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How Shall We Worship? Biblical Guidelines for the Worship Wars

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Introduction

Most of my happiest memories from early childhood relate to worship. Since my father was the church organist and the director of choirs, our family was always present for worship whenever the congregation offered it.

There was always great anticipation in our household for worship. Saturday nights meant I actually had my hair pinned up after my bath, and we always set out my Sunday-best clothes for the next morning. If it was Christmas or Easter, we had been hearing Dad composing new pieces throughout the preparatory seasons of Advent and Lent, and every week my father delighted in practicing the organ and directing choir rehearsals. I'll never forget the thrill when I first played the final pedal note on the organ at the end of worship (I had *practiced* with Dad!) and, several years later, my delight the first time he invited me to write a text for his new music.

Worship was always filled with glorious sights and sounds. Our church building had an intri-

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cately carved altar, ancient Christian symbols everywhere, and beautiful stained-glass windows that reminded me of whole stories in the Bible. We sang all kinds of music—new and old—often with various students playing their brass instruments or flutes. What I saw and what I heard in worship throughout my childhood deeply formed my faith and my enraptured desire to praise God with all my heart and mind, voice and life.

I *loved* worship! Especially I loved the singing and often memorized hymns as part of my memory work assignments in the Lutheran school (where Mom was secretary, Dad was principal, and they were my fourth- and eighth-grade teachers). I'd sing those songs at the top of my lungs while I did my newspaper route. (My customers always knew when their paper had arrived.)

I still love worship. For many years I have sung in choirs and folk teams and directed them, have played various instruments and (more recently) have preached for worship. When I was a junior in college, I participated in a choir that sang Christian concerts literally around the world; in the last few years I have taught in numerous nations and thereby have experienced a multitude of worldwide riches in worship.

With such a background of precious—and global—worship, I find it piercingly painful that in so many places people fight about it. The dissensions take many forms, but often erupt in bitter battles over styles of music or aspects of divergent tastes. In response, I try to help people ask deeper questions, get to the root of the issues, look to the Scriptures for as much insight into God's desires as we can gather.

Let's ask some of those questions together, shall we? For example, what is worship? Let's begin by realizing that it is our glad response to the immense grace of the Triune God. All of life is worship if we live in gratitude and reverence, with mindfulness of God and eagerness to serve Him.

At particular times, we expressly worship with words, songs, and actions of thanks and petition and praise. When we do this by ourselves, we engage in the practices of private worship or devotions. If we gather with other Christians, we participate in public, corporate worship. The result will be that we become more

Let's begin by realizing that worship is our glad response to the immense grace of the Triune God.

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deeply formed to worship God in all we think, say, or do in daily life.

This poem by Abraham Joshua Heschel suggests many questions we could ponder:

*Amidst the meditation of mountains, the humility
of flowers—
wiser than all alphabets—
clouds that die constantly for the sake of His glory,
we are hating, hunting, hurting . . .
Only one response can maintain us: gratefulness
for witnessing the wonder,
for the gift of our unearned right to serve,
to adore, and to fulfill.¹*

Is the public, corporate worship of our churches true to the Christian faith? Does it form its participants with the humility and wisdom of God's creation? What can we learn from nature about praising God? Does our worship enable us to be ready to die for the sake of God's glory? Does it cleanse us from our propensity to hate, hunt, hurt? Does it help us witness God's glory and nourish in us gratefulness? wonder? Does it stir us to witness, service, adoration, fulfillment of God's purposes?

The Crux of the Problem

Worship is a much-debated subject in twenty-first-century North America. In the past three or four decades, many churches have had bitter fights over worship issues, and many congregations have split internally or externally. In the present, thank God, it seems that more church leaders and congregations are trying to ask deeper questions and to think through the issues more biblically and theologically and ecclesio-logically.

What kinds of questions could and should we be asking for the sake of genuine worship? Could any of the questions in the following paragraphs bring some clarity to the issues in your congregation?

