaccheus Was a Wee Little Man” as our second hymn, and concluded with “The B-I-B-L-E?” Would that be appropriate, or suitable, or fitting (Titus 2:1; 1 Tim 2:9,10; Eph 5:3,4)? I don't think so. Most people would not think so. Is this an arbitrary, or personal, or even worse, an elitist point of view? After all, there is no Bible verse that says one shouldn't use those particular tunes with those particular words. In fact, the words are Biblical! What could be more Biblical than “the B-I-B-L-E”? Or, if you prefer Bible quotes, “Zaccheus, you come down! For I'm going to your house today?” No, there isn't a Bible verse that forbids “Deep & Wide,” and any sensible person would add, there need not be. We are to use sanctified common sense when determining the “culture” of a worship service.

This means that we ask ourselves questions such as, what is the “nature” of this assembly (1 Cor 11:14)? Is this a gathering around a campfire? Is this a children's Sunday School class? Is this a hymn sing around the family piano? No, it is none of these. It is a gathering for Lord's day worship of the whole people of God, young and old, rich and poor, slave and free, Jew and Gentile (Gal 3:28). It is not a gathering for a church business meeting, but for worship. It is not a gathering for a Bible lecture, for a hymn sing, or a prayer meeting, but for worship. Neither is it a gathering for the informal weekday worship of families and small groups. Songs

(and a number of other things) which may be appropriate on these occasions may not be for this. Campfire songs are fine, around the campfire. However, the official worship of the church, called by the elders, on the Lord's day, has its own distinctive character. This being the case, there are necessary implications that should be discerned. I can think of about a hundred, but let me name but a few.

First, the format we use, the songs we sing, and the language we use should transcend narrow "cultural" appeal in so far as it is possible. We'll continue to focus on our songs in order to illustrate the point. We should not sing songs that target ethnic groups, be they black or brown or white. We should not sing songs that appeal only to children, or youth, or the "swing" generation of the 1940*s, or Baby Boomers, or to "Generation Xers," or to what is being called the "millennial" generation (those born since 1980). Even apart from questions related to the regulative principle (e.g. the content of the songs), this ought not to be done. Why? *Because it is an inherently divisive thing to do.* Target the tastes of a single subculture, be it generational, ethnic, or racial, and one immediately alienates all the others. The "worship wars" in the churches today rage because of the profound sense of alienation older generations feel as the songs with which they grew up are cast aside, often quite flippantly, without regard for their inherent value, the communion of the saints across the generations, or their attachment to them. Regrettably some of that to which they are attached are likewise culturally specific and consequently foreign to the young (e.g. some gospel songs). But this is not true of the best songs in the traditional hymnal.

I want to propose a different ideal, namely that of a distinctly transcultural liturgical culture. The church has its own culture, a culture that transcends any particular culture, and appeals to all cultures. It does so because it appeals to aesthetic qualities that are universal rather than particular. For example, the contemporary

church adaptation to worship of the format of David Letterman appeals to some Yuppies, but for their elders, and often their Generation X youngsters, it can be alienating and even repulsive.

Contrast this with Calvin's Genevan liturgy. Once completed, it was used in Strasbourg and then Geneva. Quickly it was translated (a necessary concession to culture) and taken to Holland, to Scotland (by John Knox, no less), to France, and to Germany. The *Genevan Psalter* followed similar paths. Poles, Germans, Dutchmen, Swiss, Frenchmen, and Scots all worshiped with the Genevan forms and with Genevan Psalms. Thus the communion of the saints among Reformed Christians was enjoyed across cultures and races and ethnic groups (and their distinctive folk music!). It is silly to think that our forms in worship should be culturally familiar or “user friendly” to unconverted worldlings and their fallen culture. It is just as silly to think that Christ's disciples ought to require forms in worship that resemble those of the fallen and hostile culture around them. Yet self-centered boomers are demanding just that. We have had PCA people not join our church, indeed, join non-Presbyterian churches, because they couldn't sing their generationally specific songs. They have given up Reformed doctrine, Reformed church government, and Reformed practice for the sake of culturally comfortable tunes!

The best that is found in the traditional hymnal accomplishes what Calvin's liturgy did. It transcends culture. The hymnal contains the best tunes and the best lyrics of the Christian tradition. This claim, of course, does not go undisputed. What some folks like to think is that the songs of the hymnal are those of the older generations, whereas “contemporary” worship features the songs of the younger generations. But this is false. The traditional hymnal has nothing in it that sounds like Al Jolson, Big Band, or Elvis Presley. I don't know anyone now living whose contemporary culture featured songs like “O Sacred Head, Now Wounded,” “All People that On Earth Do Dwell,” or “Holy, Holy, Holy.” These are not the tunes of

a generation but *for* the generations. Some of them have ancient Latin and Greek roots (e.g. Veni Emmanuel, St. Theodolphus). Some are rooted in Hebrew culture (e.g. Leoni—"The God of Abraham Praise"), some in Welsh (e.g. Aberystwyth—"Jesus Lover of My Soul"), French (e.g. the Doxology), German (e.g. Ein Feste Burg), Italian (e.g. "Come Thou Almighty King"), and other European cultures (especially British). Many have been developed from Gregorian Chants, as is typical of many of the tunes attributed to Lowel Mason (e.g. Hamburg—"When I Survey the Wondrous Cross"). The hymnal includes selections from across the centuries and from the world's greatest musicians. Contributions have been made by Bach, Handel, Haydn, Mozart, Brahms, and Beethoven. Its lyricists include The Venerable Bede, St. Bernard, St. Francis, Luther, Calvin, Watts, Wesley, Newton, etc. In other words, the hymnal contains the best lyrics and best hymn-tunes of the Christian tradition. No doubt someone will object that they are all Europeans (if one counts Hebrew music as European, which it isn't). But where else but within the borders of Christendom was excellent music ever written before modern times? Indeed, where else was music as we know it, rich with melody and harmony, ever written at all? Exactly nowhere, that's where. The Judeo-Christian tradition invented music. It is only natural that most of the best tunes arise from European cultures. We use them, however, not because they are old or European, but because they are good. Good? Yes, good for the same reasons that Japanese and Chinese musicians learn to play by practicing Bach, Mozart and Beethoven. Good in that they are well crafted, beautiful, and suited to the content and form of Psalms and hymns.

