

# The Means of Grace

Their Necessity Put into a Modern Context

## Introduction

This week, as we enter Reformation month, I want to take a break from Acts and begin a short series on [the means of grace](#). I'm going to give you a sermonized version of a paper I did at the end of my time at Denver Seminary (2001) that I think is still relevant today. I do this to set the stage in helping you understand a bit about why we do what we do here at RBCNC.

I perused the library for books on worship and found the following titles: *Innovative Worship*, *Creative Worship*, *The New Worship*, *Diverse Worship*, *Blended Worship*, and *Contemporary Worship*. I was able to find one book published in the past three years dealing at all with the seemingly antiquated notion: “[biblical worship](#).” The scene has changed little in that time, so let me continue.

I then took a look at the most recent editions of cutting-edge periodicals to see what they had to say about

worship. I found the following. *Group Magazine's* cover article was "The Cool Church."<sup>1</sup> *Your Church Magazine* had articles, "Lighting and Video: How Lighting Can Work For You," "The Immediate Bible," "A Primer on Choosing The Right Church For You," and "Now Playing at a Church Near You... creatively reinforce your message by integrating audio, video, and lighting."<sup>2</sup> *Christianity Today* had an entire issue devoted to the benefits of technology for all areas of Christian influence, including worship.<sup>3</sup> In Denver Seminaries' *Focal Point*, then president Craig Williford said, "Reaching [this generation] for Christ includes the use of video, PowerPoint presentations and graphic arts to enhance the effectiveness of sermons, worship times and Bible study methods."<sup>4</sup> These sorts of sentiments are now the norm rather than the exception as it pertains to worship today, and like the titles of the books, things have only multiplied exponentially in the last 20 years on this front.

Innovation, creativity, and being cutting-edge are "the thing" in contemporary worship. Pathways Church of

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<sup>1</sup> *Group*, 5/6/2001.

<sup>2</sup> *Your Church*, May/June 2001.

<sup>3</sup> *Christianity Today*, February 19, 2001.

<sup>4</sup> Craig Williford, "Technology and Seminary Education: An Oxymoron?" *Focal Point*, Spring 2001, p. 3.

Denver, a self-proclaimed evangelical church, was mentioned in Leonard Sweet's book *Soul Tsunami* as an exemplary postmodern church on the cutting edge of contemporary worship. One woman described Pathways as "a church that's not a church." That's what people want, so let's give it to them. I received a brochure from them advertising the service that they called "Volcanic Mass." On the back of this brochure was a mock quiz meant to entice the reader into trying out this new worship service. As well as an obvious attempt at humor, the quiz explained to us different aspects of their service. They do "visual worship" which is "multi-dimensional art stimulating reflection on God in fresh, new ways." "Electronic music" is "welcoming God's presence through experimental technology-enabled sound." "Divine dialog" is "exposing the words of your heart about life and God." "Interactive art" is "encouraging creativity in worship of God, where the process *is* the product." "Prayer" is "conversation with God."

In Pathways, we had an evangelical Protestant church calling its worship service "mass." More sympathies with medieval/Roman worship were easily seen when I attended one of their services. There were burning candles,

the smell of incense, as well as pictures of the rosary gaudily glorified on Power Point. Though the emergent stuff has kind of died down, giving way to ever newer movements, the philosophies and attitudes that caused Pathways to do these things is the norm in Evangelicalism today.

Not coincidentally, just a couple of years after the old Bethany Baptist church on 55<sup>th</sup> and Baseline went the way of the dodo bird after a short experiment with this kind of stuff and RBCNC was fortunate enough to have rented that building from the school that was then gifted it (you should have seen some of the blasphemous things we cleaned out that came out of their worship services in the aftermath that they had left in the closets), Pathways also went under. On their kind of “obituary” to the church, the website still says, Pathways “offered people in this city a safe place to deconstruct and reconstruct their beliefs about God.”<sup>5</sup> That about says it all.

Because of this innovation and creativity in worship today, what one sees can be as different from church to church as one finds when going into a fast food joint or a fine steakhouse. Most people think this is great. Music

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<sup>5</sup> Susie Grade, “[Pathways Church Closing](#),” *susiegrade.com* (Nov 9, 2013).

ranges anywhere from hymns (rarely), to old style gospel songs, to Neil Diamond-like ditties, to grunge-metal, to just straight up singing Taylor Swift songs, to mixtures of any and all of these. A friend of mine told me that a contemporary church she attended actually sang the theme song to Scooby Doo, the 70's cartoon, in their worship service (she had no idea why they did this)!

There can be a music leader, a “worship” team, a band, or a choir. But God forbid you just have congregational singing. You can sing songs with a projector, sophisticated Power Point presentations of flowing fonts and lively picture scenes, or to full-fledged MTV style videos. But don't bring out that dusty old hymnal. Scripture may be read, but usually is not. [Sermons](#) can be topical, evangelistic, political, social, environmental, pragmatic, sentimental, and almost always self-help, but rarely expositional. [Communion](#) will probably not be done for “seeker” services, but is in other settings. Some churches do “take-out communion.” Here, the Eucharist comes in individually wrapped packages, like you might find your catsup at a drive-thru. You eat it at home. Another church I heard of had pizza and Coke replacing the “traditional” wafer and wine/juice. One is likely to see drama, puppets,

clowns, jugglers, concerts, mime, dance, movies, chatty-like talks, expensive lighting, huge sound systems, massive jumbotrons, smoke machines, theatrical productions, candles, chants, or a plethora of different things going on in any given worship service these days.

“Worship” is so eclectic that most likely a **Christian from any other time in history** would not believe that this is really happening in God’s church. This is American evangelical worship at the beginning of the third millennium. For all of its diversity, there is **one unifying theme** that, if we have eyes to see, dominates our worship like nothing else. It needs to be explored and labeled what it is. It is the worship equivalent to the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, and what it produces is *necessarily* dubious, dangerous, and deadly to the church.

Evangelical worship of the past few decades must, like the shifting shadows of day, **change continually**. There is a **theological root** behind the near infinite tentacles of evangelical “styles” of worship. It is rarely, if ever, discussed. Because of its extremely serious nature, I am compelled to tell you about it, knowing that the worship of God is at the very heart and soul of individual and corporate Christianity. If I’m correct, then we are truly in perilous

times in our American evangelical churches, much to the disbelief and bewilderment of the movement as a whole.

I contend that [this constant need to change our worship](#) is not a good thing and it is not biblical. It is caused by the modern “Christian” fascination with glorifying man and the innate “felt need” that goes hand in hand with it—for humans to control their environment through their choices. R.C. Sproul wrote an article for *Modern Reformation* where he argued that it is not Arminianism that dominates the evangelical landscape. Rather, it is the centuries old heresy [Pelagianism](#) that has captured the heart of the church. Pelagianism is that repugnant theology, condemned over and over again in church history that teaches [the sin of Adam affected no one but himself](#). It teaches that those who have been born since Adam have been born into the condition Adam possessed before his fall. It teaches that there will always remain the possibility and the reality of sinless people. It teaches a human will utterly free from the bondage to sin. It teaches that salvation is not by grace alone. It teaches that the chief work of Christ is to provide us with an example to follow. Pelagianism is especially relevant to a look at worship and the means of grace as it attacks the fallen nature of



humanity and as it replaces the substitutionary work of Christ with that of really good teacher.