First of all, we have to recognize that many members of our churches do not know what worship is. How shall we sing the LORD's song in this strange land? How should churches conduct their worship in the midst of a culture that less and less knows what worship is? How might congregations nurture in their members deeper insight into the meaning and practice of worship?

What does it mean to worship? What would be

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the answer if we asked Christians who worship with you why they are there? Would their answers be biblically formed—or would they primarily reveal the influences of the culture that surrounds the Church?²

Simultaneously we must also ask, why do congregations seem so often to be fighting over worship and music, styles and forms? To end the battles, some churches start multiple services, with two or more styles featured at separate times and labeled with such terms as “contemporary” or “traditional” or “blended/convergent.” Other churches specialize in a certain kind of “praise and worship” or advertise their services as “exciting” and “upbeat.” Do these descriptions and understandings enable churches to be all that they could be for the sake of the world around them?

Why don’t our churches seem to be affecting our culture? Why do so many who say they are “spiritual” want nothing to do with our churches’ worship?

Why don’t our typical Sunday morning worship services cause us to tremble? Are we really encountering God?

We could ask many other questions—and will be doing so as this book progresses. I begin with

these because in teaching throughout North America and across denominational lines I have discovered that many of the arguments and fights about worship could be avoided if we asked better questions—and if we let our biblical roots and the branches of the Church on Christ the Vine bear fruit.

Why don't our churches seem to be affecting our culture?

It seemed that the best way to organize our discussion of the issues would be to take a biblical text and thoroughly consider its implications for our worship decisions. Psalm 96, an “enthronement” psalm used in the worship of Israel, provides an excellent structure for asking key questions. (The entire psalm appears on the following page for your reference.)

PSALM 96

A Call to Worship the LORD the Righteous Judge.

*SING to the LORD a new song;
Sing to the LORD, all the earth.*

*2 Sing to the LORD, bless His name;
Proclaim good tidings of His salvation from day to day.*

*3 Tell of His glory among the nations,
His wonderful deeds among all the peoples.*

*4 For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised;
He is to be feared above all gods.*

*5 For all the gods of the peoples are idols,
But the LORD made the heavens.*

*6 Splendor and majesty are before Him,
Strength and beauty are in His sanctuary.*

*7 Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the peoples,
Ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.*

*8 Ascribe to the LORD the glory of His name;
Bring an offering, and come into His courts.*

*9 Worship the LORD in holy attire;
Tremble before Him, all the earth.*

*10 Say among the nations, "The LORD reigns;
Indeed, the world is firmly established, it will not be moved;
He will judge the peoples with equity."*

*11 Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice;
Let the sea roar, and all it contains;*

*12 Let the field exult, and all that is in it.
Then all the trees of the forest will sing for joy*

*13 Before the LORD, for He is coming;
For He is coming to judge the earth.*

*He will judge the world in righteousness,
And the peoples in His faithfulness.*

What Kinds of Music Should We Use?

Sing to the LORD a new song;

PSALM 96:1a

Since my father was an organist, choir director, and composer, I grew up loving both new music which he created and old music which he treasured and sometimes rearranged. As a child, I observed his great love for worship and for music of all sorts—which inevitably rubbed off and kindled in me the same desire to praise God with the best texts and tunes we can invent or pass on from our forebears in the faith. Consequently, it still seems strange to me that churches fight over styles and hastily reject the Church’s heritage without investigating its riches or refuse to use global music and new songs without exploring their possibilities.

Some churches are founded upon the principle that only “contemporary” music—particularly that which matches the styles of the culture

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around us—should be used for worship. Verses such as Psalm 96:1a seem to justify that decision. However, this first verse doesn't suggest using *only* new songs, for later in the same psalm its poet employs an older song from Israel's heritage. Verses 7-8a of Psalm 96 quote the more ancient beginning of Psalm 29 (and 1 Chronicles 16 repeats Psalm 96 or perhaps antedates it). Those who advocate only "contemporary" worship miss the fact that worship throughout the Scriptures makes use of both new and old materials. To sing new songs doesn't negate singing old songs, too. In fact, we must consider what is lost if our worship has no connection to the "cloud of witnesses" who have preceded us in faith.

