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I

INTRODUCTORY CONSIDERATIONS

Worship itself is one of the most difficult things for Christians to discuss because their attachment to it is, understandably, emotional. As the primary means by which we meet with God in this life, public worship is very significant to us. It is very difficult for us to consider "giving up" public worship *as we have known and experienced it*, in exchange for some yet-unknown form. Music is also one of the most difficult things for Christians to discuss dispassionately, for similar reasons. Like worship, music is a reality that involves us emotionally and sometimes deeply, and therefore it is difficult for us to establish the philosophical distance necessary to evaluate it on aesthetic or musical grounds.

Worship music, then, is almost hopelessly impossible to discuss because it combines the passion we feel about worship with the passion we feel about music, and the whole enterprise becomes so fraught with emotion that philosophical distance is extremely difficult for most to acquire. Nonetheless, it is our

duty, once we raise the subject, to do the best we can to evaluate it with all the resources available to us.

Further, it is also our duty to employ charity in discussing "polemical" theology, or controversial theology.[1] That is, the duty to love our neighbors does not cease here, and it is contrary to the law of Christ to dismiss the arguments of another by attacking the person's motives. On both sides of this question, I have often witnessed a descent into an attack on the motives of others: "Contemporaneists (or traditionalists) are just selfish; they just want things their way." According to the Westminster Larger Catechism (no. 145), among the sins prohibited in the ninth commandment is "misconstructing intentions, words, and actions." Unless we are certain that we understand the intentions of another, we run a grave risk of misconstructing them, which is a violation of the law of charity. None of us wishes our own intentions to be misconstrued, and therefore we are not at liberty to misconstrue the intentions of others.

Further, and logically, all such arguments *ad hominem* are irrelevant. They are irrelevant, as all *ad hominem* arguments are, because if a malicious person proposes a truth, it is not for that reason less true. If Adolf Hitler, for instance, believed in gravity, this would not mean that gravity does not exist. Such arguments are also useless because not one of us can claim to have perfectly pure motives; therefore, if we were to exclude from the discussion those whose motives are mixed, no one could enter this (or any other) discussion.

1. Those interested will want to consult the timeless counsel in the essay by a former colleague at Gordon-Conwell Seminary, Dr. Roger Nicole, entitled "Polemic Theology: How to Deal with Those Who Differ from Us," available at http://www.founders.org/journal/fj33/article3.html.

Some readers will have difficulty following portions of the discussion because they know so little about pre-contemporary Christian hymnody. My students, for instance, occasionally refer to "traditional" hymns, and when I ask them to mention one, they often choose one that is, in fact, quite new, almost contemporary. In a "mixed" musical service, for instance, they once selected "How Great Thou Art" as the traditional hymn—supposing, I guess, that the *thou* suggested an Elizabethan origin. But the hymn is quite new, written in Sweden in 1885 (by Carl Gustav Boberg), and not translated into English until 1953 (by Stuart Hine). In English, it is only one year older than I am. We live in a remarkable moment indeed when a hymn that is merely a century old, and in our own language only a half-century old, is regarded as traditional. Most of the Christian tradition never heard or sang this hymn. Indeed, most even of the English Christian tradition never heard this hymn; yet it is regarded as traditional. The point is significant, however, because I will suggest that *traditional* and *contemporary*, in the present discussion, have nothing to do with dates, history, or chronology. The terms are employed idiomatically, to refer to Christian hymns that have different musical properties.

Further, and the reason I mention the matter here, we face the challenging circumstance that many voices in the discussion know nothing of Christian hymnody prior to the nineteenth or twentieth century (which is precisely the moment when some of us think it began a downward spiral). They often equate *traditional* with organ-accompanied hymns, for instance, even though organs were uncommon in the Protestant tradition (both because of expense and because of musical and

theological considerations) until the mid- to late nineteenth century. Thus, a young person reared in anything like a typical evangelical church knows only two things: nineteenth-century, sentimentalist revivalist hymns, and contemporary praise choruses; and they think the argument *against* the latter is an argument *for* the former. My students routinely assume that I am defending Bill Gaither or Fanny Crosby when I express reluctance about praise choruses. Yet those who know me well know that I carry no brief at all for Fanny Crosby or Bill Gaither, and those who were members of the church I pastored for nine years will testify that neither Bill nor Fanny made any appearances in my bulletins.

Why This Question Now?

