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**Substance, Style, And Spirit:
A Theology Of Worship And Church Growth**

Alvin L. Reid

A woman from a free congregational tradition visited a liturgical service. She continually punctuated the message of the pastor with "Praise the Lord!" Finally, a member of the church turned around and said to the guest, "Excuse me, but we don't praise the Lord in the Lutheran church." A man down the pew corrected the member: "Yes we do," he said, "It's on page 19."¹

The revolution in worship services in contemporary evangelicalism is obvious. Over 25,000 congregations use overhead projectors to sing contemporary choruses each Sunday. Multiple thousands of others sing only the old hymns of the faith. Many seek some sort of "blended" style to meet the needs of their members and to make the services palatable for the unchurched. Radical changes in corporate worship have led to "worship wars" in more than a few congregations.

R. W. Dale said, "Let me write the hymns and the music of the church, and I care very little who writes the theology."² He understood the powerful impact worship has on the church. My purpose in this address is to focus on aspects of corporate worship which relate to the evangelistic growth of the church. It seems that most questions deal with style rather than the substance of worship. I believe focusing on church worship style glosses over more significant issues. But more about that later. Let us begin our examination into a theology of worship where we should, in the pages of Scripture.

A common Hebrew word for worship, *shachah*, means "to prostrate oneself." Worship for the Hebrew meant to come be-

fore the Lord in humility. Hebrew worship focused on giving offerings to the Lord. A number of terms in the New Testament denote worship. *Latreuo* is one of many which emphasizes veneration of God. The familiar *proskuneo* means "to kiss toward," i.e., it focuses on one's allegiance to the Lord. To state it simply, worship is to be God-centered. Much of what we do in church is a means to a greater end. Worship is an end in itself. Worship relates directly to the emotions; however, true worship goes deeper.

True worship of the ancient Hebrews was predicated on the activity of God in history, in particular, on the initiative taken by God to reveal Himself to His people. Thus, Abraham was called by God in Genesis 12; in response, Abraham built altars of worship. God revealed to Noah the coming judgment on humanity; Noah responded in obedience by building the ark, and he worshipped God by building an altar after the flood. Ultimately, an elaborate process of worship developed through the tabernacle and the temple. Too often the people of God missed the genuine relationship with God in their ritual, so prophets like Amos exhorted the people to true worship. The Psalms provided songs of worship to God, while national festivals reminded the people to seek the Lord. Eventually, following the Babylonian exile the synagogue service became the heart of Jewish worship.

The New Testament worship services patterned themselves after the synagogue. Phifer noted key differences in the worship services of the early Christians.³ The New Testament writings, particularly Paul's letters and the Gospels, soon became a prominent part of the services. To the Psalms were added Christian hymns, probably including hymns in Paul's epistles (Phil. 2:5-11). Paul encouraged the singing of "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs" (Eph. 5:18-19). Baptism and communion were added features of Christian worship. Zeal characterized the services. The resurrection emphasis led to a celebrative spirit.

Christian worship moved from the Jewish sabbath to the Lord's Day, commemorating the resurrection.

We must recognize that, although we can gain a general knowledge about worship in the early church, "there is, of course, no place in the New Testament which clearly states that the church had any set order of service, and very little information is supplied to us about the outward forms which were in use."⁴ By the early second century, the *Didache* does give evi-

dence to a greater sense of structure. The conclusion is obvious: in the New Testament, the style of worship is not prescribed, but the substance of worship, in particular, the celebration of the risen Lord, is. Just as evangelism must keep a proper tension between the changeless message and changing methods, worship must give attention to a biblical focus while avoiding the temptation to prescribe one form of worship. This reality is born out in history.