In many church situations I have found worshipers fighting for "contemporary" worship without really knowing what they mean by that vocabulary. The term *contemporary* is usually not defined. Do we mean by that word something that sounds like a pop radio station, or a brand-new organ improvisation, or a new text set to an old melody, or a new melody put to an old text, or an ancient song newly arranged and freshly contemplated? All those possibilities are "contemporary." Are we arguing for a certain instrumentation or a

certain adaptation to culture? Ironically, some of the churches that boast of always singing “new songs” sing them over and over week after week and repetitively in each service, so that their newness is hastily worn off.

On the other side of many worship conflicts, some people advocate using only “traditional” music. That term isn’t very helpful either because it doesn’t clarify to which traditions we are referring. Do we mean Swedish or Swahili traditions, hymns or chants, the ancient liturgy of the Church or revised liturgies from the Calvinist or Lutheran or Anglican reformers? Do we mean the traditions from the first centuries of the pre-Constantinian Church or those from more recent American reformation movements?

It is essential that we ask what people mean by the words *traditional* and *contemporary* because failure to define them clearly usually leads to unnecessary arguments. Moreover, often the terms are used in response to wrong questions or as wrong answers to good questions, as we will see

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more thoroughly below. At this point it is important simply to recognize the importance of both new and old.

Throughout the history of the people of God, worship has made use of a mixture of elements old and new. Many songs in the Old Testament (or First Testament) make use of older elements from Israel's history. Songs in the book of Revelation use phrases from the Psalms and Isaiah. Both Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16 urge us to teach and admonish with "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs." These texts free us from debating about musical styles and suggest instead a wide range of music for our faithfulness.

The word *psalms* invites us to participate with our Jewish and Christian forebears in singing the Old Testament poems, written for synagogue and Temple (as indicated by the frequent title, "To the Chief Musician" or "For the choir director") and collected primarily in the book of Psalms (and also in other poetic portions, most notably Isaiah).

The biblical term *hymns* points to the development of specifically Christian songs in the traditions of faith. The New Testament contains many of the earliest hymns, such as Philippians 2:5-11, 1 Timothy 3:16, 2 Timothy 2:11-13, John 1:1-14,

and all the hymns in the book of Revelation, such as 5:9-10, 12, and 13. Similarly, today there are many hymns held in common by diverse denominations and eras—and written by great saints from Ambrose of Milan (339–397) and Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) to Martin Luther (1483–1546) and John Wesley (1703–1791).

The phrase *spiritual songs* cannot be specifically defined. Perhaps it refers to new expressions of praise composed at the moment, or ecstatic utterances, or perhaps local music. Though we don't know exactly what the phrase originally signified, we can be reminded by it now that God is never contained by the music we already know. There will always be a need for new melodies, new harmonies, new texts, new arrangements, new instrumentations, new expressions of, and to, the infinitely incomprehensible God—even as we will always build on the faith expressions of our forebears and need some of the old, old songs to tell “the old, old story.”

As we look at various stages in the history of Christianity, we discover that the sixteenth-century Reformers usually valued the past, even as they discovered the new. The earliest Christians patterned their worship after Jewish synagogue

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services, but added to them the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Martin Luther kept the Mass from the Catholic church, but put it into the people's native tongue. John Wesley continued to worship in the Anglican church, even as he and his brother Charles wrote many new hymns.

The Antithesis: Separation

Because the Church has generally used its treasures old and new, it was odd that in the last decades of the twentieth century churches started advertising a specific kind of music (usually "contemporary" or "traditional") for their worship services or that they split their worshipping Body into two or more different styles of services offered at different times. This leads to all sorts of divisions—by age, musical taste, head and heart, doctrine and feelings.

