THE MINISTRY OF THE WORD THROUGH MUSIC

Leonard W. Pine

See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is. And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord, giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another in the fear of God. —Ephesians 5:15-21

Why do you sing in worship? Apart from the numerous commands and examples found in Scripture (as if they weren’t enough), music as a means of worship is the harmonious expression of the redeemed, declaring God’s worth to one another and to God himself. Though it can be observed by the lost to good effect (Psalm 40:2, 3), music in worship is not an evangelism tool (Psalm 137:3, 4). Paul tells us in both Ephesians 5 and Colossians 3 that our worship music is to take the following forms: psalms (the Psalter, usually with instruments); hymns (songs of praise, also with instruments); and spiritual songs (other songs that speak to the variety of the Christian experience in the Spirit). These forms, laden with the content of the Word, constitute the primary language of the heart in corporate and individual response to God. God has ordained music in worship so that He may be exalted by His creatures, and that we may edify one another (Eph. 5:19, 21).

Musical Worship Exalts the Lord

In his article, “The Triumph of the Praise Songs” (CT, July 12, 1999, p. 34), Michael S. Hamilton observes, “One cannot sing praise songs without noticing how first person pronouns tend to eclipse every other subject.” This from a man who approves of them! One has only to listen for a few minutes to most Christian radio stations to confirm that this observation is true. Today’s Christian music focuses primarily upon man, his feelings, his problems, and his efforts to come to God.

But is the inward look the focus of the Scriptures? Just having a large number of first person pronouns is not the problem, as even a cursory review of the psalms will show that the psalmists certainly looked within. But introspection that goes no further is viewed as a problem (e.g., Psalm 77). The psalmists use their own experiences as opportunities to rest in the Lord’s sovereignty, power, wisdom, holiness, protection, and so on. True worship occurs when the focus is turned outward to gaze in wonder and faith on the face of God. Music is ordained of God to enable the believer to do just that. First Chronicles 16:9 demands, “Sing to Him, sing psalms to Him; talk of all His wondrous works!” Psalm 100:2 is even more concerned with entering into the presence of God: “Serve the LORD with gladness; come before His presence with singing.”
To exalt the Lord in your music, first of all, you must worship with a text orientation. Paul urges in Colossians 3:16, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom….” Christocentric content is what God desires from us, as we acknowledge the Savior He has provided for His people. Worship is not, as so many today believe and practice, something that springs out of feelings and emotions. Worship must be grounded first and foremost in the Word. I’m not simply speaking about the language we use, or certain forms of music. I’m speaking about having your emotions and feelings (a natural part of responding in love to the One who loved and chose you before the foundations of the world) under the discipline of the Word in both content and form of expression. Simply put, just because you like it doesn’t mean it’s right. In fact, just because millions of people like it doesn’t mean it’s right. Whether or not your musical worship is consistent with the content and forms of the Word is the criteria. And, you’ll notice, the Word is not anthropocentric!

Another aspect of this text orientation that must be mentioned is the necessity of substance. Endless repetition of simple (even biblical) phrases may produce euphoria in the singers (witness the use of mind-numbing choruses to soften up the typical charismatic church so they can enter into trance-like states and produce such phenomena as laughter, tears, howling, “tongues,” and so on), but is certainly out of keeping with the examples of musical expression found in the Scriptures. Leonard Payton writes, “When ‘simple’ is a virtue placed in rank above ‘biblical,’ it is not long before we are writing a different gospel on the tablets of our hearts” [“Reforming Worship Music,” Modern Reformation Magazine, Mar/Apr 1994, from website http://www.remembrancer.com/ace/ LPrefworship.html]. We’ll talk more about the understanding aspect of singing shortly, but for now, the Word is to dwell richly (“abundantly,” “in great measure”) in the believer. The term “fullness” is the biblical description of life in Christ, not an arbitrary minimum daily requirement! John 1:16 reads, “And of His fullness we have all received, and grace for grace.” Bumper sticker Christianity, mindless repetition of one liners, and “in a nutshell” theology just don’t add up to fullness no matter how many become ecstatic when the emotions overrule the mind orientation of the Word.

