

Something Old and Something New: Five Theses on the Worship Wars*

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Worship—more accurately, a debased approach to worship—is killing the church. I mean the conservative, supposedly Bible-believing, allegedly Evangelical church. She has lost her relevance because she has lost her prophetic voice. She has lost her prophetic voice because she has lost all consensus on what her core message is. She has lost that consensus because she has lost her spiritual unity. And all these losses go back to worship.

The church's unity, even across denominational lines, is grounded in the fact that she worships the same God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, for the same reason, his great glory, fueled by the same stimulus, the redemption she has experienced in Christ. Cut any link of that chain and you destroy the whole. They are all always under attack because Satan understands this better than we do. We have not given sufficient attention to our vulnerabilities at the point of worship.

In the sentence which began the previous paragraph, worship was at the heart of Christian unity. Yet in the lives of our congregations today, nothing is more divisive. Where it has not actually split churches, it has divided them into separate services, “traditional” and “contemporary.” But this is only a symptom. Congregations that are comfortably contemporary are often divided from the whole history of the rest of the church by a radical shift in their concept of what worship is.

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These “worship wars” that rage in the church today are nothing new. They go back at least as far as ancient Israel when David was despised by Michal for dancing before the Ark. In the patristic period St. Ambrose was considered an innovator (horrors!) for writing hymns and teaching his people to sing them. The controversy over melismatic textual elaboration in the Middle Ages was (according to legend) settled by Palestrina’s Pope Marcellus Mass. The Reformation started debates over exclusive psalmody and the use of instruments that continue among Protestants to this day, though now overshadowed by heated arguments over contemporary praise and worship music versus traditional hymnody. No pastor, minister of music, or institution which trains people for ministry can afford to ignore these controversies today.

I am under no illusion that I can settle the current disputes. But I am concerned that they are often conducted more on the basis of personal taste than principled teaching. I remember being rebuked as a teenager in the late 1960s for performing a worship song I had written in the style of the then-popular folk group Peter, Paul, and Mary. The song was “inappropriate” music for use in church. When I asked what was appropriate and why, I got a very confusing answer devoid of biblical principles. And then it hit me: The music my deacon approved of was the kind that was popular when *he* had been the age I was at that very time! I hope I do not need to make the point that this is not good enough.

A positive step toward peace would be to recognize the biblical principles that should govern our practice. Then there are some lessons from history that can help us apply them constructively.

The Lessons of Scripture

We had best begin with a biblical understanding of what worship is. The English word *worship* comes from the Anglo-Saxon *weorthscipe*, literally “worth-ship.” It means attributing worth to God: in a planned and structured way, articulating what it is about his attributes and his mighty acts that makes him worthy of all our worship, adoration, obedience, and praise. We do this to remind ourselves of these things about God, but even more simply because they are true. As such, God’s attributes and acts deserve to be expressed and we need to express them, first for their own sake and then to reinforce our belief in them, our trust in them, and our commitment to them. Note carefully:

Worship is not about us. It is about God. And the benefits that we derive from it are there for us precisely because it is not about us but about him. We receive them precisely to the extent that we keep the focus not on ourselves but on him.

This older concept of worship was biblical. King David makes a very interesting statement in 1 Chronicles 29:1. The temple whose construction he is preparing “is not for man but for the Lord.” Most Evangelical worship programming today seems to assume the opposite. Worship is an “experience” that we try to engineer for the congregation with music and even lighting. The problem is not with contemporary music. Much of it is bad, and some of it is good, and this has been true of the music of every generation. The problem is the shift in philosophy and therefore in worship culture that comes along with the shift to the contemporary. It would be a problem in a congregation that did the same thing with the old hymns. But if we want the *people* to be edified, taught, uplifted, encouraged, exhorted—and we do—maybe the best thing we can do is to get the focus of worship off of them and their experiences and back onto the only thing that can do those things for them: back onto the Lord, his gospel, and his glory.

To get more specific about the music that fits this concept of worship, I suggest that at least the following passages of Scripture are relevant. We are commanded to “Sing to Him a *new* song; play *skillfully* with a shout of joy” (Psa 33:3, NASB, emphasis added). One effect of being filled with the Holy Spirit is “speaking unto one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord” (Eph 5:19–20). And we are also told to use discernment and “approve the things that are excellent” (Phil 1:9–10).