What is true of our songs is true of format and language also. The format we employ should be such that transcends specific cultural expressions. Foreigners should be able to walk into our church and feel at home. They should not feel like they have entered an enclave of 1990s pop culture. The language should be standard English. It should not be the inaccessible English of William F.

Buckley. Neither should it be the English of a particular subculture. It should not be black English, or cool '90s English, but standard, universal English. We can learn from the news programs in this respect. They aim at the broadest audience and consequently use unaccented, grammatically correct, universally accessible English. Use an ethnic style of English and whites will be alienated. Use '90s chic English and older generations will be alienated. Use kindergarten English and the under-5 crowd will be thrilled, but the rest will be offended. Wrap a worship service in the trappings of a particular culture or subculture and you divide, divide, divide. The logical endpoint (to which we are rapidly moving) will be a church segregated by age, generation, race, ethnic group, musical preferences, and taste. As each sub-culture demands and requires its own music and format and lingo, we shall continue to have black churches and white churches, and add to them churches for old people, churches for young people, churches for lovers of "Country & Western," churches for the swing era, even churches for Valley Girls, surfers, skateboarders, a church for me (capturing exactly my preferred cultural expression), and a church for you. Can you see that the contemporary church movement is headed down the wrong trail? It would be better to follow Zwingli's path, and banish all music from the church, than to allow idolatrous attachment to idiosyncratic cultural preferences divide and segregate the body of Christ. Our worship must employ forms that transcend appeal to a particular culture and instead appeal to that which is Biblical, Reformed, and universal.

Public Propriety

(We argued last time that because our assemblies are public services of worship, there are necessary deductions that we must draw. The first of these is that we should avoid cultural appeal and use language and music that transcends the taste of any particular group and appeals to all.)

Second, the forms employed in worship should be public in nature. By this I mean that the services should clearly be public not private, corporate not individualistic, and congregational not personal. This I take to be true by definition. It is necessary in the nature of things, by definition, in a public service for the individual to subordinate his immediate state of mind and preferred patterns of speech to the requirements of group expression. A person may not “feel” like God is “Holy, Holy, Holy,” but he praises him as such anyway. He may not feel like confessing his sin or confessing his faith that day. He may find the language of a given hymn or creed to be awkward or unfamiliar. But he rightly joins in because these are public, congregational, corporate exercises, expressing the convictions of the covenant community as a whole. Of course it ought to be the aim of every worshiper for his heart to match his mouth. But in the meantime, he adopts the public language by faith. Even though my heart is filled with doubt and fear, I affirm the truth of the hymn, of the prayer, and of the creed *by faith*. Without this step of faith, public worship becomes impossible, as each individual searches for language which more perfectly expresses the condition of his own heart, and his preferred patterns of speech. Public worship does not collapse into an anarchy of individual expression because hymns, Psalms, creeds, and public prayers express what at our best moments we believe and aspire to be.

This being the case, the *exercises* of public worship services are *corporate and congregational*. There is a tendency to add to public worship time for individualized expression, such as moments for silent and personal prayer, or personal confession, or personal intercession. This is thought to make the service more “meaningful.” I see this as being entirely unnecessary, even contrary to the nature of the service as a public service. If it is necessary to add such activities in order to encourage “personal participation,” what are we to make of the rest of the service? Is the congregation not participating during the minister’s prayers and preaching or during congregational responses such as songs and creeds? If individualized time must be added for prayer, then what about for Bible study? Should we all have time for personal interpretation and application of the Bible prior to the sermon? How about individualized confession of faith? Shall we have personal testimony time, where each member gives his personal views of the Christian religion or what Jesus means to him? There is a sense in which these are things which can be done, and in some circles are. But why are they deemed necessary? Given that this is *public* worship, why is this deemed appropriate? *All of the activities of public worship should be public and corporate in nature.*

In addition, because the services are public, its *concerns* are public. Richard J. Mouw, President of Fuller Theological Seminary, complains about preachers who “seem convinced that I have come to church eager to be updated about their daily lives.” [“Preaching Worth Pondering,” *Fuller Focus* 5 (November 1996) 2,3.] The intimacy and informality that may be appropriate to private devotions or family worship are often unsuitable for services that are *public*. You may wear your pajamas for personal devotions, but they are not advised for public. You may ask questions about the Bible of your four-year-old during family worship, but such is unlikely to be edifying during public worship, however cute it may be. In a house church or small group setting it may be appropriate

to take personal prayer requests, to confess particular sins, to have personal testimonies. But once a gathering increases in number beyond a half-dozen or so, these matters must be handled in a more generalized way, otherwise the congregation will become cliquish. Intercessions must be of a general nature, as must the confession of sin, as must the confession of faith, or else the congregation will quickly divide into the in-group whose needs and experiences are known, and all the rest. There is an informality or familiarity that is inappropriate for public gatherings. A measure of formality is necessary for services that are public.

