

Chapter 13

Church Life Beyond the Bushel (4)

Music that makes sense

I vividly recall the moment. On a cassette tape nearby a voice was singing the parables of the gospel of Matthew. It was clearly a product non-sanctioned by LSM—a maverick self-produced music tape that was a professional effort, mixed in a studio, and whose words were written neither by Nee, Lee nor the Blendeds-to-be.

It drew a response. A Local Churchman standing in the vicinity pronounced with great contempt, “That music is soulish.” The certainty behind the judgment was a bit confusing. I was in the habit of thinking Led Zeppelin was non-spiritual. But this had no drums, electric instruments, or daring lyrics. The words were godly. As far as I could see, daring to be different was its only “sin.” But therein was the rub. The LC Movement had been conditioned to think of music on certain terms. Aside from Lee-approved hymns from church history, many among us thought that the most trustworthy (and thus valuable) Christian songs consisted of Witness Lee’s systematic theology set to music. These were typically training banners or footnotes that could be sung, or some very long unwieldy hymn—musical doctrines, I eventually called them. Some, especially the LSM banner songs, were produced every training, sung for a few weeks and then discarded. Their shelf-life matched their value. Anything not conforming to narrow LC criteria was at least suspect,

although a few efforts managed to gain notoriety, including (ironically), the tape I mentioned above, which became a staple of many Local Church children's services. Still, the survival of new musical efforts did not come without a measure of disapproval along the way.

That was my brief introduction to “the worship wars”—struggles over emergent musical styles that were occurring not only in the LC Movement but throughout the rest of Christianity as well. These were only the opening glimmers of a problem that would take some fifteen years to develop into a double-barreled confrontation. And no alleged “God-man living” would temper the battle we would enter. As we were fated to find, Movement people would fight just as acrimoniously as any outraged religious zealots.

A Brief History of the Worship Wars

A quick survey of church history will show that music has always been something of a hill for misled saints to die on. As we will see, for long stretches of time, the church was content to co-opt the structure of its music from popular culture. Gradually the surrounding culture moved on, but the church would musically entrench itself in dated styles and sounds, that became “holy.” At some point beyond that phase, a few radicals would note that Christian music had fallen out-of-step with the current culture and had thus become irrelevant to society. They would then seek to return it to a parallel course with the contemporary culture. Once again it would be received enthusiastically by the common man, but not without vigorous protest from the majority of the saints. After an unpleasant period of struggle, the new musical style would be accepted, become the new orthodoxy over the coming decades, and then, unfortunately, morph into

the next fortress from which to resist any future musical developments.

Let's rewind back to the beginning and follow this pattern in greater detail. The fledgling Christian church not only had a New Testament written in Greek, but music that was heavily influenced by Greek stylistic elements. Thus it developed an early habit of songs and music. As early as the 2nd century however, heretics began setting their strange brand of Gnostic teachings to the popular music of the time. Predictably, these catchy jingles gained inroads with the common man. Christians responded by doing the same thing and getting equally impressive results. They commandeered tunes from mainstream culture and used them as vehicles of orthodox teaching. As Christian author Donald Ellsworth, says, "During the first centuries, the church continually borrowed secular music sources and practices" (p.30).

A sacred church style did not evolve until Pope Gregory the Great (590-604) developed and promoted the Gregorian chant. Once that music was officially accepted and then entrenched, departure from it was strongly resisted. In fact, *The History of Catholic Church Music* defines the prevailing attitude in the Medieval Church toward emerging musical styles: "New means of composition would be acceptable only after they had been tried and had lost their force in contemporary secular music...This was to be the viewpoint of the church for centuries" (Fellerer, p. 56). Such an attitude effectively kept the church away from anything that might have remotely appeared to be cutting edge. It also dulled the church's ability to captivate the hearts and minds of the common man.