As one thinks about these passages, it is hard to see that the Lord is on either “side” in the current squabbles. Neither a slavish adherence to the old music nor a total abandonment of it for the new has any warrant in Scripture. God apparently wants us to preserve the best of the traditional music that connects us to our forefathers in the faith, for the New Testament church was still using the psalms, the hymnbook of the Old Testament, in their worship. On the other hand, they were also led by the Holy Spirit to sing new hymns (songs of praise addressed to God in the second person) and spiritual songs (first-

person statements of personal testimony or spiritual truth)¹ of their own composition, some of which scholars believe are actually quoted in the New Testament (for example, 1 Tim 3:16). In doing so they were following the Old Testament exhortation of Psalm 33:3. If they followed all of it, they sang and played those songs, old and new, with all the skill as well as all the exuberance they could muster. (Presumably, this meant that their lyre players knew more than three chords.) And if they followed the New Testament exhortation of Philippians 1:9–10, they would have been concerned to discern in their new music what was truly excellent and cleave to it, adding it gradually to the rich stock of resources for worship that they were building so they could pass it on to us.

If this reading is correct, it gives us a good general guideline for the church at all times: **Preserve and honor the best of the old; encourage and support the best of the new.** If that is right, then the Christian college and seminary should be providing the kind of training that would help future church leaders to be in a position to do just that. The question then becomes, how is this training best to be achieved?

The Lessons of History

Churches today are dividing over what they think is musical style, but the division is really over the new concept of what worship is and how it works. I can think of two past moments in church history that are only a superficial parallel to our current situation, a resemblance which ironically points out the difference. Anselm and Luther were both controversial in their generations for giving music back to the laity rather than having it all done by professional choirs of clergy. Luther even did it by putting Christian lyrics to German drinking songs (for example, “A Mighty Fortress”). But when the shift came in our day, the laity were already participating. In fact, I would argue, they were participating more than they are now.

¹ The literature warns against drawing hard and fast lines between the three categories of music, which are often used in ways that overlap. But in so far as there is a distinction, the one offered here seems helpful. Cf. “Hymn,” in Willi Apel, ed., *The Harvard Dictionary of Music* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958), 345; F. L. Cross, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 681; J. D. Douglas, ed., *The New Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 549.

Four factors contribute to this horrible defection from participation in worship music by the laity.² 1. The new stuff is recycling so quickly that nobody but the current youth group knows it. 2. It is not composed using common practice—the few chords the band knows do not follow each other in a musically logical fashion.³ 3. The band is playing so loudly that you cannot even tell whether the congregation is singing or not, so why should they bother singing? 4. The worship bands do not understand the difference between giving a performance and leading the congregation in singing. A whole different musical skill set is required, which they do not have and have never even imagined.

Understanding the history of worship music helps us realize by contrast how unhealthy our practice is today. History is also a key to how to get back to a healthier place. Part of the answer to that question was inscribed over the door to the old Ayres Memorial Library at Taylor University, a door I passed through almost daily when I was an undergraduate: “What is past is prologue; study the past.” We study the past precisely because we live in the present and look toward the future. We study the past not because the present is unworthy of our attention but because only by studying the past can we learn the criteria by which to discern that which is worthy in the present. No one has explained this principle better than Dr. Johnson:

To works, however, of which the excellence is not absolute and definite, but gradual and comparative; to works not raised on principles demonstrative and scientifick, but appealing wholly to observation and experience, no other test can be applied than length of duration and continuance of esteem. What mankind have long possessed they have often examined and compared, and if they persist to value the possession, it is because frequent comparisons have confirmed opinion in its favour. As among the works of nature no man can properly call a river deep or a mountain high without the knowledge of many mountains and many rivers; so in

² If you don't think it is happening, sit with the youngsters and notice how many of them are just standing or swaying around. It's not just the older folks who are not participating because they feel the music has left them behind.