The ritualism of the Middle ages mitigated against true worship. Even more foreboding was the theological shift away from an emphasis on a regenerate church, leading to multitudes who observed the liturgy without a personal knowledge of the One they worshipped. Only a dramatic theological restructuring could truly rescue worship.⁵

The Reformation brought such a restructuring. Martin Luther returned the Bible and the hymnbook back to the people. Luther introduced theologically-rich hymns with more familiar tunes and in the language of the common man. As Donald P. Hustad commented, "Worthy lyrics sanctify the secular melody."⁶ In fact, Luther's opponents said Luther did more damage with his hymns than his sermons.⁷ Calvin emphasized the singing of the Psalms.

The Pietists of the late 17th and early 18th centuries began writing subjective hymns, reflecting their emphasis on religion of the heart. At this same time, Isaac Watts began composing hymns. His hymns, including "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross," and "We're Marching to Zion," set a new standard for English church songs, thus his title *The Father of English Hymnody*. By the turn of the 19th century, over 130 hymn collections had been printed.

Franklin Segler once wrote that "a religious awakening has always been accompanied by a revision of the liturgy."⁸ More recent centuries have witnessed the increasing role of music in the evangelistic mission of the Church. One can most clearly trace the roots of music used for evangelistic purposes to the Evangelical Awakening and the ministry of John and Charles Wesley. Charles Wesley wrote over 6,000 hymns. These were crucial to the theology of early Methodism. John preached biblical sermons which emphasized the application of the text to life. To these Charles wed hymns utilizing secular tunes.

The impact of their songs is hard to overestimate. To a large-

ly illiterate population the hymns taught doctrine and supported Christian experience, combining “the revivalist’s fervor with the cooling elements of disciplined poetry and biblical theology.”⁹ Further,

Early in the Awakening the wide use of singing, particularly the singing of groups of young people along the cities and roads of the countryside, had a profound impact . . . thousands of nominal Christians were caught up in evangelistic fervor that shattered old forms and traditions and opened new channels of spiritual growth for entire congregations.¹⁰

The campmeetings of the Second Great Awakening were characterized by simple, emotional hymns, many with evangelistic appeals at their heart. The campmeeting songs developed into the gospel hymn, marked by a verse and chorus. *The Southern Harmony*, a collection of campmeeting songs published in 1835, sold 600,000 copies over 25 years.

Charles Finney worked closely with local churches in urban centers, so a different sort of revival song was needed to reach the people in the cities. The church hymnals set too high a standard for some tastes, but the typical campmeeting songbook’s standards were too low. Thus he utilized Thomas Hastings, who published an early hymnbook, as a musician in the urban setting.

The first true music evangelist to be widely recognized was Ira D. Sankey (1837-1899), who teamed with evangelist D.L. Moody. Sankey led congregational songs and sang solos. Sankey served as an emerging model for music evangelists. “The Ninety and Nine,” “Jesus of Nazareth Passes By,” and others made a great impact on believers and unbelievers alike. Lord Shaftersburg did not exaggerate when he said, “if Moody and Sankey had done nothing else but teach us ‘Hold the Fort’ their visit would have been worthwhile.”¹¹ He and Philip P. Bliss published *Gospel Hymns and Sacred Songs* in 1875, which included hymns they, Fanny Crosby (1823-1915), and others penned. Between 50-80,000 copies were sold by 1900. Sankey was followed by scores of others who teamed with evangelists. These included Charles Alexander, partner with Wilbur Chapman and R. A. Torrey, Homer Rodeheaver who teamed with Billy Sunday, and more recently Cliff Barrows with the Billy Graham team.

In the 20th century music on the radio, Stamps-Baxter gospel quartet music, and revivalistic Southern hymns have added to evangelistic music. With the rise of evangelistic music a tension

developed between music designed to worship God and music primarily aimed at reaching the lost.

The Jesus Movement, a time of spiritual renewal primarily among young people during the late 1960s and early 1970s, laid the groundwork for a significant shift in the corporate worship of the American church. The Charismatic movement added to the growing awareness of a need for freedom in worship.