Are such divisions good for churches? We have seen, from Ephesians and Colossians, that such sundering might not be biblically appropriate. But do the advantages of such partitioning outweigh the disadvantages? Does it solve some problems? Is it really spiritually helpful? Before answering those questions, we must understand

a little more history—both long range and from the past half century.

If we look over twenty centuries of church history, we glimpse many periods when movements of renewal broke away from the mainstream churches. Monastic currents shed some of the unbiblical accretions (especially wealth) that had invaded Christianity. Pietistic streams stressing Bible study and personal religious experience protested secular power structures or excessively intellectualized instruction in state churches.

The latter highlights a particular pair that has caused conflicts noticeable in many eras: the opposition of objective and subjective, expressions of truth about God and feelings in response to God. The dominant fight between “traditional” and “contemporary” sometimes circles around this opposition, for the older traditional hymns (with such exceptions as nineteenth-century romantic pieces) are typically more doctrinally focused, whereas a greater proportion of contemporary music stresses feelings primarily. It seems to be an opposition of truth and spirit, though Jesus underscored that “true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit *and* truth” (John 4:23, emphasis mine).

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Can our churches ask better questions so that the music we use in worship enables us to be both filled and free with the Spirit and also grounded in biblical and doctrinal truth? Without the emotion and willingness of Spirit, our music becomes dry and dusty—without life. Without doctrinal bones as a skeleton, the Body is not enfleshed in a healthy way.

It is essential that our worship music—as well as all the other formative elements of our congregation's life—continuously holds in tension the opposite necessities of both Spirit and truth.

It is essential that our worship music continuously holds in tension the opposite necessities of both Spirit and truth.

These two form a dialectical pair, for they are both important but seem to be pulling in different directions.

How can we keep them both prominent and balanced? Since the truth side of this dialectic is less likely to be accentuated these days, let me elaborate that dimension.

I have a crooked leg that offers an excellent visual aid for the importance of straight doctrinal bones as the foundation for worship. I wear a toe-to-knee plastic brace to hold my leg firm because otherwise, if I put full weight on the leg, the bone

would probably snap at the place where it is bent. Similarly, churches who have crooked doctrine—for example, an inadequate trinitarianism—will snap when that which is awry comes under pressure. Moreover, holding my crooked leg stable by means of plastic isn't a good solution either, for often the meeting of bones and plastic on two sides of fragile skin rubs ulcerated wounds. (I have just begun walking again after 15 months on crutches.) Similarly, churches who try to prop up their crooked doctrinal structure with supports from the outside might chafe incurable wounds.

Many formerly powerful churches have fallen apart or have become seriously weakened either from snapping at the crooked places or from festering wounds that can't be healed. For example, churches that use essentially narcissistic music, focused on self rather than God, find it increasingly difficult to engage members in service and outreach. Churches whose music accentuates only the Holy Spirit, thus betraying deficient trinitarianism, often have an insufficient doctrine of confession and forgiveness and consequently find it difficult to deal with conflicts. The freedom of the Spirit must be matched with the disci-

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pline of the Truth—especially in contrast with, and resistance to, the world’s untruths.

Recent Escalations of Separation

In all of history, both unifying and dividing forces have been at work, with one or the other prevailing. In the last half century, however, the powers of separation have been more intensely aggravated by a combination of factors. We have to understand the history of church music as it is intertwined with the rebellions of the ’60s and the development of “niche marketing.”

I do not intend to romanticize the past (every era has its flaws), but in general before the second half of the twentieth century in North America music unified diverse peoples. Families would cluster around the piano and sing all kinds of songs—hymns, folk songs, patriotic marches, show tunes, lullabies. Literature and art often portray families gathering in the parlor or communities assembling in the town hall and playing a great variety of music on a wide assortment of instruments, often homemade.