The criticism of this, of course, is that such seems “impersonal” and cold. But it seems to me that this complaint says more about the complainer than about the worship. We live in a hyper-individualistic era. Individualism easily deteriorates into self-centeredness and narcissism. The goal of worship, after all, is to bless God, not myself. We assemble corporately and publically at His command. Let me say it again. We worship corporately, congregationally, publically because God wants us to and has so directed us. Since this is so, if we are to lift our voices “with one accord,” the use of common language and common expressions are necessary (Acts 4:24).

Propriety, Music, and Instruments

(Regarding public worship we have argued: First, that we should avoid narrow cultural appeal and use language and music that transcends the taste or preferences of any particular group; second, that the forms employed in worship should be public and not private.)

Third, musical instruments that we use should be suited to congregational public worship. Christendom has debated the use of musical instruments for centuries. They were not introduced into Christian worship until the 9th century. The Greek Orthodox churches still don't use instruments today. The Swiss Reformers reverted to the ancient practice of non-instrumental worship, and were followed by the Scottish Presbyterians and English Puritans. American Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and Baptists began to use instruments around the beginning of the 19th century. The Scots maintained the old ways until the 1850*s. The argument has been settled at IPC at least since 1819, and among Presbyterians only a few thousand “Covenanters,” members of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North American (RPCNA) continue to worship without instruments today.

Assuming it is permissible to use musical instruments in public worship, which ones ought to be used? The Psalms mention a whole range of string and wind instruments. Some of the instruments of the Old Testament may have been employed in connection with the sacrificial system. *When the burnt offering began, the song of the Lord also began with the trumpets, accompanied by the instruments of David* (2 Ch 29:26-28). It may be that the instruments functioned to cover the sounds of animals being slaughtered, even as incense covered the stench. Be that as it

may, the primary and normative use of instruments is that of accompanying congregational singing. Instruments do not themselves praise, they accompany, support, and enrich the intelligent praise of the gathered congregation.

Which of them do the best job of this? Let me clarify the question. The issue is not what is *permissible*. A variety of instruments may be permitted. Neither is the issue what might effectively accompany the singing of a choir, or of a soloist, or of a small group Bible study. The question is, which instrument(s) might most effectively accompany, support, and enrich the *congregational* singing of public worship? That would depend upon what people like, wouldn't it? Some will prefer one kind of instrument, others another. It's all a matter of taste, isn't it?

As a matter of history and fact, personal or group preference has not been the method by which this question has been resolved. As a democratic society, we are accustomed to thinking in these terms. But majority preference misleads us on these and other questions. Instead, an ecclesiastical consensus was reached through a sense of what was suitable and appropriate. Popular or even folk instruments, prior to modern times, have never been considered suitable. The near universal verdict of Christendom through the centuries is that keyboard instruments are best for public worship: they best lead, they are best suited. The younger generations often assume that this is just an arbitrary cultural preference. But this assumption is unproven and false. Tommy Dorsey and his band would be accompanying the singing in “traditional” churches if the older generation had tried to impose its musical preferences on the church in the way that younger ones have. The churches of Christendom house organs and pianos not because one generation prefers them, but because the verdict of many generations is that they are superior to all others for the specific purpose of supporting congregational singing. One could hire an orchestra, but that is too expensive to be practical on a regular basis. Normally limited

resources will restrict a given church to a single paid musician. Which instrument will be 1) loud enough to effectively support and yet not overwhelm the singing; 2) sophisticated enough to distinctively sound each note; and 3) appropriate, as determined by its inherent qualities and associations?

Guitars have become popular for public worship in recent years. We use them in our home Bible studies and in Sunday School. We use them at Point Pleasant *before* the start of our formal worship. For these uses they perform admirably. But we don't use them during the evening service itself, or even more to the point, we don't use them Sunday morning. Have we made arbitrary distinctions? Does our practice reflect what is merely a cultural bias? We don't think so. Why? Because for formal public worship guitars fail (or at least earn a weak grade) on all three tests. Respecting the first test, they are not loud enough once a meeting moves to a space that is larger than a living room (or once a larger room fills up). To make up for this guitarists, even multiple guitarists, will strum chords loudly, but then the guitar fails the second test. Typically guitarists only play chords and don't play the melody at all, never mind all four parts. You may have noticed it is difficult to learn a tune when the melody is not being played. The medium then begins to impact the message, as "chords alone" playing typically requires simple and repetitious tunes. It is no accident that guitars and choruses go hand-in-hand. They are suited for each other. Only with great exertions can they be used to accompany the more complex tunes of traditional hymns and Psalms. Stringed instruments simply lack the versatility of keyboard instruments. Because the piano and organ combine melody, harmony, and rhythm, they provide better support for the singing of hymns in congregational settings.¹

¹A recent favorable review of classical guitarist Paul Galbraith, in the *Wall Street Journal* describes his attempts to overcome the guitar's "limitations," which it says "have kept it a stepchild in classical circles." Noting

The third point raises the problem of associations. A saxophone suffers from its association with the nightclub scene. Banjos suffer from association with square dances and Hee Haw. Guitars suffer from two associations: the first is the casual setting of the campfire and other informal occasions for which it is so famously known and loved, which, however, undermine its suitability for transcendent public worship. This problem might become clearer when we consider harmonicas and kazoos, which are clearly or comically inappropriate. Could we use a harmonica to accompany our congregational singing? We could. It wouldn't be unscriptural, in the sense that there is no Bible verse that forbids it. But would it be appropriate? Obviously it wouldn't. Not only does it do a poor job of supporting the singing, but it lacks dignity. In a crisis it could be pressed into service. But normally we would seek a more sophisticated and versatile instrument. But back to the guitar. Richard Brookhiser has called it “the ultimate E-Z-2-Play instrument.” He asks, “why else was it the lyre of the American peasantry?” The relative ease with which it can be learned to play (say, as compared with the violin), has placed it prominently in the midst of popular and informal settings. This informality is an obstacle to be overcome for those who wish to cultivate an atmosphere of solemn reverence in the public worship of our great God.