³ With the older music I could sing a song I had never heard before because I knew chord structures and could almost infallibly guess where it was going, while now it just seems to be one random note after another.

the productions of genius, nothing can be styled excellent till it has been compared with other works of the same kind.⁴

If we know what has had staying power, we can ask, why did it have it? That might tell us not only what to preserve, but what to value in the new.

The Bible and history then both tell us that we need to make some changes. What might they look like?

Criteria of Excellence

How do we apply these principles to the worship wars, as church leaders, as ministers of music, or as those who train them? We do it partly by recognizing that ninety percent of today's music is very poor. Well, that shouldn't be too surprising; ninety percent of the music of the past was, too. The difference is that with the past, the weeding-out process described by Dr. Johnson has already taken place. Therefore, we cannot find, encourage, and preserve the best contemporary music without knowing those marks of excellence that made the best of the past stand out and survive so long. What are those marks? There are at least five, and they are my five theses on the worship wars: **1. Biblical Truth; 2. Theological Profundity; 3. Poetic Richness; 4. Musical Beauty; and 5. the Fitting of Music to Text in ways that enhance rather than obscure or distort meaning.**

These five qualities are the marks of excellence in any age. These marks are not arbitrary but are derived from biblical teaching about the nature of worship (it is to be in spirit and in truth, and it involves loving God with our whole person, including the mind) and from an understanding of the nature of music and how it can support those biblical goals.

Thesis 1: The Texts Sung Must Reflect Biblical Truth.

The faithful church has always insisted on biblical truth, and Protestant hymnody started out with a special emphasis on it. The earliest congregational songs for the churches of the Reformation were paraphrased Scripture texts, especially the Psalms. The metrical Psalms of Thomas Sternhold and John Hopkins (1549) was one of the most popular books in Elizabethan England.

⁴ Samuel Johnson, *Preface to the Plays of William Shakespeare* (1765); quoted in Geoffrey Tillotson, Paul Fussell, Jr., and Marshall Waingrow, eds., *Eighteenth Century English Literature* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1969), 1066.

What those psalms lacked in literary elegance they made up for in biblical faithfulness:

The man is blest that hath not gone
By wicked rede astray,
Ne sat in chair of pestilence,
Nor walked in sinner's way;

But in the law of God the Lord
Doth set his whole delight,
And in that law doth exercise
Himself both day and night.⁵

By the eighteenth century, writers such as Isaac Watts, William Cowper, John Newton, and the Wesley brothers felt at liberty to compose freely words of praise that were not strict paraphrases of Scripture. But they still felt strongly the obligation of being sure that their words were scriptural if not Scripture. Often, in those early days, hymns were printed with the biblical references that justified their content appended at the end of every verse or even every line. One of the healthy trends in contemporary Christian music is the revival of the ancient practice of singing Scripture. Unfortunately, this revival is sometimes limited to the mantric repetition of short and simple phrases rather than enabling the congregation to follow the train of biblical thought through fuller passages, as was more typically the earlier practice.

Bottom line: the content of worship music must be biblical, that is, faithful to Scripture when it is not paraphrased Scripture itself.

Thesis 2: Texts Should Reflect Theological Profundity.

Theological profundity is also a mark of the best of past hymnody. Even simple lay persons in the past did not turn their minds off in worship but praised a majestically transcendent Trinitarian God with a graciously incarnated Son who had saved them by grace through faith in Christ. The best texts not only lifted them above themselves in worship but also helped them

⁵ John Hopkins, ed., *All Such Psalms of David as Thomas Sternhold Did in his Lifetime Draw into English Meter* (1549); quoted in Hyder E. Rollins & Herschel Baker, eds., *The Renaissance in England: Non-Dramatic Prose and Verse of the Sixteenth Century* (Lexington, Mass.: D. C. Heath & Co., 1954), 161.

interpret their own religious experiences in biblically sound ways. So we sing to One who is “Immortal, invisible, God only wise, / In light inaccessible hid from our eyes.” We give our “Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of Creation.” Because he is “A Mighty Fortress” whose Son “must win the battle,” we do not tremble for the prince of darkness and we can “Let goods and kindred go, / This mortal life also.” Has anyone ever done a better job of applying the specifics of the atonement to the process and experience of conversion than Charles Wesley in “And Can it Be that I should Gain?” Recent choruses sometimes limit themselves by being so simplistic and repetitive that theological reflection never has a chance to get started. But how then can we love and worship God with our minds, as Christ particularly commanded us?