Surveys show that Americans believe that “**man is basically good.**” In fact, while 83% of the general population believes this, 77% of “born again Christians”, 74% of Evangelicals, 88% of Catholics and 90% of mainline Protestants agree with this statement.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, 82% of Americans believe “**God helps those who help themselves,**” while “84% of those attending an evangelical church, 83% of those who are Catholic, and 87% of those who are aligned with a mainline Protestant church concur.<sup>7</sup> When considering these facts, Sproul is correct in his assessment: “**Neither of these positions is semi-Pelagian. They’re both Pelagian.**”<sup>8</sup>

The **rosy Pelagian view of human goodness** combined with its optimistic view of human freewill and choice simply dominates nearly every corner of the evangelical subculture, especially our worship. It seems logical to conclude that what Christians do and how they act usually says more about what they really believe than do their

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<sup>6</sup> George Barna, *What Americans Believe*, (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1991), 89. This was 35 year ago! Have things gotten better?

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>8</sup> R.C. Sproul, “The Pelagian Captivity of the Church,” *Modern Reformation*, May/June 2001, p. 27.



actual confessions. Not many today even know what Pelagianism is, let alone confess that this is what they believe. Yet, if Pelagianism is truly rampant in our churches, then we would not be surprised to find it affecting our worship in many different areas. I tell you this to demonstrate how this Pelagian *impulse*, this *human* sovereignty, is fueling worship today and to offer a loud alarm that we must repent, or this heresy which has been condemned over and over again in church history will have captured our hearts and minds to the point that evangelicalism will be irretrievably silenced as a voice of the true Christian message. 20 years after this paper, this is more true than ever before.

## CHOICE IS OMNIPRESENT

Leonard Payton begins his wonderful little booklet on worship music with these words, “**Westerners demand a choice. We must have the right to choose. Truth be told, we are far more concerned that we be allowed to choose than we are about making the right choice.**”<sup>9</sup> But what does choice have to do with worship today? Elmer Towns explains,

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<sup>9</sup> Leonard R. Payton, *Reforming Our Worship Music* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1999), p. 9.

Historically, when Protestant church members moved their home from one location to the next they usually chose a new local church on the basis of doctrine, not on the basis of worship style ... Now they choose a church primarily by its style of worship ... America's Protestants choose churches on the basis of what entertains us, satisfies us, or makes us feel good about God and ourselves.<sup>10</sup>

In our day, the *descriptive* has become *prescriptive*. What people *do* in worship, without thought and without question, becomes what people *should do* in worship. Towns' descriptive comment is *not given* in order to *evaluate* the goodness of such actions, but is rather given as the jumping off point for how we can use our appetite for choice in creative, new ways! The very fact that worship has become nearly inseparable with "style" seems to demonstrate my point. Ascribing worth to an unchanging God who has condescended to tell us how he wants us to worship him is now completely turned on its head as we decide how we want him to be worshipped by us. We worship God *our way*.

Today, *personal preference and choice dominate worship*. In a consumer culture, choice is omnipresent. In a

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<sup>10</sup> Elmer Towns, *Putting an End to Worship Wars* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1997), p. 9, 10, 11.

market driven society, the nature of style is one of subjective taste, fad, and personal preference. Worship styles have no more meaning than does the latest marketing on a cereal box. Towns says, “If we recognize church worshipers as consumers, we will recognize church programs as menus, and types of worship as the main entrees in a restaurant. Consumers go where the menu fits their taste.”<sup>11</sup> Much like we expect to get what we want when we want it at a mall, the same holds true of our worship today.<sup>12</sup> George Barna shows clearly that Christians are flitting and fleeting from one church to the next, quite comfortable with not committing to any given congregation (or in some cases committing to more than one congregation) because they like parts of one church here and parts of other churches there. “Our preference is for variety in our church experiences, rather than getting the most out of all that a single church has to offer.”<sup>13</sup> The key words are “preference,” “variety,” and “experiences.” We go to church to “get out of it” what we can.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>12</sup> The church-growth movement’s language that the church is a business with a product sell and customers to buy has certainly contributed greatly to this notion. The overlap between the type of worship that dominates today with the theology of this movement can not be understated.

<sup>13</sup> George Barna, *The Second Coming of the Church* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1998), p. 19.

Regretfully, **I can speak from my own experience.** In college, I attended a prominent church in Minneapolis because it had great, doctrinally strong preaching. Yet, I attended another church just as frequently because I enjoyed the music and had several friends who went there. Finally, I was *involved* in yet a third church because my old youth pastor had moved there and he wanted me to help him out. Three churches gave me three different experiences and I consumed the parts of each that I wanted to while discarding the rest. This is unbridled “choice” allowed to freely roam the countryside, and this mentality is causing churches to have to adapt continually in order to meet the *flavor of the day* for the “customer” they are “producing.”

## **A GOOD HUMAN NATURE CAN'T WORSHIP IMPROPERLY**

Of course, many people today think there is absolutely nothing wrong with flavors of the day, as they pertain to worship styles. Rick Warren said, “**The truth is, there isn't a biblical style of worship. Each Sunday true believers around the world give glory to Jesus Christ using a**

thousand equally valid expressions and styles.”<sup>14</sup> Paul Basden remarks, “What the New Testament *never* does is identify one particular style of worship as more Christian, more biblical or more holy than another.”<sup>15</sup> By “style,” they certainly mean more than baroque or folk styles of music. As another person has said, “It is not how you worship, it is who you worship.”<sup>16</sup>

Part of the Pelagian impulse of our day<sup>17</sup> is its unwillingness to critically evaluate anything churches do that are novel. This comes from the fact that at least in practice, our pastors and leaders presuppose that whatever they do must be just fine with God. And this stems (whether implicitly or explicitly, it does not matter) from a positive view of mankind’s innate goodness and our unwillingness to admit our depravity and sinful nature. Could it be that the assumption is that our “basically good” human natures are simply incapable of worshipping God improperly? The Bible makes it clear that one can be a believer and still worship God the wrong way. Look at

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<sup>14</sup> Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), p. 241.

<sup>15</sup> Paul Basden, *The Worship Maze: Finding a Style to Fit Your Church* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 1999), p. 35.

<sup>16</sup> Towns, 23.

<sup>17</sup> Again, I am not claiming that these men or anyone else in this paper is a Pelagian. Rather it is the impulse and inroads of Pelagianism that is changing the way we think about worship.

Cain and his offering, Nadab and Abihu, Uzzah and the ark, or Ananias and Sapphira. All of the reformational confessions are unanimous here! The second commandment clearly teaches us that we should not represent God or worship him in any other manner than he has commanded in his word.<sup>18</sup> This is based off Scriptures such as **Deuteronomy 12:4, 32** which teaches, “You must not worship the LORD your God in [the nations] way ... Everything that I command you, you shall be careful to do. You shall not add to it or take from it.

This is a *transcultural* truth because the worship of God is towards the God who is *unchanging*. It is *for him* first, not us. That doesn't mean God doesn't do things for and to us through worship, but it does mean he only does this when we are worshiping him rather than ourselves. If that's not happening, then what is the real source of what people are “getting out of” their worship? Maybe it's not God at all! Since his worship is for him, he gets to choose how it is performed and what is required. Paradoxically, when we think that worship is for us, we end up worshiping ourselves and God doesn't actually do anything to and for

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<sup>18</sup> See *Heidelberg Catechism* questions 96-98; *Westminster Confession of Faith* 20.2; *Belgic Confession* Article 7; *The Baptist Confession of 1689* 22:1, *The Baptist Catechism* questions 56-58.

us in this worship. We do it to ourselves. Or some other entity does! But when we worship God, a mysterious occurrence takes place. He changes us because we have encountered him in **through the means** he chooses, because he knows that these are what we need. And he chooses to bless those means. More on that in a bit.