Second, the guitar carries further liabilities because of its associations with electric guitars and rock music, a form of music

one of its “traditional strengths” as “the sense of intimacy it imparts,” it goes on to reason that this “inherent intimacy can be a weakness, making it harder to project the instrument in today’s large concert halls.” This is our first point exactly. Moreover, guitar performances, this otherwise positive review argues, “often lack the nuances of phrasing and interpretive depth” characteristic of other instruments. This is our second point. (“Turning the Guitar Upside Down,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 7, 2001.)

inextricably bound up with rebellion, promiscuity, and illegal drug use. Whether rock is inherently such or such only by association is a larger debate than can be undertaken now. That those are the roots out of which it (the electric guitar) has arisen, and the subject matter with which it is universally associated, however, is not to be denied. Can rock (soft or hard), and the primary instrument with which it is associated, the guitar, make the transition from the riotous party, the concert, and the bar to the sanctuary? I don't think it can. Many "successful" churches are doing just that. But that a thing can be done does not answer the question, at what cost? The cost, it seems to me, is the loss of the dignity, reverence, and awe that ought to characterize Christian worship (Heb 12:28).

Rock's Form

We left off last time complaining about electric guitars and rock music and their unsuitability for public worship. So what is the problem, or should I say, "hang up" with rock music? Where shall I begin? And, where shall I stop? There's so much to say.

First, let's start with the rock's form. The old fundamentalists said that the rhythms of rock and roll were the rhythms of eroticism and its accouterments. Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, everyone laughed. Squares! Legalists! Dorks! But wait, Alan Bloom in *The Closing of the American Mind* and Robert Pattison in *The Triumph of Vulgarities* (I like the title), two first-rate intellectuals, say essentially the same thing. Rock music echos and arouses sensual and erotic appetites. *Why* this is so is open to dispute. We could also ask, why does John Phillip Sousa's music arouse a martial and patriotic spirit, David's music calm and quiet Saul's disturbed spirit (1 Sam 16:23), and Mozart's aid in the development of both plants and the brains of infants? Some music saddens, some gladdens. It is hard to say

why these things are so, but neither can they be denied. These effects have something to do with both the nature of the music and the human nature to which they appeal. *That* it is so, that rock eroticizes, is beyond question, one would have thought. Bloom doesn't mince his words:

“But rock music has one appeal only, a barbaric appeal, to sexual desire—not love, not eros, but sexual desire undeveloped and untutored. It acknowledges the first emanations of children’s emerging sensuality and addresses them seriously, eliciting them and legitimating them, not as little sprouts that must be carefully tended in order to grow into gorgeous flowers, but as the real thing. Rock gives children, on a silver platter, with all the public authority of the entertainment industry, everything their parents always used to tell them they had to wait for until they grew up and would understand later... Young people know that rock has the beat of sexual intercourse.” (The Closing of the American Mind, 73)

In his excellent study of the baby boom generation Landon Y. Jones notes that “at the onset of puberty, a vulnerable point in anyone’s life . . . (boomers) were overwhelmed by an energetic music whose sexual power was never far below the surface” (*Great Expectations*, 71).

Robert Pattison sees rock's roots in Romanticism's irrationality and primitivism. Romanticism celebrated the “innocence” of youth and the “noble savage.” Combine the notion that the primitive is superior to the civilized with the mass culture of the 20th century, and you have in rock the perfect idiom for this worldview. What worldview? A worldview in rebellion against the discipline, restraint, order and traditional virtues of civilization; a worldview that champions feeling, experience, and immediate gratification. H. R. Rookmaaker referred to rock's “thumping rhythm and shouting

voices, each line and each beat full of the angry insult to all western values” (*Modern Art and the Death of a Culture*, 189). Commenting on a recent article in *The Weekly Standard*, Dr. Darryl Hart, Librarian at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, writes,

“Even a journalist with no evidently religious convictions is able to see the incongruity between Protestant virtues and the forms of mass culture. According to Diana West, the essential ideals of middle-class culture—responsibility, fidelity, sobriety, and other badges of maturity are completely at odds with the cumulative message of the rock culture—sexual and narcotic gratification, anarchism, self-pity, and other forms of infantilism.”

Christian author Calvin Johansen, writing in his book *Discipling Music Ministry*, is stronger yet:

“The music of rock supports the repudiation of biblical standards by using combinations of sounds which are violent, mind-numbing, vulgar, raw, mesmerizing, rebellious, grossly repetitive, uncreative, undisciplined, and chaotic sounding. If listeners do not hear these things, it is because rock has dulled their aesthetic sensibilities. Rock's anarchist and vulgar approach to composition produces music which is tasteless, blunt, rude, indiscriminate, frenzied, and wild. Speaking of today's more raucous and abrasive pop music, violinist Isaac Stern fears for the effect it has on thinking young minds. In some of this music, violence and the call to violence have become acceptable. It's not acceptable to me. I view the arts as freeing us from the slavery of our worst emotions. They're not a home for hatred.” (p. 26)

“Not all rock does all that,” an objector may say. Maybe not. But the least that we can say is that the form of rock music is problematic for Christians. Again, Rookmaaker says, “anyone who thinks that this is all cheap and no more than entertainment has never used his ears” (190). It is not mere entertainment and its form is more than entertaining.