Thesis 3: Texts Should Reflect Poetic Richness.

Poetic richness is a virtue that must be pursued carefully, for a text that is too allusive and requires too much literary expertise to unpack will be self-defeating for average lay persons and thus hinder worship rather than enabling and enriching it. Nevertheless, appropriate kinds of literary excellence have a role to play. Examples include gems like the use of the questions in “What Child is this?” to capture the wonder of the incarnation, the appropriate military metaphors in that great meditation on spiritual warfare, “A Mighty Fortress,” or the choice of a simple but evocative word like “wretch” in “Amazing Grace.” Little touches that make a text more intellectually suggestive or emotionally powerful without making it unnecessarily difficult will tend to show up in those hymns which have survived the test of time, while texts that are just rhymed prose with tunes attached are, for that very reason, the more forgettable. How many “praise and worship” texts would be worth reading simply as devotional poetry without the music? Many classic hymns rise to that level.

Thesis 4: Settings Should Manifest Musical Beauty.

Musical beauty might be thought by many to be in the eye of the beholder (or the ear of the hearer). To a certain extent this is true: *De gustibus non est disputandum* (“There is no accounting for taste”). Nevertheless, those who have studied music also know that there are certain contours, structures, and cadences that make for a singable melody and certain harmonic felicities that can make that melody more memorable or even haunting. Think of the way the tune “Slane” (“Be Thou my Vision”) rises and falls like an ocean wave or a

sine curve, of the gently rolling ABA structure of “Ebenezer” (“Oh the Deep, Deep Love of Jesus”), or the way each phrase of “Gift of Love” (“Though I may Speak with Bravest Fire”) varies the same pattern. Think of the way the men’s voices in “Diadem” (the “complicated” version of “All Hail the Power of Jesus’ Name”) punctuate the flowing women’s line in the chorus, or the way the inner parts move against the still melody in the third measure of “Nicaea” (“Holy, Holy, Holy”).

Though some very beautiful pieces have come out of contemporary Christian music (“El Shaddai,” much of John Michael Talbot’s, Michael Card’s, Andrew Peterson’s, Stuart Townsend’s, and the Gettys’ work), too many of the more recent praise choruses seem to ignore all the rules of good composition deliberately, giving us not well-shaped melodies but just one note after another. These “tunes” are not very singable, but it doesn’t really matter because the “worship team” is playing them so loudly that no one can tell whether the congregation is singing along or not.⁶

Thesis 5: There Should Be a Good Fit between Text and Setting.

A good fit between the words and their musical setting is essential to great worship music, even when text and tune are both excellent in themselves. The most egregious violation of this principle may be A. B. Simpson’s “A Missionary Cry”: “A hundred thousand souls a day / Are marching one by one away. / They’re passing to their doom; / They’re passing to their doom.” If ever there was content demanding a minor key and a mournful, dirge-like tempo, this is it. But if you’ve sung this song you know it is set to a completely inappropriate snappy march tune, as if we were happy about the damnation of the unsaved! It might be a good tune for a different text; it might be a good text to a different tune. Examples of a good fit between message and music are the quietly meditative, plainsong-derived melodies of “Picardy” in the contemplative “Let all Mortal Flesh Keep Silence” and “*Divinum Mysterium*” in “Of the Father’s Love Begotten” or the sprightly and joyous rhythms of “Ariel” in “Oh Could I Speak the Matchless Worth.” A contemporary song with a good fit

⁶ I am not against rock-influenced styles or amplified volume as such; I have myself played electric bass in and written songs for a praise and worship band. But we knew that there is a difference between giving a performance and leading a congregation in worship.) And where did so many guitarists get the notion that it is somehow cute to avoid ending a song on the tonic chord (i.e., “home base”)?

would be Don Francisco's ballad "I've Got to Tell Somebody." Michael Card is especially good not only at writing worthwhile texts but also at giving them appropriate settings.