But first, this idea is exactly **the opposite view taken by Protestant churches today** whose criterion for inventions in worship is not explicit positive commands, but prohibitions only. This is ironically the view of Roman Catholicism that Protestants reformed yet are returning to with near reckless abandon, and we know what gross abuses and havoc medieval worship caused by the time the Reformers came around, and even long before.

An example may help here. It appears that Nadab and Abihu had the Roman principle in mind in **Leviticus 10:1-3** when they offered “**strange fire**” to God and he incinerated them for it. **Jeremiah Burroughs** points out, “**Their sin was offering strange fire ... [Yet] there is no text of Scripture that you can find from the beginning of Genesis to this place where God has said in so many words expressly, ‘You shall offer no fire but one kind of fire.’ And yet here they are consumed by fire from God for offering strange fire.**”



“They had been told that they should constantly keep the fire on the altar burning and never let it go out (Lev 6:13). It was God’s intention that they should make use of that fire and that fire only.”<sup>19</sup> The text does not say that they were “insincere,” but simply that they brought fire “which [the LORD] had not commanded them” (Lev 10:1).

I need to point out that in each of the above quotes [Warren, Basden, Towns], there is no critical thinking or justification at all for these statements. Instead, being consistent with their hermeneutic of worship, it is simply assumed that the Bible says nothing about that they are doing because it is not forbidden. How do we know that the thousands of methods and means and measures that Christians express themselves in are “valid?” Israel and Judah, the very people of God, expressed themselves in many ways that the prophet’s condemned as dubious and invalid. Corrupt worship was perhaps the primary thrust of the prophets! The books of the Kings are perhaps the clearest examples of how God views proper, biblical worship as each king is held up to the standard of David and Jeroboam and how they worshipped God.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Jeremiah Burroughs (1599-1646), *Gospel Worship* (Ligonier, PA, Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1990, 1648), 3-4.

<sup>20</sup> We simply do not have the space here to exposit the literally dozens of biblical examples of people who worshiped God improperly and unlawfully. From Cain, to the seven churches of

## CHOICE MAKES US LIKE THE CULTURE

But the thinking continues. *This is simply the way our society is, and in order to win the lost, we must reach them where they are. If this means offering choices in worship or creating new forms of worship, so be it.* In order to examine this, I want to look at the infatuation American Christianity has with being culturally relevant in worship. Let us understand that it was the highly liberal (and Pelagian) [World Council of Churches](#) that had the slogan, “[The world sets the agenda for the church.](#)” What the god of “choice” is doing to our worship is forcing it to become exactly like the culture. In the Bible this is not a good thing. Rather, it is repeatedly condemned as [syncretism](#). From the secular side of things, we have a society that loves to choose and consume everything in its path. Fads are the popular thing in America, created by clever marketing and slick advertising. Nothing stays the same anymore in our culture at large.

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Revelation and those in between (like Israel at Mt. Sinai, Gideon, Uzzah, Jereboam, Israel, Judah, the Corinthians and the list could go on and on), the Bible is replete that we are to worship the proper God **in the proper way**. He wants us to obey not only the first commandment, but the second as well. A good place to start a study of this would be [Kevin Reed's](#) *Biblical Worship* available online at [http://www.swrb.com/newslett/actualnls/BibW\\_ch0.htm](http://www.swrb.com/newslett/actualnls/BibW_ch0.htm).

When we add this to the new mentality that the church is a **business** that supplies a **customer** (the pagan) with a **product** (relationships), as Barna puts it,<sup>21</sup> it is easy to see why the church must constantly change its worship. The larger culture loves change and choice and new shiny things. I remember back when King Soopers built a new store on the SE side of 104<sup>th</sup> and Federal. Safeway then built one on the west side. But only a few years later, King Soopers tore down its store to build a bigger one on the west side next to Safeway, so Safeway then tore down its store and built a new one right where the old King Soopers was on the SE side!

The idea is, we want to reach the larger culture. Therefore, we must change and provide choice in our worship that's just like this. **Worship becomes a fad**, something new, popular, shiny, exciting, big! The popular bumper sticker "**win the lost at any cost**" fits this all-consuming mentality perfectly. The Church Growth movement's emphasis on evangelism has done a service to the church as it has helped us right the wrongs of the church's fortress mentality. But it has also hurt the church

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<sup>21</sup> See George Barna, *Marketing the Church* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1988), Pp. 26-36; 50-52.

tremendously by making evangelism the most important purpose of the church. This is not the Bible's main purpose for church. In the Great Commission of **Matthew 24**, **the command is not to "go"** (as these proof-texters—having evangelism as the main purpose—would tell us). Rather, the command is to **"make disciples."** If we are going to use this as our proof text for the purpose of the church (and worship!), then we at least ought to get the grammar correct! Indeed, it is worse, because the Church Growth movement actually **turned the audience of worship into seekers**, and they then become the people who make up the church. Where are all the Christians to now go? How do they get discipled? In this way, the entire definition of what church is changed at its core.

Nevertheless, the thinking seems to go like this: *Winning the lost is the most important thing the church can do. Since it is our responsibility to save as many people as we can, and because we do not want anyone to go to hell if we can prevent it (because their eternal souls rest in our hands?), then we need to be as pragmatic about our approach as possible. **Let us use whatever methods** will work in our worship services to make sure that as many people as possible 'get saved.'* This inevitably ends up meaning that we must **emulate the style of the culture**

(while supposedly not compromising the message) in our worship (which is naively and profoundly wrong). We must give the people what they want. Thus, *for Evangelicals, in order to win the culture, the methods and measures and styles of the culture set the agenda for the Evangelical church.* But this strategy can never work and it is not working today. Churches are simply not seeing more conversions now than in the past. In fact, the overall numbers in new paradigm churches are actually shrinking!<sup>22</sup> How foolish it is to believe that we must become like the world in order to win the world.<sup>23</sup> In the end, if the church looks exactly like the world in its worship, what exactly do we think we are going to convert this same world to?

Becoming culturally relevant *can* be a perfectly acceptable thing to do. Leith Anderson comments on meeting at different times for worship services when he says,

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<sup>22</sup> Statistics of mainline churches have shown this for years. Now, evangelicals are following suit. See David F. Wells, *God in the Wasteland* (Leicester, England: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), p. 21, n.6.

<sup>23</sup> This is a notion that never works, as I will demonstrate later. Style has intrinsic meaning that must fit the message. When the two differ, it is always the message that eventually conforms to the style.

The shift away from farming and the popularity of football are examples of the changes that are affecting the times when Americans worship God. Some may say that the sacred should not be subject to the secular, and often that is true ... however, we cannot view the church as an island isolated from the rest of society. It cannot be isolated. As the culture changes, the church changes.<sup>24</sup>

No one will argue that meeting at 7:00 am on Sunday is theologically better or worse than meeting at noon on Sunday. I would not call these considerations “culturally relevant” as much as I would call them prudent and wise. These are simply *circumstances* of worship, as our Confession teaches. However, we can quickly see where his slogan “as the culture changes, the church changes” leads when churches begin having worship services, not on what the Bible calls “the Lord’s day” (the day on which worship was regulated in the New Testament and has been kept for nearly 2000 years), but on any and every other day of the week *except* Sunday, because people watch football on that day! This change in days of worship is not argued for biblically but *pragmatically*.