For nineteen centuries, all previous generations of the church (Greek Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, or Revivalist), in every culture, employed prayers and hymns that preceded them,[2] and encouraged their best artists to consider adding to the canon of good liturgical forms. That is, none were traditional, in the sense of discouraging the writing of new forms; and none were contemporary, in the sense of excluding the use of older forms. So why now this insistence that many, most, or all forms of worship be contemporary? My father's generation did not demand that all hymns be written in a big-band idiom, and mine did not demand that they be written to sound like Eric Clapton or The Who. So why do

2. John Calvin's Strasbourg Liturgy, for instance, was entitled *A Form of Prayers according to the Pattern of the Ancient Church*. And while we have since discovered ancient prayers that Calvin's generation was not aware of, the title is a clear indicator of Calvin's *attempt*.

we now find something unique in the history of the church: a considerable number of people who appear to believe sincerely that it is not merely permissible, but in some senses necessary or preferable to jettison hymns that previous generations employed? Why?

I ask the question partly rhetorically, but also because I honestly think that one cannot address the matter well without first wrestling with this. The issue is not whether it is permissible for a given generation to continue to encourage gifted artists to create forms of worship that may assist the church in her worship; this has never, ever been denied, and is not now denied by anyone.[3] The question is: Why do so many people appear to find it impossible or unprofitable to use the earlier forms? Why this craving for what sounds contemporary? Why can't Johnny sing hymns? Many people appear hesitant to answer this question, and some even evade it by reasoning that, for whatever reason, people today find contemporary musical forms attractive and noncontemporary musical forms unattractive, and that therefore we *must* provide such forms to them. But why should the sensibilities of those who may not even know God, or the sensibilities of a commercially driven, banal culture, rule in the worship of God? To employ a self-conscious argument *ad absurdum*, suppose we reached a point thirty years from now where the prevailing popular musical idiom of our culture were gangsta rap: would we then be required to worship exclusively in this idiom? Would this musical idiom be adequate or appropriate to the task?

3. Even exclusive psalmists, for instance, do not object to the composing of new musical settings of metrical psalms.

Up to twenty years ago, the members of hymnal-revision committees ordinarily had a group of six to ten musical, liturgical, literary, and theological criteria that helped them determine which hymns ought to be retained in, deleted from, or added to a new hymnal.[4] In contrast, many circles today have effectively only *one* criterion for choosing worship music: it must sound contemporary.[5] So now a criterion never before employed by anyone anywhere has become effectively the *only* criterion employed. And this has happened (as far as I know) without any study committees by any denominations.

That is, in my judgment, the essence of the question boils down to a cultural value, as invisible as radon gas, that has been unwittingly embraced by the church: *contemporaneity*. Contempo-

4. The preface to the *Trinity Hymnal*, for instance, mentions the goal of compiling a hymnal that has three traits: "truly ecumenical . . . , theocentric in orientation, biblical in content" ([Philadelphia: Great Commission Publications, 1961], v). Its successor volume (1990) reaffirms this threefold goal, and also mentions the desire that the hymns selected be "faithfully based on God's Word, clearly teach the doctrines of grace, and facilitate the biblical worship of God among his people" (Preface, *Trinity Hymnal* [Suwanee, GA: Great Commission Publications, 1990], 8).

5. Charles Wesley was surely one of the most prolific, and arguably one of the more accomplished, hymn-writers in the English-speaking world. According to William J. Reynolds and Milburn Price, in their *A Survey of Christian Hymnody*, 4th ed. (Carol Stream, IL: Hope Publishing, 1999), 60, Charles Wesley wrote at least 6,500 hymns. Yet not all his hymns succeeded in making their way into the hymnal. *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1989) has 862 hymns, only 41 of which were written by Charles Wesley. So of the 6,500 hymns that Wesley wrote, only 41 are found in the hymnal of the denomination most influenced by him. Only one hymn out of every 158 he wrote made its way into the hymnal. In percentage points, that is barely over one-half of 1 percent. Are our contemporary hymn-writers superior to Wesley? Probably not. Is their success rate higher than one in every 158 they write? Of course it is, because unlike Wesley, they get a "free pass." As long as their music sounds contemporary, virtually every other criterion for measuring hymns is discarded.

raneity is more an aesthetic value than an ethical value; but it is a value, a sensibility, that considers the past passé. No other generation ever before found itself so utterly distant from the art forms (or other cultural expressions) of previous generations. Yet this generation finds itself there. And the so-called worship wars are, in my estimation, like the radon detectors in our basements: they alert us to something in our environment that we would otherwise not notice. Most of what follows are the considerations that I believe, at a minimum, need to be addressed before we can determine whether contemporaneity, like radon, is both invisible and harmful or whether, like oxygen, it is invisible and harmless.