All Junk

The critics of rock cited last time highlight two objections to the genre: primitive appeal (to our baser drives) and primitive skills (crude composition & performance). Yet it has dominated the music scene for nearly 50 years and is likely to continue to do so. Why? Richard Brookhiser attempts a brief answer in his previously cited article, “All Junk, All the Time” (*National Review*, November 25, 1996).

First, it's easy to play. He writes, “If rock depended on some instrument—trumpet, clarinet, fiddle, piano—that required some tone of the lips or lightness of the fingers to play even barely competently, its pool of potential performers would have shrunk by 90 per cent. There is only one instrument easier to fake: drums. The low standards also apply to rock vocalists. Remember Mick Jagger when he was in his prime? Heard him now, when he sounds like a voice on the subway PA system? Mr. Jagger could actually move his notes around, but they were always harsh and homely notes. That's OK—they were good enough for rock.”

Second, it's easy to rhyme. “The whole point” of rock lyrics, he writes, “is not to have to worry about rhyme schemes. If you start worrying, not everyone will be able to do it. So rock will keep on rhyming 'pain' and 'shame,' and 'stop' and 'stuck.’”

Third, It's easy to dance to. He recalls when they quit giving dancing lessons to 5th and 6th graders back in the 1960s. How the boys did sigh with relief! “The abolition of dance steps was a great relief to the awkward, especially the men, who once had to lead—no more visualizing the points of the compass, no more shame when you crunched the foot you were supposed to be guiding.” All you had to do to dance to rock was hold on tight (slow dancing) or jump around fast (fast dancing).

Fourth, it's easy to make money. Back to Brookheiser:

“It is easy to make a buck selling it. Because the product is so generic, primitive, and witless, the distributors and marketers can know nothing, ingest huge quantities of drugs, and still not be too addled to make millions. The fields I know best are journalism, publishing, and politics, and I do know something about laziness and empty pretensions. But if there were ever a land of opportunity for the feckless, the modern music industry is it.”

His closing comments are worth pondering by Christian people as well:

“Rock is a form of popular culture that aims downward in terms of class and age, instead of aiming up. Rather than aspiring, it despises. Astronomers speak of the red shift, the change in the spectrum of the light of receding galaxies. Rock is redneck shift. The preceding phase of popular music, encompassing jazz, dance bands, and show tunes, was urban and adult. Rock is kids channeling the rhythms of bumpkins.

“But the worst thing about rock is not that it fails the culture, but that it fails on its own terms. Popular music is a market and a memory aid. Most of the important events in

life—romance, courtship, celebration—are accompanied by it. We remember them because of their importance to us, no matter what was on the radio. But if the music is crude and blank, does not some of its crudity and blankness infect the experience, and the memory?

“And while popular music mostly amplifies pre-existing emotions, at its best it can tug us, tease us, make us grow. Not rock. For all its supposedly revolutionary ethos, rock is a binary switch of angst and hormones—Kafka without humor, or centerfolds in notes. The emotions that unsettle, like stones under a sleeping bag—hope, regret—are beyond its ken. And they are beyond our ken, to the extent rock stuffs our ears.

“It's Bottom 40, all junk, all the time. And it's here to stay.”

Rock's Content

So far we have only highlighted the problems associated with the *form* of rock music. But there are also the problems with the *content* with which it is associated. Think back over the past 30 years. Scour your memory for one popular song that did not feature the erotic, the intoxicating, or the absurd. Or, listen to a pop radio station for an hour and see how many selections are appropriate for your 13 year old. How many communicate a message that you value? How many portray male and female relationships in a manner in which you would be comfortable for your teenagers to imitate? Indeed, how many are not absolutely antithetical to essential Christian morals? I dare say you will be hard pressed to find any that are compatible with any facet of a Christian world and life view. Yes, many of them are fun and cute and emotive. A

handful are unobjectionable. But most are also contrary at best, and hostile at worst, to the call of Christian discipleship. The world of pop music is, from the top to the bottom, morally degrading and spiritually oppressive. To enter it, or worse, to encourage our young people to enter it as though it were harmless fun, is naive.

As is the case with so many things, it has been rearing children that has awakened me to the pervasive decadence of pop culture. Even the most innocent and fun pop music offends. We were heading off to the beach one day listening to the Beach Boys, when my favorite of their songs started up.

“Well she took her daddy's keys
And she cruised to the hamburger stand, *now*.
Seems she forgot all about the library
Like she told her old man, *now*.
And with the radio blastin'
Goes cruisin' just as fast as she can, *now*;
And we'll have fun, fun, fun
Till her daddy takes her T-Bird away
Euuuh, Euuuhhhhhuhuhhhuh”

“Daddy, what's that about?” asked Sam. “Oh, that's about a girl who lies to her daddy about taking his car to the library and instead goes to the hamburger stand to grab a bite to eat and see the gang. Then she drives off at high speed with the radio blaring.” “Daddy, should we be singing about that?” “Well, it's just a fun kind-of-a-song, Sammy...uh...plus, think of the exposure you're getting to outstanding poetry. Don't you think the writer made particularly effective use of the word 'now?’” “Daddy, who is the old man?” “Oh, that's what she calls her father.” “Is that nice...?” etc. Why do I want to encourage this?