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<sup>24</sup> Leith Anderson, *Dying For Change* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1990), p. 43.

The potential problems with cultural relevance are that it introduces things in worship that have not been commanded by God. This in turn easily lends itself towards a flippant view of worship. If God no longer controls, through specific commands, what belongs in *his* worship, **his commands become background material**, left in the dust by our own introductions and innovations and idolatrous hearts. This is what happened to the church at Corinth.

After mocking God's foolish method, i.e. preaching, in chapters 1 and 2, the church became corrupt to the point that we find gross disobedience, frivolousness, and innovations throughout her worship. For example, 1 Corinthians 11 discusses **Communion**. Improper treatment of the Supper meant many among the Corinthians were weak and sick, and a number had fallen asleep (**1Cor 11:20, 30**). In this example, we see God taking judgment out upon *believers* for abusing this biblical *method/style* of proclaiming the gospel (**11:26**): Communion. Communion, like preaching, is in fact a *style* of proclaiming the message of the gospel.

The Corinthians were treating Communion as any other meal. They were showing favoritism and being “**culturally relevant**,” acting in church as they would at



home or in a bar. They were making their friends feel comfortable and welcome at the table while inevitably abusing others who were not “in” on their particular culture (not much differently than we sometimes treat the elderly by denying their cultural heritage when we force our contemporary styles in their faces). That obviously opens up a huge can of worms in terms of worship-wars over styles, but this is precisely why the Reformation set to make styles of singing, for instance, something that was transcultural, precisely because it was being influenced by theology rather than culture. That’s really, for example, what Bach was trying to do in with the music he created.

Furthermore, they were **treating as common that which is sacred**. Paul says, “for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk. *Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?*” [emphasis mine] (**1Cor 11:21-22**). Not only is Communion to be a part of the service (a notion being challenged from all sides in modern worship), but it is to be done *biblically*. As Paul also says, if you do not do it biblically, then “**it is not the Lord's Supper you eat**” (**vs. 20**). If it is not the Lord’s Supper you eat, then it is not

the Lord's *worship* you give. Here we see *style* (how Communion was 'done') *directly impacting the very meaning of the sacrament*. Robert Godfrey rightly says, "The Bible reminds us that neither our instincts nor our traditions nor our experiments are reliable guides to worship. The Bible itself is our only reliable guide."<sup>25</sup> For the church at Corinth, people had to die in order to figure out this point! What is it going to take for Evangelicals?

Another, more serious example of "choice" leading to non-critical adoption of cultural tactics can be seen in how our worship services have shifted from having *God as the audience* to having the customer or *consumer as the audience*. George Barna makes this clear when he tells us "a fundamental principle of Christian communication: the audience, not the message, is sovereign."<sup>26</sup> And just who is the audience in worship? Paul Basden is unmistakable. For traditional services, he says, "*believers are the target audience*." For seeker churches, "*unbelievers are the target audience*."<sup>27</sup> In all cases, according to the new paradigm thinkers, it is always *people* and *never God* who is the true "audience" in worship. Here we can see Pelagianism in all

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<sup>25</sup> Robert Godfrey, *Pleasing God in Our Worship* (Wheaton, Crossway Books, 1999), p. 16.

<sup>26</sup> Barna, *Marketing the Church*, 145.

<sup>27</sup> Basden, p. 101.

of its glory, sinisterly replacing God himself as the object of worship with human beings! This is perhaps the most fundamental point of worship. It is for him. We are worshiping him.

Lest someone at this point accuse me of going too far, I quickly point out the language used to describe our “sanctuaries.” First off, they are no longer called sanctuaries, but *auditoriums* or *gymnasiums*. In the front we have the *stage*. The motivational “*speaker*” has replaced the preacher. He roams around either amongst the people or all over the stage, talking to them as if it were a fireside chat rather than a sermon. Bands “*play*,” singers “*perform*,” pastors “*make you laugh*” (it sounds way too familiar to the scene around Mt. Sinai with Aaron and the golden calf - **Exodus 32:6**). How are we to take such drastic replacement of our church terminology theologically? The obvious way to take it is at face value. Worship no longer centers upon God. The focus is the audience. The purpose is to please and excite people.

As further proof, let us move for a moment **to the music** that is sung throughout “contemporary” evangelical worship. In a chapter that Donald Miller calls “**Beyond Rationality: Democratizing Access to the Sacred**,” we are

given the following sympathetic understanding behind contemporary worship music. “We direct more of our songs to God as opposed to singing about God.”<sup>28</sup> Now, there is nothing wrong with singing songs to God. The Psalter has many such songs and parts of songs. While it is certainly biblical to sing songs to God, we must realize that this emphasis is a significant departure from songs written in much less consumeristic, narcissistic cultures. Think of the songs *Amazing Grace*, *A Mighty Fortress*, or *The Church’s One Foundation*. These are the hymns that dominated worship music from the time of the Reformation until the middle of the Second Great Awakening. It was understood up until this time that songs were extremely important in the worship of God for singing with thankfulness in one’s heart (Eph 5:19) and also for teaching and admonishing one another (Col 3:16). Leonard Payton did a study of over four hundred modern praise choruses and gospel songs. “I found that most of them fit within [singing with thankfulness], with about thirty in [teaching], and fewer than ten in [admonition].<sup>29</sup> Much “church” music today is

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<sup>28</sup> Donald E. Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 87.

<sup>29</sup> Leonard Payton, “How Shall We Sing to God”, in *The Coming Evangelical Crisis*, ed. John Armstrong (Chicago: Moody Press, 1996), p. 191.

over the top on [sentimental feelings](#) and has forgotten the other biblical purposes of singing. Is it not possible that this has happened, again, because we have replaced God throughout the entire worship service with ourselves? And could this not be a reflection of the fact that we no longer believe that we need God's continual grace through the completed work of Christ—as Christians—because his example (WWJD?) is something that we can and do follow perfectly fine on our own, according to the neo-Pelagian impulses?

During [the Second Great Awakening](#) (early-mid 1800s), a dramatic shift took place theologically in Protestant churches. God-centered theology of Jonathan Edwards, George Whitfield, and even to a degree John Wesley (especially via his brother Charles) was dealt a heavy blow by the likes of a Pelagian named [Charles Finney](#) through his use of “[New Measures](#).” Finney's theology of church came from his theology of salvation. He said that we are not saved from God's just wrath and ingrafted into Christ's church by a supernatural work of God's Spirit working through ordinary means of grace—i.e. preaching the gospel and the sacraments. Rather, conversion is “[not a miracle or dependent on a miracle in](#)

any sense, but is the philosophical result of the right use of means.” Therefore, the job of the evangelist or revivalist or even pastor is to find “excitement sufficient to induce repentance.”<sup>30</sup> The whole point of making the worship “exciting” comes from bad theology!

God has given to his church “means of grace.” These are not musical styles, rock bands, incense and altars, anxious benches, altar calls, praying the Sinner’s Prayer each week to get resaved, fancy stage lighting, and every kind of overload of the sensory experience. None of that. They are ordinary, common means that God has told us that he is pleased to use for our salvation and sanctification for everything we need to live godly quiet lives that are pleasing to him and fulfilling to us. Traditionally, these have been understood as the preached word (although I will include in this also the sung and read word), and the visible word—that is the two sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Some have included church discipline and others have included prayer and fellowship. And really, that’s it. It isn’t complicated. It doesn’t need new

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<sup>30</sup> See Michael S. Horton, “[What Makes Something a Sacrament?](#)” *Westminster Seminary California*.



inventions. What it needs is faith. We need to believe him on this.