Second, you exalt the Lord in worship when you exercise discernment in preparation and performance. Paul commands in Ephesians 5:5, “Walk circumspectly.” This general command governs every aspect of our lives, but is especially important in those areas where emotions can overrule principle. Music is a prime example, and worship music in particular. The believer ought to respond in joy, gratitude, and faith to what God has done. We are not, however, at liberty to carelessly or arrogantly think that God is pleased with whatever we do, however we do it, just because it’s us that’s done it. In a way, we tend to think that God is like the human parent who “ooh’s” and “aah’s” over his child’s picture of the giraffe (that looks like a wilted purple sunflower with black spot) and hangs it proudly on the refrigerator. We think that God should be proud of our effort, now matter how sloppy it is! When my daughter hastily and carelessly produces a scribbled representation of an indiscernible something, I don’t hang it up on the wall. She knows that for me to keep it, she must do her best to conform her drawing to the reality. She may not do it perfectly, but if she does her work with her most careful skill (even if it still looks like a wilted sunflower), then she gets approval, and her drawing is accepted gratefully. So God holds us accountable for the light we’ve been given, and what we do with it.
God also looks upon the heart attitude of the worshipper as a major issue. Vance Havner’s observation about preachers applies in the area of worship as well: “A preacher can be as straight as a gun barrel theologically — and just as empty.” Quite apart from any discussion of style, when you come to worship with a careless attitude, an self-glorifying attitude, or a “y’all-bear-with-me-’cause-I-ain’t-practiced-much” attitude, you are not walking carefully before God, and you can’t expect that He will be pleased with your offering. I am inclined to believe that the immature Christian who sincerely delights in the Lord through heartily and thoughtfully singing a theologically shallow chorus is more pleasing to God than the “mature” believer who goes through the motions of singing praise in a theologically dense hymn of antiquity. Hopefully, of course, the immature believer will grow in understanding and ability to express the feelings of his heart in a more biblically substantive and appropriate way. Growth is the goal, not stagnation, whatever one’s maturity level!

Third, you exalt the Lord when you worship with gratitude (Ephesians 5:20a). Paul commands in 1 Thessalonians 5:18, “In everything give thanks, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” This does not mean that every song you sing should be light hearted or upbeat. After all, “many are the afflictions of the righteous” (Psalm 34:19)! Spirit-filled music should accurately reflect life in the Spirit. Every psalm, hymn, and spiritual song ought to be an expression of gratitude and faith in your Redeemer regardless of the circumstances in which you sing. The book of Lamentations is a good example of this principle. In the middle of the whole dark lament (3:22-24) comes one of the most glorious statements of faith in the Scriptures: “Through the LORD’s mercies we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness. ‘The LORD is my portion,’ says my soul, ‘therefore I hope in Him!’ “ We must fight the tendency of our fallen hearts to always cry out “I need,” focusing rather on “God provides.” Psalm 34:19 concludes the thought about many afflictions with, “…but the LORD delivers him out of them all.”

Fourth, you exalt the Lord when you worship in Jesus’ name (Ephesians 5:20b). This is simply because doing so humbly acknowledges that you cannot come into the presence of God on your own merits, just as in prayer. Consider Acts 16:16-34. Paul and Silas find themselves beaten and bound “in the inner prison.” Late into the night, the two evangelists sing hymns and pray while all the prison listens (v. 25). Their testimony for Jesus’ sake was powerful indeed, for when the Lord broke the bonds of the prisoners, and the jailer set about taking his own life, Paul’s words out of the darkness produced a curious response in the man. Notice that he did not seek confirmation of the prisoners’ whereabouts. Nor did he begin an investigation of how the chains had all been loosed and the doors opened. He immediately humbled himself before God’s servants and asked, “What must I do to be saved?”! Their answer was consistent with what they had been singing: Christ is the Cornerstone of the faith. Notice also that it wasn’t the singing that converted the man and his household. It didn’t even get his attention, really: it took an earthquake to wake him up! Rather, it was the preaching of the Word (v. 32). Undoubtedly, though, the jailer had heard at least a few of the hymns sung by Paul and Silas before he retired to his bed. Observe that he knew right where to come when he needed the his soul’s need for Christ met. What does the music you like to worship with (both text and style) say about Christ? What does it say about you, His servant? Are you using His name in vain?
John Angell James (1785-1859) had the following to say about preaching, and I think it applies equally well to the musical expression of our hearts as we lift up our voices in worship:

Preach Christ, my brethren, and for Christ’s sake. Exalt Christ, not yourselves. Exhibit Christ, in the divinity of His person, the efficacy of His atonement, the prevalence of His intercession, the fullness of His grace, the freeness of His invitations, the perfection of His example; in all His mediatorial offices and Scripture characters; and as the Alpha and Omega of your whole ministry. Christ has Himself told you the secret of popularity and success where He said, “And I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men unto me.” With this divine lode-stone magnetize your sermons: here lies the attraction.