One strong element that contributed to present fractures was the cluster of changes, events, and attitudes of the ’60s. The large postwar popula-

tion bubble coming of age, the development of junior high schools in which teens were mentored by their peers rather than by a consistent teacher, escalating anger about the Vietnam War, violent governmental crackdowns like the Kent State killings of student protesters, an unprecedented rejection of elders' authority by teenagers, and new infusions of illegal drugs were some factors that intensified the separation of young and old. Music in the '60s became an identity marker, a sign of rebellion, a unifier of one segment in protest against all the rest of the culture, a means for flaunting independence.

At the same time, businesses—particularly the record industry—realized that they could make much more money if they divided people up into smaller and smaller niches. Instead of one radio station playing all kinds of music, we could have numerous stations, each with a specialty. Various newspapers in Canada and the U.S. have featured articles on the new “tween market” (ages 9–13), for which a special line of cosmetics, a new fashion magazine, new movies and games have been designed. “Tweens” have their own styles and models, trends and tunes because the producers

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and marketers have discovered that they have \$1.4 billion to spend.

Bring the same sort of rebellion (against the institution of the Church and its practices) and of niche marketing (“We want *our* kind of music”) into our congregations, and is it any wonder that the splitting of churches into various styles of worship should intensify dramatically with the boomer generation?

Both sides erred when the boomer generation rebelled against the music of the churches and demanded their own styles, like “Praise and Worship.” The traditionalists blundered in not finding ways to incorporate new sounds and to ask better questions for sorting the new music. The contemporaryists misjudged in not learning from their elders better practices of teaching and leading new music, of filling songs with better theology, of matching sound to meaning.

By God’s grace, more and more churches—across the denominational spectrum and around the globe—seem to be asking better questions. Some are inquiring how we can avoid these splits, how various styles can be brought together. Many of the younger-than-boomer generations are asking what might be learned from the past,

from the roots of the Church, as they search for mystery, symbolism, heritage, and depth—all for the sake of worshiping God genuinely in “spirit and truth.”

Not “Blended” or “Convergent,” but a Sense of the Whole Church

My primary reason for wanting churches to use many musical styles and sounds in their worship is because we have such a big God. No single type of music can respond to all that God is. No instrument can sing all God’s attributes. No era of the Church has displayed the fullness of God’s glory.

Some persons seek these days to offer what is called “blended” worship, in which old and new music are featured. This is an excellent goal, though I have trouble with the name *blended*, since recovering from emergency jaw surgery once necessitated that for three months I eat food made soft in the blender. That illustration points out the danger: If we use music from different eras and styles, we dare not let the songs played in “blended” worship services all sound the same and become indistinguishably gray like various foods tossed together in the blender. Instead, we will want to be very careful that each

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piece maintains its own character and is sung with its own integrity.

The adjective *convergent* has often been used, too, especially in association with Robert Webber's idea of "Ancient-Future" faith.³ This, too, represents an excellent goal, for it emphasizes that we have to get back to the Church's roots if we want truly to understand what worship is and how our praises might be sung. One helpful question the term raises is at what point the convergence takes place. Do we mean that all the worship of the past converges in our present moment of worship?

Perhaps we could be clearer about the nature of our faith if we remember that worship converges ultimately in that great day when God brings to culmination the Triune work of reconciling the cosmos. At that glorious time, all of our present-day worship will converge with all the praise of all the saints throughout time and space when we join the heavenly host in their eternal and perfect worship. (We will return to this emphasis at the end of this book.)

Meanwhile, how can we make use of more of the best music—old and new? It is critical that we decide what we employ not by the criteria of

what we like or what will please certain people or what will attract the neighbors or what matches the most people's tastes.⁴ Future questions in this book will give better criteria for making our decisions. Perhaps we can simply summarize our goal by declaring that our worship could make use of "the Music of the 'one holy, catholic, apostolic Church' (as the Nicene Creed calls it) for the Sake of the Whole World." Our desire is that all our music will help believers learn the language of faith and the nature of true worship.