One of the things I'm **proudest of** in my 20 plus years at RBCNC is that this is a church that loves the means of grace and has always had leadership that wants to put them front and center. This is a church that teaches and believes strongly that God uses ordinary, boring, common, mundane things to extraordinary, incredible, even miraculous ends. For these things bring peace, contentment, fulfillment, rest, deep satisfaction, and hope. They fill us with all those things that all these Christians who do not seem to care about them are looking for in all the wrong places and trying to achieve by their own means.

If you will indulge me a little longer. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century and basically ever since, worship changed dramatically. One might say “change” has been the DNA of American Christianity since the founding of our nation, or just barely after. Unlike the First Great Awakening, **revivals became the work of people rather than God**. The music of the day reflected these changes greatly. Gone were hymns rich in doctrinal content. In their place came the familiar gospel songs of which the modern “praise



chorus” is an heir. When we view songs like *In the Garden*, *I Surrender All*, and *Pass It On*, we see just how dramatic the shift really was. Godfrey again says, “Whereas traditionally music was an important part of the dialogue between God and his people, for many it has become the heart of worship, even called the ‘Praise and Worship’ part of the service. Music seems to have become for some a new sacrament.”<sup>31</sup>

Grammatically, when we sing songs about God, he becomes the direct object. Take for example the short sentence “I love you Lord.” “Lord” is the direct object while “I” becomes the subject of the song! When we add this to the highly experiential and non-rational nature of so much contemporary worship music, we end up with a doubly subjective worship service. We (the **subjects**) sing songs about our (**subjective**) feelings and emotions about God! Again, the Pelagian impulse is remarkable. Pelagianism’s disdain of forensic justification, original sin, and substitutionary atonement means we don’t need to sing about such things either. In fact, not only do we not sing about things like these, many pastors won’t even mention

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<sup>31</sup> Robert Godfrey, “The Reformation of Worship,” in *Here We Stand: A Call From Confessing Evangelicals* ed. James Boice and Benjamin Sasse (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 162.

them because “the words are too big and people just can’t understand the concepts.”

With the heart of the gospel cut out, what is left to sing about is either our feelings about God or how we are going to obey him in our own strength or manipulate him to do our bidding (all of which can be seen in Appendix A). Godfrey closes out this thought nicely when he says, “Where doctrine teaches that man is good and God is benevolent, worship will be upbeat – the children’s playroom – and life will be oriented to self-fulfillment. Where worship focuses on human needs and entertainment, the doctrine of God, sin and grace will wither and life will become self-centered. Where life is self-indulgent, doctrine and worship will also be self-indulgent.”<sup>32</sup>

## **SELF-CENTERED WORSHIP DEMANDS NOTHING**

It should come as no surprise therefore to find *worship* being synonymously used with *music* and *singing*. Today music time is actually called “praise and *worship*,” while we often see nothing else in the service being called worship at

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<sup>32</sup> Robert Godfrey, “The Reformation of Worship”, p. 172.

**all!** Be late for the Call to Worship? Meh, not really a big deal. That's not really worship after all. Leave early from the Benediction, no biggie. But you better be there when the band starts. When people replace God as the audience of worship, the very meaning of worship must be changed. This is how it works. First, "worship" (worship implies that God is the object) is reduced to "music" (In reality, music is an aspect of worship, but it is not the sum total of worship). But "music" does not *have* to have God as the object as "worship" does. One can sing about people, animals, events, food etc. Next, because worship is seen as merely music (especially music as defined by pop culture), it quickly, and I would argue *necessarily* due to the message of the very style itself, becomes intensely subjective and centered around the singer, rather than objectively centered around God. That is, the entire service of worship that used to point to Jesus Christ through music and preaching and the ordinances and prayer etc. is now only relegated to one aspect of the service: **music**. And this is why music absolutely dominates most of the time in Evangelical worship today. Because worship is now only music, and music is not necessarily about and for God, *worship* is no longer about and for God.

This drastic reorientation from God being the object of worship to the “**seeker**” being the focus of worship has been perhaps the central organizing force behind the **dramatic changes we have seen in contemporary worship**. It has changed the object of worship songs from an objective message to subjective human experiences. It has led to a reversion to medieval worship’s **use of drama and images** because these are more “user-friendly” to the worshiper. It has seen a dramatic reinterpretation of the very purpose of Scripture from a book chronicling the historic-redemptive purposes of God’s saving action culminating in Jesus Christ, to a book of mostly helpful tidbits of “**good-advice**” to a happier, healthier life. When God ceases to be the object of worship, then the biblical elements of worship<sup>33</sup> must all be **reevaluated for their pragmatic ability to meet human’s felt needs** and the end result is to look exactly like the larger culture. Worship can no longer change our thoughts, hearts, and actions. Instead, it must merely make me happy for the moment. The Pelagian impulse has truly inculcated every facet of today’s music lyrics and style.

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<sup>33</sup> The Confessions of faith all identify the same elements. For example, the Westminster Confession says, “The **reading of the Scriptures** with godly fear, the sound **preaching** and conscionable **hearing** of the Word, in obedience unto God, with understanding, faith and reverence, **singing of psalms** with grace in the heart; as also, the due administration and worthy receiving of the **sacraments** instituted by Christ, (and **prayer**) are all parts of the ordinary religious worship of God. WCF 21.5.

## Common Objections

The most common remarks to anyone who **questions the validity** of new methods of worship is to brand them “**old-fashioned,**” say they are simply “**unwilling to change**” and throw them into a stereo-type of people who are horribly “**fearful of change**” or “**have their head in the sand.**” Elmer Towns has identified that often times traditionalists “**use worship to control people.**”<sup>34</sup> Robert Webber says, “**There are traditionalists who want worship to be as it was. These are the people who resist change or are so deeply committed to a particular historical model of worship that talk of incorporating new styles of worship is intolerable.**”<sup>35</sup> Paul Basden remarks, “**Why are some people so offended by the idea of worship styles? Because they have naively decided that all churches everywhere should worship the same way that they do!**”<sup>36</sup> One **looks in vain** to find a new paradigm proponent mentioning how *some* who are suspicious of innovation and change in worship are suspicious for biblical or exegetical reasons! Rather, all

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<sup>34</sup> Towns, 147.

<sup>35</sup> Robert Webber, *Worship Old & New* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), p. 12

<sup>36</sup> Basden, p.33.

who are suspicious are either naive, traditional, and/or just incalitrantly stubborn.

I do not doubt at all that there is indeed some truth in these statements. I have experienced more than one church that refuses to change merely because the tradition has become comfortable. Traditionalists are as likely to defend their “style” by personal preference as are contemporary worshippers. “Traditionalists” are not justified in doing something “because it is old” any more than contemporary advocates are justified in doing something “because it is new.” The problem with these statements is not the truth that they contain, but rather that *ad hominems* are offered as proof for why it is perfectly fine to change our worship. “Traditionalists” is too often just name calling.