The so-called worship wars in the churches reflect the so-called canon wars in the universities in the 1980s. In those wars also, there was a revolt against the so-called Western canon—a canon judged to be "irrelevant" (or worse) to us. The same language is employed in the worship wars. Ironically, nearly all conservative Christians took one side in that discussion, and find themselves on the other side in the present one. Why did we defend the West's *literary* canon (the product, largely, of nonbelievers), but repudiate its *hymnody* canon (the product, largely, of believers)? Why did we trace our literary and philosophical roots to the past, but not our musical roots to the past? Why did we warn our culture not to cut itself adrift from its intellectual and literary roots, but not warn our church not to cut itself adrift from its liturgical, aesthetic, and hymnic roots?

One of the most common misunderstandings that make this matter difficult is that the pro-contemporary people almost always consider their concerns (that worship be conducted in forms that are *contemporaneous*) to be analogous to Martin

Luther's concern that worship be performed in the *vernacular*. Luther wanted worship to be conducted in a known language (following Paul) because worship that is unintelligible cannot be edifying. As Paul said:

> For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful. What am I to do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will pray with my mind also; I will sing praise with my spirit, but I will sing with my mind also. (I Cor. 14:14–15)

Luther therefore translated prayers and hymns from Latin into German. But there is no evidence at all that Luther ever said that worship had to be conducted in contemporary-sounding musical idioms. To the contrary, what evidence exists suggests that Luther believed in what we now call *sacred music*—music that is deliberately and self-consciously different from other forms of music. He and others of his generation often wrote new musical tunes, for the distinctive purpose of accompanying hymns. And at any rate, *vernacular* and *contemporary* mean different things, and therefore an argument for one is no argument for the other. Luther did not argue that a prayer or hymn had to sound *contemporary*; he argued that it had to be *intelligible*, and therefore conducted in the vernacular language of a given culture. It is simply historically false to recruit Luther into this discussion. Yet the fact that he manifestly did consult earlier liturgies and translate portions of them into German is evidence that he exhibited no concern for that which was contemporary, and a very self-conscious concern to

conserve and preserve forms from the past. His concern was for intelligibility, not contemporaneity.[6]

What I am looking for is an argument that actually addresses the crux of the decision that many churches have now made: that the criterion of contemporaneity trumps all the criteria of all the hymnal-revision committees that ever labored. I put it that way because, with very few exceptions, the contemporary praise choruses that are actually selected would not ordinarily satisfy the criteria that previous hymns had to meet to get into the hymnals. These included, but were not limited to, items such as the following:

- theologically orthodox lyrics
- theologically significant lyrics
- literarily apt and thoughtful lyrics
- lyrics and music appropriate to a meeting between God and his visible people
- well-written music with regard to melody, harmony, rhythm, and form
- musical setting appropriate to the lyrical content

By these criteria, only the most artistically gifted (or arrogant) of generations could possibly imagine that it could, in a single generation, be expected to produce a body of hymns that surpassed all previous hymns and rendered them obsolete.

6. Paul Jones has conclusively demonstrated that Luther never employed "bar songs" as melodies for his hymns, though he did employ what is called "bar form," an A-A-B structure, as a musical device, which may have contributed to the present misunderstanding of the matter. Cf. the chapter "Luther and Bar Song: The Truth, Please!" in his *Singing and Making Music: Issues in Church Music Today* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2006), 171–78.

So the question remains: Why does *contemporaneity* deserve to be included as a criterion at all, much less as a criterion more important than all of these? Why are there not signs outside churches that read: "Theologically Significant Worship," or "Worship Appropriate to a Meeting between God and His Assembled People," or "Worship That Is Literarily Apt and Thoughtful"? Why do the signs say "Contemporary Worship," as though that criterion were itself worthy of promoting?

The True Comparison Is to the Psalms

Proponents of contemporary worship music ordinarily compare it to what they call *traditional hymns*, and argue that some of the best of the one are nearly as good (or as good) as the worst of the other. Fair enough, but is that our standard? Study the biblical psalms and ask whether, on lyrical grounds, the various forms of contemporary worship music demonstrate anything like the theological or literary integrity or profundity of the individual psalms. The best hymn-writers have made this their goal and standard; indeed, Isaac Watts took the very substance of the 150 canonical psalms and wrote Christological, metrical paraphrases of them.