Musical Worship Edifies Other Believers

Allen Bloom writes:

Though students do not have books, they most emphatically do have music. Nothing is more singular about this generation than its addiction to music. Today, a very large proportion of young people between the ages of ten and twenty live for music. It is their passion; nothing else excites them as it does; they cannot take seriously anything alien to music. When they are in school and with their families, they are longing to plug themselves back into their music.” [The Closing of the American Mind, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), p. 68. Quoted by Leonard Payton, “Reforming Worship Music.”]

The addictive tendencies of today’s music audience demonstrates an introspective approach that is especially inappropriate in worship. Unfortunately, “worship” has been redefined in many contemporary churches to mean only the music portion of the service, or perhaps music and testifying. It is the feeling of euphoria that people are after — a feeling that music can definitely provide. Payton observes that “The more a person is inclined to subjective thinking, the stronger music’s influence will be on that person. As a culture, we are progressively devaluing objective reasoning while giving subjectivity higher and higher priority.” What this adds up to is a worship that is increasingly self-oriented. It should be obvious from even a casual glance at the Scriptural record that worship is a community activity that is designed not only for a common voice lifted unto God, but unto each other (read Ephesians 5: 15-21 again). In other words, worship activities — especially music in this study — that do not edify others are unacceptable to God.

But how are we to define what is edifying? After all, what may edify one person may not do so with another: or so the usual argument runs when the question of music styles comes up. Typically the person who posits this maxim does so with the air that his or her statement is unassailable. Such, however, is not the case. Once again, we are not discussing a matter that man thought up all on his own. We are talking about something that God invented and for which He gave objective rules! If we are bound by God’s definition of edifying, then we have something by which we may judge the value of a particular piece or genre of music which we may consider using in worship.
First, you edify others when you worship with Spirit motivation. If you are not “filled with the Spirit,” your worship expressions in music and otherwise are so many empty words to one another. Being filled with the Spirit means that you are walking in readiness to hear the Spirit’s voice through His word. Simply put, filling is demonstrated by an immediate response to the Spirit of God. (What gets your attention?) Such a response results in joy, obedience, humility — indeed, all the fruits of the Spirit, thereby demonstrating the reality of your new life in Christ. As in any other area of instruction, exhortation, or correction, if your musical statements (however theologically sound and musically appropriate) to one another are not the outpouring of the Spirit’s work in you, your words lack the conviction of the person who really knows God and has experienced His power firsthand. If you simply sing because it is expected of you at a particular time in the service and mechanically sing the song because that’s the one that was chosen, you are merely giving out secondhand information that lacks any of the edifying power of which Paul writes in his letter to Ephesus. Secondhand information is not worth very much! Trust rather the Spirit’s moving in the officers of the Church who chose those hymns and that liturgical form, and take the choices before you as from the Spirit. Sing to those around you, and in your own heart, with the conscious goal of being the Spirit’s mouthpiece through the music. I believe the reason so many find little value in substantive hymns is because their hearts know little of the real depth of life in the Spirit. Feelings and signs are not dependable indicators of the Spirit’s work — rather His Word confirmed in the heart of the believer who is walking unmoved through the trials of this life (Psalm 55:22).

Another aspect of Spirit motivation may be best understood by taking a brief look at its opposite: fleshly motivation. The late sports promoter Bob Briner wrote in his book Roaring Lambs, “Culturally, we’re lambs. Meek, lowly, easily dismissed cuddly creatures that are fun to watch but never a threat to the status quo. It’s time for those lambs to roar.” [Quoted by Candi Cushman, “Salt or Sugar?,” in the May 13, 2000 issue of World, p. 21.] While such thinking appeals to human pride, it certainly has nothing to do with being motivated by the Holy Spirit of Christ, who said, “Behold, I send you as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves” (Mat. 10:16). Jesus is the Lion who roars, not the flock! Worship styles and content motivated by such pride (even when “sanctified” by the desire for “relevance”) cannot promote godliness, only carnality. Lust for excitement and emotional intensity are not substitutes for genuine spiritual joy. Yet much of contemporary worship is determined to use carnal weapons to do God’s work (2 Cor. 10:4). Wes King, this year’s co-winner of Dove’s song of the year award, told World magazine, “When I got nominated and sold a fair amount of records, everybody started going, ‘Okay, let’s groom this guy.’ I found myself going to this lesbian atheist who was going to tell me how to talk in interviews. They wanted me to extract anything and everything about my faith that was offensive. But Jesus went around offending everybody” (“Salt or Sugar?”, p. 19). Mr. King had the courage to leave his label. But many others do not act on such conviction. That any believer would seek to come into God’s presence through the medium of such spineless, worldly relevancy reveals a heart more concerned with man’s ways than God’s.