If you tend to agree with objection #2 (the words are bad or dumb) but deny #1 (the music, you insist, is neutral or good), then ask

yourself what is the connection between the two? Why is rock so compatible with the themes of rebellion, promiscuity, and illicit drug use? Why is it so compatible as to be virtually inseparable? Why is it so hard to find the one without the other? Theorize all you want. Rock, rebellion, promiscuity, and drugs are bound together in popular culture. The world of MTV and pop music is unrelentingly corrupt. If you don't believe me, turn it on for 5 minutes. I hereby issue a challenge. See if you can turn on a rock radio station or MTV for 5 minutes of music and not be assaulted by a message that is hostile to Christian discipleship. If I'm right, and you can't, then what legitimate business can we have to do with them?

Take this discussion a step further. Who are these people who sing of such things? Recently the *Wall Street Journal* (4/7/99) reviewed the VH1 cable network's documentary series entitled "Behind the Music." The title of the review article said it all: "What a Long, Strange Trip It's Been." The subtitle added, "Rockers Lure VH1 Viewers with Tales of Drugs, Sex, and Despair." "Each week, 'Behind the Music' confirms what people's parents used to say," the article begins. "Rock music is dangerous, the lifestyle is a killer, and some of the industry's executives act like crooks." We learn from the article of episodes featuring the lead singer of Three Dog Night "losing his career, marriage and family in a haze of heroin addiction," the bankruptcy of Grand Funk Railroad, the infidelities of Fleetwood Mac, Gladys Knight's "fever for gambling," 70s teenybopper star Leif Garrett's doped-up, intoxication-caused car accident which left a friend of his crippled, Boy George's drug addiction and perversion, Madonna's "Sex" book, and still more perversion from R.E.M. The lives of the rock stars are a tale of "deceit, hubris, infidelity, larceny, and attempts at redemption," the reviewer says. And Janis Joplin, Sid Vicious, Jimi Hendrix, and Kurt Cobain haen't even been featured yet. Sometimes conservative social critics can be accused of making things out to be worse than they are. Not so in this case. From Elvis to the Beach Boys to the Beatles to today, the story is the same.

Each time our family watches a sporting event on TV my wife shakes her head in disgust at the poor quality of role models found in the sporting world. Yet they influence our children, whom we find walking, dribbling, strutting, dressing, and talking like the stars do. It is enough to make one want to turn off and tune out of sports all together. Everyday seems to bring another account of a star athlete propositioning a harlot, fathering illegitimate children, or abusing drugs and alcohol. Why patronize it?

If this is a valid question to raise regarding sports, how much more so regarding pop music? If we're right about the kind of people who are involved, and about the kinds of things about which they typically sing, and perhaps even the inherent properties of the rock genre, why would we wish to patronize it? Why would we wish to introduce our children to it? Why encourage the development of an appetite for rock and entry into its realm? The whole rock/pop world is so nasty, brutish, corrupt, and perverse, that the theoretical question about whether the music is inherently corrupt or only corrupt by association seems beside the point. It is a world that we would be wise to avoid, and whose influences we should wish to limit as far as is practical to do so.

Popular Music & the Church

Now ask yourself, why should we think that the pop/rock medium would be suitable for the communication of Christian truth? Why would we want to bring it into the Christian sanctuary? As we have seen, this is music that is sung by morally corrupt artists, about morally corrupt themes, in morally corrupt venues. Its inherent qualities are questionable at best. Its unvarying associations are decadent. Its artists are degenerate.

The typical rebuttal that I have heard argues the exception: What about _____ (fill in the name of a relatively virtuous musician/singer) who sings _____ and _____ (add the names of relatively untainted rock/pop songs)? The point seems to be because one out of a hundred top-40 songs is compatible with Christian discipleship, then we ought not condemn the whole genre. Sorry, but that reasoning seems lame to me. Will you eat from a jar of peanuts where 99 of 100 are rotten? Will you look through a magazine where 99 of 100 pictures are pornographic? Will you breathe air which 99% of the time is polluted? Will you drink water from a faucet which 99 times out of 100 contains sewage? Will you watch TV hour after hour, night after night, when 99 out of 100 shows are morally corrupt? I imagine that about the best we could do is sift through all the musical chaff and create a tape or CD (or 2 or 3) with all the unoffensive pop songs of the past 30 years. We could call it “The Top 100 Un-Nonchristian Songs of the 60s through the 90s.” But the energy required to edit out the junk along with the soiling effects of determining what is suitable and what isn’t leads me to ask—is it really worth it? Why are we so attached to the forms of pop culture? Can’t the Christian community come up with something refreshingly different and better?

The other argument is that even though the artists, words, and associations of pop music are bad, rock itself is morally neutral. More importantly, it is *popular*. This really is the heart of the issue. “In the here and now,” notes *National Review's* Richard Brookhiser, “rock is triumphant and universal” (Nov. 25, 1996). Consequently, its popularity can be used to the advantage of the church if the claim of neutrality can be established. Excepting a few Reformed cranks, established it has been. The almost universal opposition to rock music in the 1950s and early 60s amongst conservative Christians has given way to almost universal acceptance. *Enthusiastic* acceptance.