Lawful Is Not Enough

Paul, addressing the matter of food offered to idols in 1 Corinthians 10:23, said, "All things are lawful," but not all things are helpful. "All things are lawful," but not all things build up. There is some debate whether his "All things are lawful" is merely hyperbole, indicating that many *more* things are lawful in the Christian covenant than in the Mosaic, or whether it is

Paul's rhetorical concession to the libertines at Corinth, who wrongly taught that all things *are* lawful. In either case, Paul's point is that even when we have determined that a thing is lawful, we have not finished our evaluation. Other considerations must also be brought to bear, such as whether it is helpful and whether it edifies.

This deeper look is important to our circumstances because some people wish to terminate the discussion at the level of what is lawful. If older musical forms are lawful, and if newer musical forms are lawful, then the whole question is *merely* a matter of taste, and nothing else can be said. This un-Pauline way of viewing the matter, I might add, is particularly tempting to those who favor the use of contemporary-music forms, since virtually no one has ever suggested that older forms, such as the *Gloria Patri* and *Doxology*, are unlawful. But followers of Paul (and therefore followers of Holy Scripture) cannot stop with the question of what is merely lawful. Whenever we choose one thing over another, there must be some reason, some rationale, for determining, at least in that particular circumstance, that the one thing is in some ways, for some purposes, superior to the other. Each of these various ways of making the decision is an issue of judgment that takes place *beyond* the mere consideration of what is lawful.[7]

7. John M. Frame's insightful book on this topic may suffer a bit from this tendency. It seems throughout that much of Professor Frame's argument is for the lawfulness of contemporary worship music, or at least an argument that contemporary worship music is not unlawful. His point is entirely well taken, but the point is not enough. The question is whether as a genre contemporary worship music is superior to hymnody as a genre—or, as I will put it, whether it is sufficiently superior to replace all the criteria by which previous hymnody was evaluated. Cf. his *Contemporary Worship Music: A Biblical Defense* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1997).

To illustrate, suppose we asked whether it is lawful to accompany the singing of God's praise with a kazoo. Well, the Holy Scriptures do not contain a list of approved and disapproved musical instruments, so we really could not say, on explicit scriptural grounds, that kazoo accompaniment is unlawful. Would that settle the question? Would any churches adopt the kazoo as their accompanying instrument on the mere ground that it is not unlawful to do so? I think we know what the answer is. None would select the kazoo. But in not selecting the kazoo, they are suggesting, rightly in my judgment, that other considerations come into play: aesthetic questions, media-ecological questions, musical questions, form and content questions, cultural-value questions, and so on.

Similarly, my friends in the free-church movement[8] commonly and rightly remind me that they are "free" to employ spontaneous prayers—prayers that have not been composed or approved earlier by some ecclesiastical group. I agree with them; it is lawful to offer extempore prayer in worship. But the fact that it is lawful to do so does not mean that any *given* extempore prayer is as good as or better than *another* extempore prayer, and it does not mean that a given extempore prayer is better than some common prayer, previously composed. That it is lawful to consider choosing x does not mean that x is a better choice than y.

8. I realize that most refer to the phenomenon as the *free-church tradition*, but I refer to it as the *free-church movement*, on two grounds. First, it self-consciously distinguishes itself from any ecclesiastical tradition (and therefore, out of fairness, we should not misconstrue it as a tradition). Second, it is not a tradition in any ordinary sense, identifiable by some creedal or liturgical heritage (and therefore should not be dignified by the term *tradition*).

What follows, then, is a collection of those extralegal considerations that I judge to have bearing on the question. In each case, I state the matter briefly. Those who wish to think well about the matter will need to unpack each of those considerations substantially.

Questions for Reflection

1. Why is it difficult to discuss either worship or music dispassionately?
2. What was the title of Calvin's Strasbourg Liturgy, and why is the title significant?
3. What is *contemporaneity*?
4. The so-called worship wars in the church reflect what other earlier wars in our culture? What was the basis of those conflicts, and what is a key difference between the two?
5. Is there any historical evidence that Martin Luther desired hymns to be contemporary-sounding? Does evidence exist to the contrary? How is this significant?