A second way to edify others is to worship with mature understanding. Paul’s words are “understand the Lord’s will” (Eph. 5:17). Hebrews 6:1 reads, “Therefore leaving the elementary teaching about the Christ, let us press on to maturity….” And Colossians 4:5 commands,
“Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity” (KJV - “redeeming the time”). There are a couple a facets to this understanding and maturity that helps us use our time well by edifying one another in worship. Paul begins with the idea of circumspection (Eph. 5:16). Circumspectly means to conduct yourself accurately, with care and diligence. Christians who are sloppy in their theology — including musical expressions of that theology — don’t honor God! The worship band, “warm-up to worship” mentality only communicates that biblical Christianity is superficial (if you have to have an external stimulus to get you going about God’s worth, you don’t run very deep!): hardly something worth offering to the world, which has enough superficiality to go around.

Next, Paul discusses discernment. This is how the Lord declares you are to be relevant in your worship — not by finding the lowest common denominator that people will tolerate, but by seeking what the Lord desires. The problem with peer pressure (the principle behind “seeker sensitive” worship) is that pooling ignorance just compounds ignorance! Paul declares in 1 Corinthians 14:15, “I will sing with the Spirit and I will sing with the understanding also.” You are not at liberty to lose yourself in feel-good music and call it worship. Biblical worship has the mind engaged at all times in reverent meditation upon God as He reveals Himself. So, “try the spirits, whether they be of God,” and do your homework to know what style and content the Lord wills from His people as they worship Him. I guarantee you that it will look and sound nothing like the world. Leonard Payton notes, “As we find we are feeling good about something that is not biblical, then we must confess the rebellion of our emotions and then repent of it.”

Understanding is more than just being able to parrot someone else’s thought. It involves the exercise of your own perception and insight as you prayerfully and humbly depend upon the guidance of the Spirit of God. Human dogma, from whichever side of the debate it may come, destroys discernment.

Finally, the third and most important way you edify others in worship is when you worship with the mind of Christ, in His name, and in the fear of God (Eph. 5:18). The mind of Christ is a mind of mutual submission in the body; of the stronger looking out for the weaker; of humble, holy fear of the Father; of walking united in all that Jesus’ name encompasses. The mindset of Christ is others-oriented, not self-absorbed. Michael Hamilton, though, looks with approval upon the divisiveness of current music practices:

Hymn reformers still cherish the pre-baby-boom hope that the ideal of Christian unity can be achieved in worship. Praise-and-worship musicians, by contrast, bring the baby-boom assumption that different groups will all need their own kind of music. … Increasingly, we are grouping ourselves with the musically like-minded. This is the root, stem, and branch of the new sectarianism that is flowering in American church life. (CT, July 12, 1999, p. 34.)

This statement reveals the spiritual poverty of contemporary worship music philosophy on several counts. First, it forgets that unity around worshipping the name of Jesus has nothing to do with pre-baby-boomers: it is the message of Jesus himself (John 17) and his apostles (1 Corinthians 2:2 - “For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified”). Biblical worship is not a market-driven activity. It has to do with being compelled by the love of Christ. Secondly, this philosophy has as its center the wrong center!
We ought to be grouping ourselves with the Spiritually like-minded who lift up the name of Jesus and His finished work. To rejoice in musical sectarianism because it seems to have pragmatic benefits is nothing more than sin. Many of those who fancy contemporary worship music are the same people who cry out that Christians shouldn’t be so divisive as to separate over doctrinal issues — yet they hypocritically divide over something as superficial as whether or not they like another’s style of music. The mind of Jesus is nowhere to be found in this statement. The Root of the Church is Christ, not baby-boomer preferences.

Note that the mind of Christ shows itself in the goals of singing to one another: showing gratitude to the Lord as a community (Psalm 100:4 - “Enter into His gates with thanksgiving, and into His courts with praise. Be thankful to Him, and bless His name.”), exhorting and encouraging one another unto godliness, submitting to one another as instruments of the Spirit. And all of this “in the fear of the Lord,” not a party atmosphere.