Let's explore this idea of neutrality further. A prominent theme of Cornelius Van Til's apologetic is that "there is no neutrality." Every cultural form is expressive of a world view, including every form of music. Rock arises from and embodies the spirit of a world view, as we have seen. It cannot be regarded as neutral. Can we redeem it? My answer would be, we may seek to redeem music *generally* by developing forms that are beautiful. But it may be that we cannot redeem any *particular* form of music, such as rock, rap, pop, heavy metal or grunge, because the form itself may be corrupt. Corrupt? Yes, in the sense of ugly or illicit. The devil has his music. A world that rejects truth and righteousness will also reject beauty. We should expect that a culture fleeing from God will come to prefer the false and ugly. We see evidence of this everywhere today, don't we? Don't we have to say that a significant portion of today's art, architecture, and fashion is simply ugly? In fact, we see folks taking considerable delight in the downright vulgar and grotesque, if horror movies and the tattooing and piercing rage give any indication. If we have come to the place where we must consider all forms of music as equally beautiful or suitable then we have abandoned the cultural mandate altogether, and made a god of what is. I cannot imagine a greater irony than that the theological heirs of Kuyper and Van Til have come to this. But even if it were *theoretically* possible for rock to be value neutral, in practice, as we've seen, it is not. This fact alone is enough to caution discernment and restraint in its use.

One last note before I return to the theme of worship music. My larger concern is the degree to which American Christians have made peace with American pop culture. I'm not advocating total abstinence, though I probably sound like it. I'm really urging discernment. Somehow we've become comfortable with a world that assaults Christian values relentlessly. Somehow we can sit contentedly and listen to its music, watch its TV and cinema, worship at its sports altar, read its trash magazines and novels,

wear its immodest and seductive fashions, and conspicuously consume whatever else it offers. Am I missing something here? Did the ship sail off course when no one was looking? Most of the American evangelical world is thoroughly compromised, and yet remains tragically unaware. The culture wars are over and we lost.

Worship Music

Now let's examine the ideal form for worship music. It would be ridiculous for me to enter this discussion as though I were a trained musician. I'm not, and I shouldn't and won't try to pretend. Neither am I a person of refined or highly cultured taste. I'm essentially a McDonald's and Beatles sort-of-person. Junk food and junk music define my adolescent appetites. It's embarrassing to have to admit that, but it's time for true confessions. Neil Young, Simon & Garfunkel, Cosby, Stills & Nash, Loggins & Messina, the Eagles, Beach Boys, Beatles, Doobie Brothers, Abba, Elton John, and among harder-rockers, Boston, Jethro Tull, Led Zepplin, and, to my eternal shame, Black Sabbath, formed my musical canon in high school and college. Now, in elementary school my favorites were "Deep & Wide," "Happy Birthday to You" and Al Jolson's "Mammy." But then my tastes "matured" in high school. And they've matured since then. We should expect this. We should anticipate maturing tastes in food, clothing, cars, music, and so on as we grow older. When we "grow up," the music of our teens, along with those other things, seem, well, adolescent. This is not an elitist notion. It's just a fact of life, not to mention a Biblical insight—

When I was a child, I used to speak as a child, think as a child, reason as a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things. (1 Cor 13:11)

All of us then are to put away “childish things,” and listen to what is around us and make judgments, evaluations if you please. Again, let your mind scan the world of popular music. Then make some observations and ask yourself some questions. There are good reasons why certain forms of music should *not* be adapted to Christian worship. The music of the carnival, of the circus, of the ballpark, of the march and the battlefield, of the tavern, and of the party all have their place. But that place is not the Christian sanctuary. They are not suited to or appropriate for public worship because they send a message, or more precisely, set a mood that is contrary to that required for the praise of God. More problematic still are rap, heavy metal, and the music of the strip-tease. Even the folks at *Maranatha! Music* balk at these forms. But what about soft-rock? Can it be adapted? Again, many attempt to do just that. Many conservative Presbyterians do. But should they? Is it wise? Is it profitable and edifying? Let me outline a response.

I propose that we answer this question: What should a worship song be like? Should it look like any one thing or many things? I believe that we have been given a clear answer in the Bible itself. Worship songs should look like Psalms. God Himself has provided an example of hymns that please Him. The 150 canonical Psalms form God's own hymn book. If we set aside for now the substantial arguments of the advocates of exclusive Psalmody, we still would want to say that the Psalms *at least* provide the model for Christian hymnody. God Himself teaches us through His Psalter the manner of praise which pleases Him. When we write hymns, we are to follow the pattern established by the Psalms. Do Psalms look like any one thing? Aren't there a variety of Psalm types? Yes there are, in that there are short and long Psalms, various types of parallelism, and a variety of themes. Still there is consistency in

form. Specifically this consistency would mean that hymns should include:

- i. *Progression in thought.* A theme is introduced and developed in each of the Psalms, whether the theme is a lament, complaint, affirmation of faith, or praise, it progresses. It is elaborated. It is developed.
- ii. *Minimal repetition.* There is some repetition (e.g. Psalms 136, 57, 99, etc.). But it is minimal. There is nothing of the sort of repetition found in gospel songs and today*s choruses.
- iii. *Theological weight.* All the great themes of Scripture are found in Christian Psalms. Thus Luther could call the Psalter “a little Bible.” Significant theological themes ranging from God to man to sin to Christ to salvation to mission to eschatology are developed.
- iv. *Variety in use of objective and subjective voices.*

Consequently, if the Psalms were written by God to be sung, and if hymns are to look like the Psalms, then musical forms will have to develop that are multi-stanzaed, multi-lined, with multi-beats/syllables/words to each line. One may chant the hymns and Psalms and eliminate these problems. But if they are to be sung, our tunes must be capable of handling sentences long enough to *express* a thought, lines enough to *develop* the thought, and stanzas enough to *complete* the thought, while remaining singable by congregations. They must look, in other words, like the hymn-tune form that Christendom has developed over the past 2000 years. There may be other forms that may serve the church equally well, but they have yet to be developed. If they exist, we have yet to discover them.