When the Protestant Reformation roared onto the scene it did so not only with an opened Bible, but the truth of that Bible fitted with contemporary music. The reformers made conscious attempts to avoid the trappings of theology-speak in their new songs. Luther

himself had said concerning hymn preparation, "Please omit all new-fangled court expressions, for to win popularity a song must be in the most simple and common language" (Smith, p. 231). Indeed, in surveying the secular music of the day, he remarked that there were, "so many beautiful songs, while in the religious field we have such rotten, lifeless stuff" (Friedenthal, p. 464). As to the writing of hymns and the use of all types of instruments, his liberality was famous. He said, "For the youth's sake we must read, sing, preach, write, and compose verse, and whenever it was helpful and beneficial I would let all the bells peal, all the organs thunder, and everything sound that could sound" (Friedenthal, p. 464). Since Reformation tunes were heavily adapted from German folk sources and secular ballads of the day, the impact on the masses was stunning. One Catholic monk of the time complained that "Luther's hymns have destroyed more souls than his writing and speeches" (Koch, Vol.1, p. 244).

But other reformers objected to the new musical forms. Chief among them was John Calvin, who strongly insisted upon a return to the Psalter. He vigorously opposed all instruments and any lyrics that were not word-for-word from the scriptures. In the wake of his influence, church instruments such as organs were condemned and then destroyed. Still, Calvin also set the Psalms to popular tunes, a development that was pointedly scorned by some as being too worldly. Eventually though, his development caught on in different quarters and became an armored orthodoxy of its own. This was graphically demonstrated when a man named Louis Bourgeois was jailed in 1551 for changing the melodies of some of those psalms. The irony was that he himself had written the original melodies a short time prior!

With the passage of time, hymns were introduced and in certain cases were violently attacked. Emotions ran hot. Some church-goers deliberately waited at home

until they knew the “contemptible” hymn-singing was over, and then attended services. John Bunyan’s church suffered a split when he introduced hymns to the congregation. Others, such as Benjamin Keach of the Anabaptists, were vigorously attacked by members of their own group. After decades of controversy and infighting, hymns slowly made their way into congregational worship.

Still, it took Isaac Watts (1674-1748) to tip the scales from Psalmody to hymn singing. As those before him, Watts sought the edification of the common man, crafting hundreds of hymns that could be easily understood and readily enjoyed. His effort came with difficulty as well, for the poetic styles of that period were enmeshed with vice of all kinds. Ingenious rhyming prose was considered unsuited for the use of saints. It was not long before the predictable and tired accusations of “worldliness” began swirling around his labor.

More serious criticisms came from those who felt that Watts’ music making was replacing Psalms in churches. In 1755, William Romaine asked, “Why should Watts, or any hymnmaker, not only take the precedence of the Holy Ghost, but also thrust Him entirely out of the church?” (Davis, p. 159). A like-minded critic added, “The rhymes of man are now magnified above the Word of God” (Romaine, p. 999). Again, church conflicts approached catastrophic proportions. Leaders were fired and congregations split. In one place, the opponents of hymns hired mischievous kids off of the streets to come into church services and deliberately sing out of tune in order to disrupt the atmosphere (H.A.L., pp. 1-2).

Ultimately, however, true to the pattern of introduction, resistance, conflict, and acceptance, hymns became the new orthodoxy. In short order, some churches began resisting anything beyond Watts’ hymns.

Charles Wesley was the next epic chapter in the worship wars. He wrote 6,000 hymns, adding to the previous themes of praise and worship such dimensions as Christian experience and evangelism. Wesley felt no compulsion to retain the familiar tunes of the Psalms in his hymn writing, as Watts had done. He was notorious for borrowing tunes from operas and English folk songs. In fact, his habit was to lift any melody from a song as soon as it became popular and “redeem” it with words that would lead to spiritual edification. Naturally, accusations came out of the woodwork. Wesley was said to have compromised sacred words and sounds, yet he had actually packaged and delivered the hymn in ways that the man on the street was most likely to enjoy. As a result Methodist hymnody “became the most powerful tool of evangelism that England ever knew” (Ellsworth, p. 75).

Meanwhile, in America, a new approach to hymn singing also emerged under evangelists like Jonathan Edwards, George Whitfield, Charles Finney, D.L. Moody and Ira Sankey. Traditional hymn music there had for some time been plodding and cumbersome, while anything livelier had been treated as devilish (Sallee, pp. 19-20). Slowly however, under the influence of the Great Awakening and subsequent revivals, snappy tunes could not be suppressed any longer. The music again earned the censure of hostile conservatives, yet millions came to Christ through the “worldly” toe tapping, clapping tunes.