I believe however that innovation and change is a relatively new way of thinking within the historic Protestant faith and strangely in some ways even in Rome and Orthodoxy (though, clearly, “new methods” did creep in—but no where near like they have in Protestantism). There was a time when worship was strongly defended and justified by churches, ministers, and statements of faith on biblical grounds alone. All a person has to do to see this is read John Calvin, John Knox, John Owens, George

Gillespie, Jeremiah Burroughs, Francis Turretin, the Westminster divines or a number of other defenders of biblical worship. Certainly there were minor differences in styles even at this time. The difference between then and now was, [these people all tried to give biblical justification for their styles](#). Remarkably, the services turned out to be quite similar from country to country! The reason one could go to church in Scotland, Holland, Germany, Switzerland, Sweden, or America and feel like you were in a familiar setting was not because these countries were identical in culture and tradition. People of these nations would utterly resent such nonsense. Rather, it was because [they cared enough to search the Scripture to find out what it said about style and form](#). And worship actually created a fairly transcendent culture. Quite contrary to the pundits of our day, their conclusions were remarkably similar. I believe this was because Scripture is clear on this issue if one will only look for it with an open mind. Today, there is no biblical justification given for different styles of worship. No one even cares. We have effectively eviscerated *Sola Scriptura* (Scripture Alone) in favor of pragmatism and personal preference in this most important of matters: worship.



## Why Style Matters

In philosophy, we come to learn that there are such things as **truth, beauty, and goodness**. Christian contemporary worship has failed to grasp that these last two, beauty and goodness, are just as objectively real as is propositional truth. Sadly, they are quickly jettisoning even truth itself. For contemporary worship, Bach is not more beautiful than Bachman Turner Overdrive (a popular 70's Rock band that I like actually). Coke and pizza are no less "good" in representing the sacrifice of the Lamb of God than are bread and wine. The failure to acknowledge the difference is the failure to realize that methods, techniques, and styles have been given **intrinsic meaning by God** (quite apart from any message that may be accompanied with them). For contemporary worship, a movie clip will suffice just as nicely for worshiping God - The Consuming Fire - perhaps even more than preaching. The meanings are all the same. The styles communicate nothing. Donald Miller unwittingly makes my point when he says, "**Young people could *imagine* Jesus playing a guitar in a way that they could not *picture* him at a pipe organ or**

leading a choir” [emphasis mine].<sup>37</sup> In Miller’s mind, my categories of goodness and beauty do not even come up. Rather, worship music is done the way it is because people find “it has an audience” and “a culturally current rhythm.”<sup>38</sup> We see that today we do music because this is what we can imagine Jesus might do if he were here today ... as we make God in our own image.

Rice and Huffstutler make the true observation, “Many worshipers, used to a particular style, feel they have not worshiped unless they have been accorded their favorite style.”<sup>39</sup> What leads people to think this way is exactly why we must conclude that **style is not neutral**. If we cannot worship God unless we get *our* fill of a particular genre of music that makes *us* happy, we demonstrate a bias in who it really is that is the object of worship in our minds. Feeling like I have worshipped if and only if I get to sing those songs that I like with those styles that excite me means, quite simply, that *I* am the true subject of this worship experience. Rather than asking what about if God is happy with this service, it seems much more likely that

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<sup>37</sup> Miller, p. 83.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Howard Rice and James Huffstutler, *Reformed Worship* (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 2001), p. 107.

we choose our worship experiences according to this philosophy: “If momma’s not happy, nobody’s happy.” Today, it is our imagination and feelings that ends up dictating how our worship experience is crafted instead of Holy Scripture! Paul calls this “will-worship,” Jesus calls it the “traditions of men,” and Peter calls it “a yoke that we are not able to bear.”<sup>40</sup>

For contemporary worship, preaching is boring and does not *work* as well as do plays and mime dances. John Calvin was of the opinion that this same thinking was behind the Corinthian use of “clever speech” and “persuasive words”.

Hence I conclude that they were persons who did not openly take away any thing from the substance of the gospel, but, as they burned with a misdirected eagerness for distinction, I am of the opinion that, with the view of making themselves admired, they contrived a new method of teaching, at variance with the simplicity of Christ.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> To understand this extremely important point that the Regulative Principle of worship was developed in order to prevent institutions from binding the consciences of others in worship with “the traditions of men”, thus causing a very “heavy yoke” for those who believe only God has the right to bind our consciences in worship through Scripture, see the extremely important work: T. David Gordon, “Freedom in Worship,” *Modern Reformation*, March/April 2000, p. 34-46.

<sup>41</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians*.

Paul's defense of preaching was that **it did not need humans to improve upon it to make it work better**. It may not *feel* that way, but that's the truth—*if we believe it*. Even the most boring and ill equipped preacher, so long as he is being faithful to God's word to preach it, has a power that the greatest orators in human history do not possess. **Preaching is a method designed, by God, to effectively mediate the gospel message**. New styles, contrary to popular opinion, actually end up making a mockery of the power of God to save sinners, for implicit in their message is the notion that the style itself is needed to supplement the power of the gospel announcement. How often do we hear things like *we need video or drama in our day because people are visual learners*? People really do come into our worship service and notice that we don't have these things. That's deliberate. Now you are starting to understand why.

The **assumed theology** of this thinking is that **it is not the gospel of Christ** itself that reaches out to our stone hearts and regenerates us *because* we are dead and unable to understand it (no matter what the medium is). Rather, the assumption is that we are good enough, wise enough, smart enough, and savvy enough to come to Christ on our own with just a little help from our inventions. This

Pelagianism destroys the meaning of **Romans 1:16** that the gospel, quite apart from our methods, is the power of God to the salvation of everyone who believes. **This is why style and methods matter!** God has chosen the foolish things (methods included) to shame the wise in order that we may not boast in our works (including how we “do church”) or our salvation. **God’s foolish methods actually demonstrate all the more his power to save sinners** by an announcement of the person and works of Jesus Christ precisely because his methods look to us like they should not work! It is never methods, but a message that saves. So, when we add new styles to worship, we are in effect saying to God, **“The gospel can’t work without our help.”**

Communion, baptism, biblically contextual and theologically diverse songs, doctrinally correct prayers, Scripture reading, and biblical fellowship all stand in the way of our evangelizing seekers in our worship in the minds of today’s pundits. Yet, God commands that we do these methods/styles and that we do them biblically “when we come together.” These have always been understood as **necessary aspects of worship**, until just very recently. For contemporary worship, the eye dominates the ear. Thus, faith no longer comes “through hearing” as we learn in

Romans. Instead, it comes through cleverly packaged and marketed videos or slick presentations from computers and soon, from A.I. For contemporary worship, fun dominates while suffering, discipleship, and coming to Christ in weakness and repentance of sin have little or no place.

## CONCLUSION

It is my strong and sorrowful conclusion that current evangelical trends in worship fall tragically and dangerously short of true biblical worship. This is derived from a conviction that **there actually is such a thing as biblical worship**, something very few even believe anymore! The God who cared enough to tell us about himself and that he wants us to worship him in order that we might enjoy him forever, has not left us in the dark as to how he would like us to do this. My contention is that current worship often looks more like pre-exile Jewish worship looked to the prophets - a sickening blend of skeletal tradition given “life” by syncretistic cultural/pagan religious styles. Evangelicals are becoming notorious in their near wholesale abandonment of biblical doctrine in exchange for narcissistic experiences. We still say, on

paper, that we believe the right things. The Pelagianism we have been considering is not found in statements of faith. That is, if they even have a statement of faith, which is increasingly a problem. Instead, it naturally occurs from the vacuum caused when “doctrine” is seen as a word that divides and creates unnecessary disunity.