Conclusion

This has to do with so much more than styles of music! Do you remember how we began? The church "has lost her relevance because she has lost her prophetic voice. She has lost her prophetic voice because she has lost all consensus on what her core message is. She has lost that consensus because she has lost her spiritual unity. And all these losses go back to worship." The very life of the church is at stake. That is why the criteria I have presented matter—not just to give us better music but to give us music that can serve the biblical ideal of what worship is: the ascription of worth to God for the sake of God and his truth, with any emotional experience or edification on the part of the congregation as a side effect.

Biblical truth, theological profundity, poetic richness, musical beauty, and appropriate fitness are not matters of style or personal preference. They are the marks of excellence for worship music in any age, but only the comparison of many ages—in other words, a knowledge of musical history—can tell us this. It is therefore shortsighted for a Christian college music department to offer a degree in contemporary worship music which does not require exposure to and immersion in the classic hymnody of the past. I do not say this out of hostility to contemporary music, but out of concern for its health and the health of the church. Only those musicians who are classically and historically (as well as biblically and theologically) trained are in a position to guide the church in a judicious appropriation of the best of the new music as a supplement to the church's rich musical heritage.

The marks of excellence are not absent from all contemporary music. The problem is not that new music is being introduced; the problem is not that it is being written in contemporary styles; the problem is not that much of it is bad. That was all true in every period. The problem is that, for the first time in church history, there is, in many places, a wholesale replacement of the old by the new with a corresponding loss of the old. The hymnbook is thrown out and the new music, instead of being added to our heritage, simply replaces it. This is not growth; it is mere change, which is not the same thing. It means a loss of

historical continuity, a loss of the riches of our inheritance, and therefore, ironically, a diminution of our ability to discern and pursue excellence in the new music, with a diminution of our ability to give true worship to God. The last thing a Christian college music program should be doing is aiding and abetting that loss. We need to keep the old around not only for its own sake (and ours), but also for the sake of the new.

Every psalm, hymn, and spiritual song in the hymnbook was new (and contemporary) when it was written. The names of some of their authors crop up more often than others do because their work manifested truth, profundity, richness, beauty, and fitness in the service of biblical worship more powerfully and reliably than anyone else's. The church should still cling to their work, both for its intrinsic merit in itself and because only an intimate and informed familiarity with that merit can help us discern and propagate the best "new songs" that are being written today.

Whom do I mean? Well, these four would be a good place so start:

Quartet

Newton, Cowper, Wesley, Watts
 Worked within their garden plots;
 Domesticated by their toil
 Exotic plants in English soil:
 Pungent spices, soothing balms,
 Cadences of David's psalms;
 Parsley, sage, rosemary, thyme,
 Words of God in English rhyme.
 Weeded, hoed, the Garden bears
 But few of thistles, thorns, or tares—
 Rather, carrots, beans, and maize,
 Solid sustenance of praise;
 Waving grain and curling vine,
 Wheat for bread and grapes for wine;
 'Most every plant beneath the sun—
 But leeks and garlic grew they none.

Much sand now through the glass has spilled;

They lie beneath the ground they tilled.
But still the seeds they sowed abide
And thrive, transplanted far and wide:
Where e'er a congregation sings,
Anew from earth their produce springs.
Such honor still their Lord allots
To Newton, Cowper, Wesley, Watts.⁷

First, we have to get back to a biblical philosophy of worship. Only then can we apply our five criteria to make the best choices for what to sing. We can then choose something old and something new. We need both, but the old has a privileged position because it has already been sifted by time. Thus the wise cling to the best of the old, not to exclude the new, but partly for the sake of nurturing the new. Like the early church, we still need both old and new in order to be healthy—and to please our Lord.

What if we made God's word, his gospel, and his glory central to our worship and let the emotional chips fall where they may? What if we trusted those things to be more powerful than our gimmicks? What if we did it, not as a superior utilitarianism, but because we really cared about those things? What would the church look like then? I'm afraid we may never know.

But don't let my fear stop you!

⁷ Donald T. Williams, *Stars through the Clouds: The Collected Poetry of Donald T. Williams*, 2nd ed. (Lynchburg: Lantern Hollow Press, 2020), 331.