**Principles to Worship By**

Michael Horton writes of his congregation:

Many of our people know their way around so-called contemporary forms of entertainment and worship much better than do those who have just recently determined to enlist these forms in Reformed worship. They therefore hardly fit the stereotypical image of the fuddy-duddy who resists worship change in principle. For them, in fact, the singing of praise songs is old news, and the singing of the Psalter is fresh and bracing. Like someone who is used to fast food but then sits down at an elegant feast, those who are drenched in popular mass culture often, at the very least, find rich communities of faith more interesting. [“Beyond Style Wars: Recovering the Substance of Worship,” *New Horizons*, April, 1999, from website http://opc.org/new_horizons/NH99/NH9904a.html]

Horton is right on the mark. Mainline denominations are failing everywhere because they have attempted to serve up popular culture and ideals in a liturgical setting. Why do so many evangelicals still think that by warming up the world’s leftovers they can influence society unto godliness? After all the years CCM has been around, where is the evidence that any real significant change for righteousness (as biblically defined) has come about? Leonard Payton’s thought is penchant on this point:

When we come to contemporary Christian music, the literature is rife with inaccurate handling of Holy Scripture. Even more subtle is the neglect of a full-orbed treatment of God’s attributes…. I do not believe that most writers of contemporary Christian music are devious. Still, by its very presence, something is often inculcated or “preached” that, as Reformed believers, we should resist. And we should resist it not with a frowning censure but with better music and better texts. [“Reforming Worship Music”]

Well said, but how does that work out in practice (especially in the “better music” department)? Our goal here is not to simply jettison every song written after 1970 or so! Our goal is practice
discernment and scrutinize, by divine standards, every piece of music we employ in worship. Though we’ve talked a great deal about those standards already, perhaps the following thoughts will help in the application process.

First, your worship must show forth the image of God in the righteous culture it portrays. Does the music reflect life in the Spirit accurately? Musical expression is an image of the society that produces it. Note the differences in classical music periods as society in Europe shifted its philosophical base: from the simple and raucous nature of medieval forms to the orderliness of the baroque period to the impressionism of the classic period to the dissonance of the modern period. Church music has followed the similar patterns of change, usually reflecting the ecclesiastical climate of the day. Note, too the chaotic nature of the societies that produced rock, the depression that produced the blues, the lifestyle that nurtured country music, and the various cultures that brought about all sorts of folk and ethnic music. Can there be a music that is an expression of Godly culture (Psa. 137:4)? Is there such a thing as “Christian Music”? (See Tim Fisher, *The Battle for Christian Music*, Greenville, SC: Majesty Music, chapters 2 & 3.) Is life in the Spirit chaotic? Depressed? Lonely? Dissonant? Sensual? Trite? Dull? Lifeless? Monotone? Giddy? Frivolous? Mediocre? Materialistic? Self-absorbed? What culture do your music preferences declare you to be a part of? Compare 1 Corinthians 14:8, 15; & James 4:1.

Second, your worship must show forth the image of God in the righteous testimony it declares. The biblical principle is one of newness, found in 2 Corinthians 5:17, “Therefore, if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature; old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.” New here has the idea of new in quality, rather than in time. A radical change takes place in the regenerated person. Just as no part of him was exempt from depravity, so no part is exempt from the new life in Christ. When it comes to our music, Robert Berglund rightly observes: “If any style of music . . . creates feelings, ideas, emotions, values, or moods that are of, by, or for the unchanged way of life, such music is out of place in the changed life experience” (*A Philosophy of Church Music*, Chicago: Moody Press, 1985, p. 12). Fisher notes, “Scripture teaches this progression in our lives through salvation: New Birth > New Creature > New Song” (p. 9). Any life song that does not cause men to reverence our Lord is not the song of the regenerate (Psalm 40:2, 3; compare also 1 Peter 1:14, 15).