In the name of “peace” we simply no longer teach, preach, or confess the robust and full orbbed faith of our fathers. As we have created a god void of justice, anger, holiness, “other-ness,” wrath, and power, because these attributes are simply not “seeker-sensitive;” we have taken biblical concepts of God’s love, mercy, kindness, and tolerance and emphasized them to the exclusion of these others. We have created worship that is almost exclusively immanent, giving us “a god who is near and not far off” (not a good thing in Jeremiah’s mind) just as Judah did so many years before (see [Jeremiah 23:23](#)). It is worship of subjective feelings to the detriment of objective truth, experiential at the expense of the rational, man-made to the expulsion of biblical, and self-centered “will-worship” to the absence of God-centered biblical worship.

What are we to do? Leonard Payton makes a very astute observation when he says,



I begin by reserving my deepest suspicions for those who want answers to the difficulties I have mentioned. The desire for answers is innocent enough, but the spirit in which they are demanded frequently is not. The fact is, the problems in worship are deep, and they are manifold. They have grown steadily over a quarter of a millennium, and they will not be solved overnight. Reformation is needed, and the process will not bring quick results.<sup>42</sup>

My suggestion is that we must acknowledge that there are indeed problems. James Boice said, “Many do not even perceive that there is a problem, which is itself a very large part of the problem.”<sup>43</sup> We cannot even begin to halt the slide, let alone make positive progress until this first move is made. I’ve chosen to preach this today in order to bring a little needed light to modern worship as preparation for the beginning of the biblical remedy to come in the coming weeks. It is extremely serious and quite sobering if my conclusions are correct. Yet, many know they are correct as the Holy Spirit has testified to us through Holy Scripture. Like the prophets of old, our one conclusion must be that we all, including those of us who agree, must

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 201-202.

<sup>43</sup> James Boice, *Here We Stand* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), p. 9.

acknowledge our own guilt and repent. **None of us is perfect in our worship** and we are **all prone to self-deifying worship** more often than any of us will ever admit. It's why we get bored and tired even in biblical worship. We aren't here for the right reasons. Where there is no repentance, there can be no restoration. But where there is repentance, God openly calls us to the pure, refreshing, life-giving worship found only in his Son, Jesus Christ. Then, and only then, are we prepared to go forward in faith to look at the means of grace. But it takes faith to see these things. You must believe God about what he tells you about worship. Do you?

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## Appendix A

This Appendix was in the original paper and was added because of the great concern that I had seen at the time in the music that was being sung at the school. While there has been some great music that has come out in the intervening 20 years, it is still the case that much of Evangelicalism does not sing it, or at least is still singing stuff point out in this vein.

★★★★★

It used to be the case the contemporary worship music was little more than trite jingles with harmless words, sometimes even fairly decent words. In the past, the “worship wars” seemed to be more over the type of *music* that was associated with contemporary songs than over the *content* of the lyrics. Traditional folks *liked* their style of gospel songs while boomers *liked* their style of modern folk/rock music. Neither particularly cared about the content. Since there has really been very little concern about the content of songs for well over 150 years now, it is no wonder that these wars were only about “taste” and personal preference.

But today, I believe very recently, our contemporary music has taken a decidedly downward turn in its content. Someone has said, “the medium is the message.” Leonard Payton talks about how in much contemporary music (by that he means songs that are older than fifteen years, so circa. 1985), “The music does not

communicate what the words do.”<sup>44</sup> Today, I believe it is the case that our words are finally conforming to the forms we have put them in. For a while there was indeed a disconnect where you might find good lyrics put to disconnected forms and rhythms. But today, this is simply not the case. The music has gotten even more intimate, more cozy, more like a fireplace sleepover; less biblical, anti-biblical, and the words are following suit. I want to examine a few songs that are sung here at Denver Seminary and at our own, non-Charismatic churches in order to make this more clear.

It is becoming extremely popular to sing about “seeing” the Lord. Take for example the following song:

### **I See The Lord**

I see the Lord seated on the throne, exalted  
And the train of His robe Fills the temple with glory  
And the whole earth is filled  
The whole earth is filled  
And the whole earth is filled  
With His glory

### *Chorus*

Holy, Holy, Holy,  
Holy Holy is the Lord (2x)

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<sup>44</sup> Payton, *Reforming our Worship Music*, p. 42.

(Repeat entire song again)<sup>45</sup>

What needs to be pointed out is first, this is a fairly direct quote from Isaiah 6:1-3.

In the year that King Uzziah died, **I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple.** [2] Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. [3] And they were calling to one another: "**Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory**" [emphasis mine].

While the song is taken from the text, it is completely out of context. It is not justifiable to suggest that we can write acontextual songs on the basis that we will “fill in the context” for the people during the rest of the service. This is so because the song itself is self-contained. Long after the worship service has passed, the song remains. The didactic purpose of music mentioned earlier, combined with the examples of songs in Scripture simply leaves us no room for this sort of extremely poor treatment of Scripture. It is no less wrong to write and sing songs like this than it would be to put to music the biblical expressions “Judas hanged himself ... go and do likewise.” Wrenching Scripture from its context is something that choruses have been

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<sup>45</sup> Christopher John Falson, “I See The Lord,” Maranatha! Music (1993).

doing for years. But what concerns me is the gravity of our new songs as demonstrated by this song.

Isaiah immediately tells us about door-posts shaking and the temple filling with smoke. He cries out “Woe to me!” I cried. ‘I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.’” Today we sing, as if it were nothing, about actually *seeing* God. We revel in it. We boast in it. Yet, when Isaiah saw God, he wanted to die. He realized and confessed his sin. Later, Isaiah was given the gospel message itself. He is forgiven his sin and sent out to preach to an obstinate people. But we get nothing of what God’s holiness actually does to people in this song, we see no need for repentance, nor do we get any good news. Instead, all we are left with is the dangerous theology that it is just fine and dandy to see God, to gaze upon him without a second thought. Truly, this is Pelagianism in all of its dangerous blindness. Here is another song that does the same thing.

### **When I Look Into Your Holiness**

When I look into your holiness  
When I gaze into your loveliness  
When all things that surround  
Become shadows in the light of You

When I've found the joy  
of reaching your heart



When my will becomes  
enthralled in your love  
When all things that surround  
Become shadows in the light of You ...  
I worship You, I worship you, The reason I live is to worship  
You (2x)<sup>46</sup>

My first comment comes from a friend of mine who told me that he has been to two churches that have, for whatever reason, changed the word “enthralled” to “enthroned!” Second, It is beyond me how people who claim that they love and study the word of God can sing this sort of a song in worship. Never mind that “no one may see God and live” (Exodus 33:20). The Bible teaches that the holiness we are claiming to gaze at is something that is so different from us that it creates rebellion when we do not see it and a death wish if we do see it. In Jesus Christ “all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form.” This includes holiness and loveliness that we sing about here. Yet, Jesus Christ is nowhere to be found in this song. Instead, it seems that like Thomas, we are wanting to gaze into the very eyes of the Father, not content in the clothing of the Son of God who protects us from the New Testament’s “consuming fire” of Almighty God in his glory. This trend disturbs me greatly, because I sense that what

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<sup>46</sup> Wayne and Cathy Perrin, “When I Look Into Your Holiness,” Integrity’s Hosanna! Music (1981). Interestingly, this song did not seem to make its way into the broader Evangelical world until the late ‘90s.

is going on in our music is just the tip of the iceberg. I think these songs show that there are truly revolutionary theological mega-shifts that are taking place in conservative, Protestant worship and theology. I am not sure we will recognize much of anything in the near future if the trend continues like this. Miller says,

In new paradigm churches, worship may be viewed as a form of sacred lovemaking, transcending the routinized rituals that so often structure the human-divine communication. In new paradigm churches, unlike mainline churches, no one tells you when to kneel, sit, recite, or read. Worship proceeds without scripture reading, recitation of creeds, offerings, and all the other busyness that dominates the typical service.<sup>47</sup>

I submit that in new paradigm churches, worship proceeds without Christ himself as the redeemer of sinful people for, or on those rare occasions, when he actually is mentioned, he is almost always relegated to the job of a coach and a cheerleader. I am afraid that Schleiermacher and Pelagius would be pleased.