The Finale

We come to the end now of our attempt to identify those forms of music that are best suited for public worship. Subjectively they should be reverent. Objectively they should be capable of handling sentences that are long enough to *express* a thought, have lines enough to *develop* a thought, and stanzas enough to *complete* a thought. Like Psalms, worship songs should contain progression in thought, minimal repetition, and theological weight. The question then is, is the pop-rock form capable of serving in this capacity? You may have guessed that I'm going to say no. Hopefully you'll see that this is not an arbitrary view, but has to do with the form itself. Generalizations are dangerous, but so is silence. Generalizations always have exceptions. But generalizations may help us to evaluate the genre as a whole. Typically pop music, including soft-rock, suffers from one or more of the following limitations:

1. Short sentences. Let the Beatles and Beach Boys help us out again,

“O' yea I (3 beats)
Say that's something (4)
I think you'll understand” (6)

“I get around (3)
Out of town (3)
I'm a real cool kid (5)
I'm making real good bread” (6)

Or, let's put Debbie Boone to work,

“You light up my life. (5)
You give me hope (4)
To carry on. (4)
You light up my days (5)
And fill my world with love. (6)
It can't be wrong, (4)
If it feels so right, (5)
Cause you, you light up my life.” (6)

It is difficult to express anything beyond the simplest sentiments in these short lines. Try it. Try to write rhyming theology in poems with 3-5 syllables per line. Try it with only 3-5 different lines. It don't work. Sentiments, yes; theology, no.

2. *Repetition*. Often the same line is used over and over and over again. I attended a church service in which “I'll exalt You, I'll exalt You, I'll exalt You O* Lord” was repeated at least 10 times. It was the ecclesiastical equivalent of Joe Cocker's “Cry Me a River,” and a thousand other pop favorites.
3. *Irregular Rhythms*. The form is designed for soloists and small groups and does not translate well to congregational singing. If you've ever been in a church serve where the attempt has been made to sing “El Shaddai,” you'll know what I mean. A soloist does fine, a congregation flounders. The “Worship Leader” may gyrate vocally like Amy Grant but the congregation gets left behind.
4. *Unintelligibility*. In pop music, the human voice often functions more like another instrument than a vehicle of discernable content. The rhythm plus the beat blurs the syllables into one great unintelligible mess. This is why lyrics, and especially the rhyme schemes, don't matter, and generally are so abysmal. As

teens it became a matter of status to be among the first to figure out the words and be able to sing along. And figure them out you had to because heaven knows it wasn't obvious. Do you remember Christopher Cross' "Sailing?" Or any of Super Tramp's songs? Impossible.

My examples are out-of-date. Okay, so they are. But it makes no difference. If I studied this week's Top 40 and used examples right off the charts, they would be out-of-date by next week! This is the nature of the genre. It is transient, immediate, here today and gone tomorrow. But if you'll scan your memories and the contemporary pop world you'll see it's still the same, only more so. I hear the latest stuff at the YMCA twice a week while I exercise. It's all the same. The other day a song came on repeating the following two lines over and over again:

This kiss, this kiss;
It's pivotal.

At least I think that those are the words. I thought the vocalists were saying, "This kiss, this kiss, it's criminal." The fellow with whom I exercise assured me that I was wrong. The word is *pivotal* not *criminal*. But that illustrates several points, doesn't it? The lines are short (4 beats), quick, trivial and incoherent. But who cares? It's catchy and about kissing. What else do you need to know? My point is not to criticize the form. The simplicity of pop music is its strength. The catchy tunes of the rock genre are catchy because they use short lines, lots of repetition, with fast (or syncopated), irregular rhythms. As love ballads they're fine. One could even load up these tunes, say Carol King's "It's Too Late Baby," or James Taylor's "You've Got a Friend," or Simon & Garfunkel's "Bridge Over Troubled Water," or Cosby, Still, Nash & Young's "Teach Your Children Well," with Christian content and you'd still have, more or less, all the same problems. As songs

for worship services the genre fails because either it doesn't carry sufficient content, can't be easily sung by congregations, or is difficult to understand. Easy listening, perhaps; congregational worship, no.

My largely theoretical and anecdotal criticisms will prove unconvincing to the defenders of contemporary worship music. Perhaps objective, concrete statistics will help. David Wells analyzed the theological content of the 406 songs of the two most popular contemporary songbooks, *Worship Songs of the Vineyard* and *Maranatha! Music Praise Chorus Book*. He compared them with the 662 hymns of *The Covenant Hymnal*. He summarized his findings saying that “the large majority of praise songs I analyzed, 58.9 percent, offer no doctrinal grounding or explanation for the praise; in the classical hymnody examined it was hard to find hymns that were *not* predicated upon and did not develop some aspect of doctrine” (*Losing Our Virtue*, 44, my emphasis). In addition, important Biblical themes are largely ignored. For example, the theme of the church is found in 1.2% of the songs; sin, penitence and longing for holiness in 3.6%; the holiness of God in 4.3%. Given what we've said, none of this is surprising. The medium is the message. Given the form of the rock genre, with its short sentences, repetition, loud beat, and overall unintelligibility, it could hardly be otherwise. But given our conviction that “faith comes by hearing the Word of God,” this emptying of Protestantism's worship songs of their Biblical content is a trend to be resisted. We would be wise to let the bandwagon pass by, and stick with the forms that have proven to be fruitful over the centuries.