For example, one Sunday at an African-American congregation to which I belonged, the service incorporated a great diversity of styles of music, not because we worried about using such an assortment, but because all the pieces we sang captured well the Scripture texts for the day and the season of the church year in which we were worshipping. At the beginning we sang two black spirituals and one so-called "contemporary chorus." The Old Testament lesson that day was Isaiah 12, so for the children's sermon the whole congregation learned the Hebrew-melody song,

Our desire is that all our music will help believers learn the language of faith and the nature of true worship.

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“Behold, God Is My Salvation,” while I taught the children a Jewish dance. The Epistle lesson that day stressed the immensity of God’s grace, so we sang the early American hymn, “There’s a Wideness in God’s Mercy.” We tuned all the strings of a guitar to Es and Bs, and one person strummed it to produce a droning while we sang the verses with Appalachian-style “call and response.”

The Gospel text was Luke 15, the story of the Prodigal Son (or the Waiting Father), which is wonderfully captured and applied to us in Kevin Nichols’ text, “Our Father, We Have Wandered,” copyrighted by the International Committee on English in the Liturgy and available in many denominational hymnals. The second verse of this stunning text ends, “In haste you come to meet us and home rejoicing bring, in gladness there to greet us with calf and robe and ring.” What a humbling text to remind us of how unworthy we are to worship God! The three stanzas of Nichols’ poem are set to the melody, “Herzlich tut mich verlangen,” most often associated with the chorale, “O Sacred Head Now Wounded,” and harmonized by Johann Sebastian Bach (one of five

orchestrations of that tune in his *St. Matthew Passion*).

Each piece we sang in worship that day fit in with the whole service, because they were all chosen to display the texts of the day and the theme of the entire service. Though many different styles were represented, each piece was accompanied according to its unique style, so that all the music was experienced with its own integrity. All together, the songs offered a great example of having the whole Church present in our worship. The music included Jewish and Gentile, black and white, ancient texts and new texts, old and new melodies. It knit the people of our community together—black and white, young and old, richer and poorer, new Christians and those more mature in faith.

Discussion Questions

INTRODUCTION

1. Does the worship of our church enable us to be like the clouds (see Heschel's poem) and ready to die for the sake of God's glory? How does it do that?
2. Does the worship of our church equip us to witness to our neighbors? In what ways?
3. Does the worship of our church deepen our desire to serve the world and minister to its needs? How does it equip us for that service?
4. What sorts of fights about worship do we have in our church? What causes them?
5. Before reading further in this book, what kinds of deeper questions do we think we should be asking about our church's worship?

SECTION I

1. What are the advantages of using words like *traditional* and *contemporary*? What are the disadvantages? What precisely do we mean by those words?
2. What might be some of the benefits in calling the Old Testament the "First Testament"? How does this phrase help us to see that God's character does not change between the two testaments?

Notes

1. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man's Quest for God* (1954; reprint, Santa Fe, N.Mex.: Aurora Press, 1998), 5.
2. Throughout this book I will use capitalized *Church* to signify the ideal as Christ would have His Body be and uncapitalized *church* or *churches* to name concrete congregations, fallen and seeking-to-be-faithful realities, more or less living out what Church means.
3. See Robert E. Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1999).
4. See especially chapter 15, "Worship Is Not a Matter of Taste," and chapter 26, "Criteria by Which to Plan," in Marva J. Dawn, *A Royal "Waste" of Time: The Splendor of Worshiping God and Being Church for the World* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1999).
5. See Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: Norton, 1978).
6. See, for example, Robert E. Webber, ed., *The Services of the Christian Year*, vol 5, *The Complete Li-*

Resources for Further Study and Group Discussion

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The Vital Questions Series

CLEAR THINKING FOR FAITHFUL LIVING

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