**Heart of Worship**  
When the music fades  
All is stripped away  
And I simply come  
Longing just to bring

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<sup>47</sup> Miller, 87.

Something that's of worth  
That will bless Your heart  
I bring you more than a song  
For a song in itself  
Is not what you have required  
You search much deeper within  
Through the way things appear  
You're looking into my heart  
I'm coming back to the heart of worship  
And it's all about you  
It's all about you, Jesus  
I'm sorry Lord for the thing I've made it  
When it's all about you  
It's all about you,  
Jesus King of endless worth  
No one could express  
How much you deserve  
Though I'm weak and poor  
All I have is yours  
Every single breath<sup>48</sup>

This song, *Heart of Worship*, demonstrates to a tee what we have been discussing throughout this paper. It is pure sentimentalism, as it gives us no objective reasons for accepting its sometimes-true statements. We sing, “A song is not what [God]

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<sup>48</sup> Matthew James Redman, “The Heart of Worship,” Thankyou Music (1997).

has required.” True enough. Yet, in the answer to what God *has* required, we see no mention of obedience, truth, repentance, or proper standing in God’s eyes (justification) being those things which God does require in our worship. We sing, “I simply come longing just to bring something that’s of worth.” Where then is the mention of Jesus perfect substitutionary sacrifice, the one true thing that must be present in order truly to bless the heart of God in worship?

If one is going to sing about what God *has not* required in worship, one should then sing in that same song what God *has* required in worship! What exactly is the heart of worship according to his song? It seems to be two things. First, it is sincere (the implied requirement of God in the song). While we of course need to be sincere when we worship, sincerity without these things is nothing short of a lie. It is false worship. Biblical worship is not mere sincerity, but also an approaching of God on his terms.

What are those terms? One of God’s terms in worship is clearly obedience. In the words of Samuel to Saul, “Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the LORD? To obey is better than sacrifice (“something that’s of worth that will bless your heart”), and to heed is better than the fat of rams” (1 Samuel 15:22). In Micah’s words, “What does the Lord require of you? To do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8).<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> It is probably the case that the end of this song “all I have is yours, every single breath” is a sacrifice of obedience, though this is at best implicit.

Next, worship must be done in truth rather than with just sentimental feelings. In Jesus' words, "God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth" (John 3:24). True worship demands Christ's sacrifice, not merely our own. Jesus said, "Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me" (Hebrews 10:5). "And where these have been forgiven, there is no longer any sacrifice for sin" (Hebrews 10:18). Finally, Job says, "Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:6). Worship without repentance is empty, meaningless, and insincere.

According to the song, the heart of worship is about Jesus the king. Again, this is true enough. However, let us put this song into the context of our paper, for it cannot be divorced from it. We need to remember that Pelagianism has never denied that Jesus is king, that he died on the cross, or that he is the heart of worship. This point cannot be made strongly enough. The question for the Pelagian is not the existence of Jesus as king, but what Jesus has done for sinners. "King" does not necessarily imply deity. Death on a cross does not imply substitutionary atonement for the Pelagian. For the Pelagian, Jesus the King became our great model, prodding us on to perfection through his example on the cross. All we need is an example, because people themselves are not born sinful, instead they learn sin from others. Thus, in an overall church culture that is infatuated with the Pelagian impulse in her worship, it is truly a sad commentary that a song like this could theoretically be sung by Evangelicals, Catholics, Mormons,

Jehovah's Witnesses, and Liberals alike. Because there's nothing in it to prevent any of them from singing it.

Thus, ironically, the gospel itself is entirely missing from a song whose primary purpose is to tell us the heart of worship, as we insidiously and subtly find no mention of the work of Christ being the thing that pleases God and through which he can be pleased with us. The Bible is quite clear that it is not our work, but God's work that is for believers "The heart of worship." Instead, God seems to be able to be pleased with us quite apart from Christ's work. We only need him to be king, not savior of our souls. Where there is no cross and no resurrection, where there is no *stated* work of Christ—the thing allowing us to please God, there we have justification by faith alone—the very gospel itself—relegated to meaninglessness and irrelevancy. Far from being merely nit-picky on semantics, we must understand that where the law is not proclaimed in its terror and the gospel is not administered as a healing balm, there we are left with a religion of works. Again, this is especially true in a song that is singing about what God requires in worship. We certainly realize that no song can or should do everything. However, the very title of this song demands that these sorts of answers be given. If they are not, all we can be said to be left with is biblically flawed Pelagianism.

Some songs written today are good. I'm not saying that because something is new it is therefore evil any more than I'm saying that if something is old it is therefore good. But songs like this one (yes far too many of our songs today) are not meant to

teach or admonish (two biblical uses of songs). Part of this has to do with the Christian Music Industrial Complex that has taken control of church music away from the local church and put it squarely into the hands of the Corporation, but that's a story for another time.

I think that what songs like these allow us to feel (an appropriate and biblical use of song in and of itself) through their intimate, cozy style must be regarded as extremely dangerous. There is nothing objectively stated about how we are put into a relationship with God in order that we might then be able to worship him properly, truthfully, with sincerity, and with emotion. In a culture of religious pluralism and relativism, this simply can no longer be taken for granted. If we do not worship God his way, including singing songs that are more than sappy, sentimental, reflections of our own idolatrous hearts, our worship will be as acceptable to God as was that of the Israelites on Mount Sinai. They were not guilty of worshiping the wrong God (for they made a feast to Yahweh). They were guilty of worshiping the right God in *the wrong way*.

As you reflect on modern “worship” songs, ask yourself these questions. Is what I am singing about biblically correct? Does this song leave out certain key truths that may be needed in order to reach any of the songs conclusions? How many times do the pronouns “I,” “me,” “us,” or “we” show up in the song? What does this communicate about who we are really singing about, for, and to? If the song is taken from a passage of scripture, how is



the exegesis? Does it wrench the passage out of its context? Does it sing about only the “make you feel good verses” while leaving out the rest of the passage, which in fact provides the biblical context and true meaning for those verses? Does the group of songs focus in on the rest of the worship service as a whole, or are the songs completely arbitrary? How much of the counsel of God is being sung in the totality of songs for any given service? Finally, how much “vain repetition” is taking place in any given song? Is it trying to focus your mind on the finished work of Christ or empty your mind like a Buddhist mantra? Is the song providing any sort of content that can edify not only the heart, but also the mind as well by teaching you about the law or the gospel? Are the songs useful for teaching and admonishing one another or do they communicate half-truths and even lies? Is it being repeated over and over again – to quote the words of a wise man – “because when you have nothing to say, in order to get the point across you should say it a lot.”