Third, the principle of the *imago dei* in action bears upon the creation of better music and texts. The creative principle inherent in the *imago dei* is quite simple. We must “originate with artistic excellence,” following the example of our Creator. Our music programs must encourage “the full development and use of the best creative gifts the church has to offer.” “Music that is maudlin, sentimental, mediocre, and poorly made has no place in the church” (Calvin Johannson, *Music & Ministry: A Biblical Counterpoint*, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1984, pp. 15 & 20). As believers, we represent God in everything we do. What we do and how we do it sends a direct message to the world around us about the God we serve. Johannson puts it this way:

God the Creator as shown forth by the church musician’s music is often a frightening prospect! We image God in the music we do. When the program is hit-or-miss, we show forth a God who lacks purpose and direction; when our work is not well prepared, we
image a God who is lazy and slothful; when the performance preparation is a last-minute affair, we show forth a procrastinating God; when our performance of music lacks vitality or artistic grace, we show God to be inert; when our musical choices revolve around our favorite style or body of composition, God is seen as rigid and unbending; and, above all, when the music we choose lacks creativity in the fullest sense (to break new ground imaginatively and with integrity), we image forth a God of “creative” mediocrity…. The question each church musician faces is not, “Shall I?” but, “What will be the image set forth?” (pp.28, 29)

Fourth, we must follow the example of the Spirit. He points to Christ. Jesus said, “[The Spirit of Truth] will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you” (John 16:14). The task of the Holy Spirit is to point us to the Savior, not asking for attention to Himself. Our music choices should follow this example. Simply stated, if the music (or the performance of it) becomes the center of attention, whatever the style, it is no longer spiritual. Tim Fisher states it well: “Christian music is that music in which text, music, performers and performance practices are conforming to the image of Jesus Christ” (p. 16). “Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31). The results of not heeding this principle are ably summed up by Elder Brad Gsell of Charlotte, North Carolina:

We too long have viewed the service of worship as a time when people virtually come in for a show. The Pastor talks, the choir and soloist sing, and depending on how the people like the show [determines] largely whether they will come back. This is antithetical to a proper understanding of worship. It is God’s people, all of them, who are to actively worship — selflessly giving praise to their Creator and Savior. If God’s people could get this understanding of their place in worship, we would soon cease to hear such statements as “I didn’t get much out of the service today,” or “I didn’t enjoy the choir’s anthem at all.”

The fifth and final principle specifically focuses upon the lyrics in the worship of God. Better lyrics will resound in the church when we make it our determination to be bound by the words of the Scriptures. Moses commanded the people in Deuteronomy 32:45, “Set your hearts on all the words which I testify among you today, which you shall command your children to be careful to observe — all the words of this law.” The psalmist makes the application perfectly: “Your statutes have been my songs in the house of my pilgrimage”(Ps. 119:54). While this does not require only word for word settings (which translation/language would you use?), it does require that the substance of the church’s songs must be blatantly scriptural, rather than the imaginations of man’s sentimentality (however sincerely meant). You can’t worship “in spirit and in truth” when the lyrics are not “truth”! Donald Hustad wrote somewhere:

Christians today are hungry for experience; they don’t seem so willing to think about or grapple for their faith. Today’s superficial music makes for a superficial view of God…. We need to make disciples rather than inspiration junkies…. Good hymnals are more than just songs. They are compact handbooks of theology in poetry form. These hymns are noble forms of prayer, adoration, thanksgiving, and dedication. They supply thought and words to enlarge and enrich our personal vocabulary of worship.
Granting that there are contemporary songs that are Scripturally sound, many never delve beyond the surface of the Christian faith. Just as a child does not continue to speak in an infantile manner as he or she matures, so the believer’s vocabulary should deepen and develop along the lines God has drawn. Or, to use another analogy, dessert is wonderful, but you wouldn’t want your diet to consist of it. The problem today is that so often all believers want is candy, and not meat and potatoes. Have your candy every once in awhile if you will, but keep the percentage low for your spiritual health’s sake!

Conclusion

The Church must offer a sacrifice of praise unblemished by the world. Will our music reflect the “new song” of the worshipper of Yahweh, or the trite superficiality of the children of this world? Regardless of our personal preferences (after all, our preferences are still subject to the lusts of the flesh), our music must give the clear, unmixed testimony that we are the children of God. More than that, it must declare back to God His own glory. Musical worship exalts our God and edifies others when we sing with grace in our hearts to the Lord. A. T. Robertson commented that worship is “Lyrical emotion in the devout soul.” Graceless worship is godless worship! May God give us the grace and discernment to be firm against trying to sing God’s song in a heathen way, for how can sweet water flow from a bitter well? Worship Him in spirit and in truth, in His way, with His zeal. May the words of the psalmist be true of us: “He has put a new song in my mouth — praise to our God; many will see and fear, and will trust in the LORD” (Psa. 40:3).