Charles E. Fromm noted that for several decades the church resisted change in worship, leading up to the revolution that occurred in the 1960s and beyond:

By the mid-sixties, it was generally acknowledged that if God had ever spoken at all through music, it had only been in the cherished hymns and psalms of the forefathers; that all things musically modern were, at best, tainted and unprofitable; and that spiritual song was best left safely locked up in the sanctity of ceremony.¹²

The changes in musical forms were influenced by young people who came to Christ in the Jesus Movement. The innovations served to present a new freshness in worship *and* were useful in reaching others as a result. In fact, the primary focus of much of the new music was evangelistic. Donald Hustad stated that "it should be obvious that the motivation behind all the pop-gospel phenomena of our day is evangelism . . ."¹³

The rise of contemporary Christian music (CCM) and the accompanying explosion of Christian radio stations after 1970 laid the groundwork for dramatic changes in worship services. Two streams merged to create the genre known today as Contemporary Christian music. Folk music, especially as it was expressed in the youth musical, eventually merged with the rock sound of the Jesus Movement coffeehouses to form what is easily recognized today as CCM.

The youth musical became a powerful medium for attracting young people to the gospel message in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Such musicals came out of the sixties and the increasing popularity of the folk song and such personalities as Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, and Peter, Paul, and Mary. "Do Lord," "Give Me Oil in My Lamp," and "I've Got the Joy, Joy, Joy, Joy Down in My Heart" became part of church youth fellowships.

The first widely used youth musical was *Good News*. The evangelistic focus of the musical is evident in its title. Ralph Carmichael and Kurt Kaiser then wrote *Tell It Like It Is*. Others

included *Celebrate Life* by Buryl Redd and Jimmy and Carol Owens' *Come Together*. Soon youth choirs became the heart of many youth groups, while youth choir tours covered North America. Contemporary Christian music began in the coffeehouses and youth fellowships of the period and mushroomed into a \$500 million industry annually by 1990. John Styll, president of the Gospel Music Association in 1993 and publisher of *Contemporary Christian Music* magazine, summarized the advent of the genre:

Contemporary Christian Music was born out of the counter-culture movement of the 60's. Disillusioned hippies who found the answer in Christ used their most natural means of expression—music—to proclaim the joy of their salvation and to share Christ with others. It wasn't organ music either. It was the music they understood.¹⁴

Dozens of "Jesus rock groups" had begun playing in Southern California. Larry Norman, called the "Poet Laureate" of the Jesus Movement by some, was one of the best known leaders. His simple ballad about the second coming of Christ, "I Wish We'd All Been Ready," was a signature song of the movement. Chuck Girard and Love Song were referred to as the "Beatles of the Christian music world" by some. Nancy Honeytree, Don Francisco, the Second Chapter of Acts, Barry McGuire, Keith Green, Eddie DeGarmo, Dana Key, Petra, Amy Grant, Brown Bannister, and Dogwood sprung from coffeehouse and similar ministries in the early 1970s. Jesus music festivals provided another forum for musicians to share their songs.

Contemporary Christian music was effective in evangelism through mass rallies, high school assembly programs, and festivals. Richard Hogue stated that the voice the young people listened to in the early seventies was not the athlete, but "the musician and the intellectual."¹⁵

The music of the Jesus Movement endured because of its integral relationship with a major reason the movement began in the first place. Positively, the Jesus Movement was experiential and evangelistic, emphasizing a relationship with Christ. Negatively, it was a protest movement, protesting the institutional church. The music gave a spiritual compass to a generation who felt disenfranchised due to the "generation gap."

The new musical styles among the youth gradually gained favor in many churches. But favor was not universal, as Carol Flake observed:

Not all evangelicals were cheered by the success of CCM. The rock of ages they clung to did not roll with the times. Not surprisingly, Ralph Carmichael's first concert at the National Religious Broadcasters convention stirred few amens. The growth of contemporary Christian music and the opening of the gates between sacred and secular genres stirred up a long-simmering controversy over the devil's role in rock and roll.¹⁶

Instruments associated with pop music, such as guitars, electric keyboards, and drums, crept into many churches with the new songs. Such instruments became more acceptable in some churches by way of their use in youth gatherings. The idea of an electric guitar in a worship service caused a virtual apoplexy to many, as illustrated by one pastor, "I'll never forget the first Sunday they had all those guitars in there. [Some members] just went nuts."¹⁷

Worship leader and composer, Bob Burroughs, linked the Jesus Movement with revivalism of the past by stating that contemporary music, with guitars, amplifiers, and so on was "the biggest thing to hit Christian music since Ira Sankey joined D. L. Moody!"¹⁸ Added to the rise of CCM was the advent of praise and worship choruses, developing out of the Jesus Movement but receiving significant impetus from the Charismatic Movement. Publishing houses, such as Maranatha! Music and Sparrow Records emerged during this period. Choruses became the inroad into the mainstream of worship services. Such songs gave a new and needed sense of freedom and emphasized the experiential side of the faith. However, the Jesus Movement was also characterized by a simplistic and even self-centered theology, which also crept into worship. This focus added unfortunately to the shift in our consumer driven culture on receiving a blessing from God rather than giving an offering to God.

To summarize, worship in the Bible focussed on the character of God. Throughout history, music and worship styles have changed with the growth and expansion of the church. In the modern era musical changes often paralleled times of great spiritual awakenings and lesser times of renewal. Over the past century, a distinction has developed between music focused on worship and music designed for evangelistic services. Added to this are the experience-oriented choruses of the Jesus Movement and the Charismatic Movement resulting in services, which focus heavily on meeting contemporary needs but which too often fail

to demonstrate a true understanding of worship. How can we keep a the best of contemporary worship without abandoning the biblical focus?

1. Let us affirm the vital role of theology in all we do, in particular in worship and church growth. Theology matters. We all affirm that, but often by default we deemphasize its role. It seems to me that its focus on modern methods to help churches grow has opened the Church Growth Movement to viable criticism on theological grounds. Sally Morgenthaler has made the point well:

In the 90s we are getting quite good at target practice—honing in on the lifestyles, habits, wants, and needs of particular people. yet in our zeal to hit the bull’s-eye, we have forgotten that *God grows the church through spiritual power*.¹⁹

We must constantly remind ourselves that our primary object in life is to glorify God. Our adoration of Him must transcend any other object of ministry including our desire to see churches grow. That being said, we know that few if any ways to glorify God rival the bringing of a lost sheep to the Shepherd (Luke 15).

Let us be sure our discussions on church growth and worship are biblically focussed.

In *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down*, a recent theology of worship, Marva Dawn offered a grid to help in selecting music for worship:²⁰

- 1) Is the text theologically sound? Is it true to God’s nature?
...
- 2) Does the style disrupt worship in any way? Is it honest? Does it prevent community singing or promote it? . . .
- 3) How appropriate is the piece with respect to our goal to use music for the diversity of congregation members? . . .
- 4) Is this piece of music characterized by excellence and greatness to a satisfactory degree?

2. We must recognize the difference between worship services and evangelistic services. An evangelistic service, from contemporary seeker services to traditional mass evangelism, can include elements of worship, but its purposes are different. It is alarming to realize how many church leaders fail to distinguish between a seeker service, which is evangelistic by design, and a seeker-sensitive worship service. Evangelistic services are need-

ed, but not to the neglect of worship of worship services. Os Guinness put it well: it is “perfectly legitimate” to “convey the gospel in cartoons to a nonliterary generation incapable of rising above MTV But five years later, if the new disciples are truly won to Christ, they will be reading and understanding Paul’s letter to the Romans.”²¹

3. That being said, let us recognize that weekly services dedicated to the worship of God *can* have an evangelistic impact. George Hunter and others have stated recently that our culture is becoming more like the Apostolic era. Our postmodern, post-Christian era demands genuine worship engaged by radically changed believers who honor God with their lives. Such worship not only glorifies God, but also draws the attention of unbelievers (Psalm 126; Acts 2:47; 16:25ff; Rom. 15:9-11; I Cor. 14:23-25). Worship leader Tommy Coomes came to Christ because of the genuine, dynamic worship at Calvary Chapel, Costa Mesa, California, the mother church of the Jesus Movement. It was the worship which drew him to Christ. He later observed, “There is a spiritual dynamic going on in authentic worship that can’t be reasoned away.”²² Don McMinn said it well:

Music is not the power of God for salvation, and neither is the media of writing, speaking, or sign language. The *gospel* is the power of God to salvation, and when it is presented, regardless of *how* it is presented, lives will be changed.²³

4. Let us give proper attention to celebration in our worship services – not celebrating our experience, but celebrating the resurrected Lord. Hustad has warned that “the ‘new enjoyment’ may lead to a worship hedonism which is another form of idolatry – worshipping the experience instead of worshipping God.”²⁴ Confession and brokenness are necessary for honest worship to occur;²⁵ still, celebrating the resurrection should be the ongoing focus of our worship. When He is our focus, we are reminded that Christianity is not only fun; it is *essential*.

5. Let us dismiss false dichotomies as unacceptable: hymns *or* choruses, traditional *or* innovative, and others. Such generalities as “Boomers don’t like hymns,” or “boomers don’t like church to look like church,” are typically inaccurate.

Such dichotomies lead to a reductionism which fails to distinguish between the timeless and the trendy, the contemporary

from the fad. Some sing choruses because that is the music they like with little thought given to the issues of worshipping God. Others hold to a more historic, traditional approach because in their minds, it demonstrates authentic worship. Style and substance are both vital, but substance must guide stylistic concerns. False dichotomies exacerbate false premises and lead us down blind alleys. We must never make "either-or" that which is actually "both-and." There is, nor will there be, one style that will exclusively reach the multitudes.

The best recent book surveying evangelistically growing churches²⁶ is Thom Rainer's *Effective Evangelistic Churches*. The book reports the findings of a survey of 576 evangelistically growing Southern Baptist churches. In the chapter surveying worship styles, Rainer defined the following categories:²⁷ Liturgical, Traditional, Revivalist, Contemporary, Seeker, and Blended. [See Appendix I.]

The largest number of evangelistic churches (44.5%) are traditional. The second largest (31.2%) was the blended format, while contemporary/seeker (21.3%, although the lion's share of these was contemporary) made the third group. True seeker services played a diminutive role in these churches. What conclusions were made from the research? Of the many given, these are critical. First, a variety of worship styles are effective. In this survey, the quality of worship was seen as more important than the particular style. Second, the atmosphere of the service is critical for unreached people. Finally, the attitude of those leading the service played a bigger factor than the style: "Leaders describe their worship services with such words as *warm, exciting, loving, vibrant, hopeful, and worshipful.*"²⁸

6. Let us keep a healthy balance between new music and lasting songs. Bob Burroughs, while affirming and writing many contemporary scores, felt that an overemphasis on singing choruses instead of hymns could become detrimental:

The praise chorus music itself in some churches has taken the place of the hymnal, and the music is so shallow,... that the great hymnody of the church, which is a teaching aid also for theology, and for doctrine, . . . is lost. When you sing "Alleluia, alleluia" over against "A Mighty Fortress" or "Savior, Like a Shepherd Lead Us," or some of those, the young people and the young adults really do miss out of some ... great theology....²⁹

7. Finally, let us constantly remember that the key to worship

is not the songs we sing or the music's beat. The key is not style, although style does matter greatly. The key is Spirit. The key is *life*. In the past year, I have worshipped in dynamic services in rural North Carolina singing hymns from 50 to 200 years old, and in a church which sang songs no older than 25 years. I have also attended churches of a variety of styles over the year, which gave no acknowledgement of the wonder of God in worship. Emphasizing methodology, and even a proper theology, without the presence of the Spirit of God is like a student who comes to seminary simply to get a degree and certain skills, as opposed to one who comes because he passionately seeks to know God and to make Him known.

Let our worship be so God-honoring, so passionate, that the lost world around us respond like the inhabitants around Jerusalem observing the worship of the Jews who returned from captivity: "Then they said among the nations, 'The LORD has done great things for them.'" (Psalm 126:2)

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NOTES

1. Paul Anderson, "Balancing Form and Freedom," *Leadership* Spring 1986, 24.
2. R. W. Dale, *Nine Lectures on Preaching* Delivered at Yale, New Haven, Connecticut (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1952), 271.
3. Kenneth G. Phifer, *A Protestant Case for Liturgical Renewal*, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1965), 23.
4. Ralph P. Martin, *Worship in the Early Church*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 134.
5. The historical material is adapted from Alvin L. Reid, "Evangelistic Music," in *Evangelism and Church Growth*, ed. Elmer L. Towns (Regal, 1995).
6. Donald R. Hustad, *Jubilate! Church Music in the Evangelical Tradition* (Carol Stream, Illinois: Hope Publishing Company, 1981),

127.

7. T. Harwood Pattison, *Public Worship* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publishing Society, 1900), 161.

8. Franklin M. Segler, *Christian Worship: Its Theology and Practice* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1967), 46.

9. Hugh McElrath, "Music in the History of the Church," *Review and Expositor* 69 (Spring 1972), 156.

10. Donald Paul Ellsworth, *Christian Music in Contemporary Witness* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 86.

11. Mendell Taylor, *Exploring Evangelism*, (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1964), 326.

12. Cited in Alvin L. Reid, "The Impact of the Jesus Movement on Evangelism among Southern Baptists," Ph.D. Dissertation, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1991, 99.

13. Donald R. Hustad, "Music in the Outreach of the Church," (Southern Baptist Church Music Conference, 9-10 June 1969), 48.

14. John W. Styll, "Sound and Vision: 15 Years of Music and Ministry," *Contemporary Christian Music* (July 1993), 42. By 1981 CCM was the fifth leading category of music, ahead of jazz or classical. In 1983, 5 percent of all record sales were gospel music, the majority of which was CCM. Also, by the early 1980s, there were over 300 exclusively Christian music radio stations. See Carol Flake, *Redemptorama: Culture, Politics, and the New Evangelicalism* (Garden City: Anchor Press, 1984), 175-76.

15. In Reid, "Impact of the Jesus Movement," 119.

16. Flake, *Redemptorama*, 178.

17. Reid, "Impact of the Jesus Movement," 124. Also Elwyn C. Raymer, "From Serendipity to Shindig!" *Church Recreation*, July/August/September 1968, 22.

18. Bob Burroughs, "What Did You Say?" (Southern Baptist Church Music Conference, 4-5 June 1971), 43; Forrest H. Heeren, "Church Music and Changing Worship Patterns," *Review and Expositor*, LXIX (Spring 1972): 190.

19. Sally Morgenthaler, *Worship Evangelism: Inviting Unbelievers into the Presence of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 36. Italics added.

20. Marva Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for the Turn-of-the-Century Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 202.

21. Os Guinness, *Dining with the Devil* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 28-29.

22. Morgenthaler, *Worship Evangelism*, 92. This book is must reading for anyone interested in the relationship between worship and church growth.

23. Don McMinn, *The Practice of Praise* (Word Music, 1992), 129.

24. Hustad, *Jubilate!*, 164.

25. The growing movements of revival characterized by open confession of sin demonstrate the need for this in our day. See John Avant, Malcolm McDow, and Alvin Reid, *Revival* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1996).

26. Unfortunately, not all statistical analyses of church growth emphasize evangelistic or conversion growth.

27. Thom Rainer, *Effective Evangelistic Churches* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1996), 101.

28. *Ibid.*, 116.

29. Reid, "Impact of the Jesus Movement," 134-35. Burroughs did not oppose contemporary music as a genre. He composed several contemporary youth musicals, including the first which used accompaniment tracts and computer-generated accompaniment.