The object of controversy in the midst of the worship wars was often more than just music and words. Instruments frequently stirred conflict. Early on, the organ had been labeled as “the devil’s bagpipe” and other instruments such as the piano and the violin (called “the devil’s fiddle” [Hustad, p. 288]) were flatly condemned as being too secular for use in the worship of God. Mere sounds also became suspect. Christian musicians shunned the fourth chord since the devil was

thought to possess it (Peters, p. 196). At different moments in church history, thirds and sixths were condemned as sensual (Borrer, p. 167). The syncopated beat was criticized as being overly associated with the ragtime era until the song *Since Jesus Came Into My Heart* made it through the gauntlet of opposition and earned its place as a golden oldie.

Eventually the music that provoked so much warfare in church history was admitted into worship meetings, but it did not get there without harsh, uncharitable judgements and spiritual casualties. In the name of Jesus, controversy, fighting, name-calling and division had thrashed the saints—all because of opinions concerning the best way to worship God. It was as though the God of light and love needed such darkness to represent His interests. In the end, none of the musical hot potatoes destroyed the church as was feared; in fact, the church grew because of them by the millions.

Worship Wars on the LC Movement Front

In the earlier days of the Local Churches, relative freedom marked the attitude toward musical styles. Youth who were weary of the stale religious scene and ex-hippies who found Jesus were in turn finding the Local Church. The predictable result of these new experiences was new music. Song writers sprang up in the churches. They used pop and folk tunes from the likes of the Beatles, Bob Dylan, the Carpenters and John Denver. These were typically ingenious and delightful to sing—favorites among youth. Many of them were circulated and then collected into binders.

Eventually the Movement became more centralized, focusing on teachings, practices, and what “proper” spirituality looked like. Contemporary music largely did not make the cut. As an approved hymnal

coalesced under the determined vetting process of the Living Stream Ministry, the tragedy was not so much that materials disappeared but that inspired processes went flat. Additional songs were later published in a supplemental hymnal, but musical expansion ended there. As the influx of new members dwindled, so did the rate of fresh new material. Creative energy narrowed to a trickle.

Witness Lee Himself was the most prolific hymn writer of the LC Movement, but he was not a musician. This was unfortunate for the musical life of the group. None of his pieces were musically inventive and few seem to have done much more than to establish present members in their particular “revelations.” Lee’s hymns contain insights worthy of consideration and even cross-denominational use, but the sectarian legacy attached to his name may never be shaken. Besides, the golden age of his kind of hymn writing and the enthusiasm that once accompanied it are now largely things of the past.

In some ways, it will be more difficult for musical transition to take place in the Local Churches than in other Christian groups. Senior workers who are mini-celebrities within the movement have issued so many warnings, cautions, and discouraging sentiments against CCM (contemporary Christian music), that it would be almost impossible for them to reverse their attitudes without losing major credibility. The fact that they utter these words in an official, revelatory capacity makes it even worse.

What “the Wars” Can Teach Us

After revisiting the long, twisting pathway of worship trends, we might want to think twice before rejecting new developments out of hand. Typically non-faith, non-morality issues do not justify casualties among the children of God. Discussion and

disagreement perhaps. Heated arguments maybe. But never battlefield scenarios.

God has a better way of settling matters in the church than through the brute force and ill will of religious folk. He principally uses the collective spiritual registration of his saints. As we review the major musical epochs of church history, doubtless a great many sounds, songs, instruments, and arrangements were not edifying. Some were not even spiritually healthy. What happened to them? They sank into disuse and obscurity because eventually believers received no authentic spiritual benefit from them. Where bonfires, anathema and official censure failed, simple Christian disinterest passively crushed elements that were inappropriate. As with many other items in the history of the church, the cream ultimately floated to the top. In fact, Christians who prematurely tried to decide for everyone else what the cream ought to be, caused more destruction than the alleged negative issues themselves. The church rests securely in the hands of God's benevolent sovereignty, its own God-given discernment, and the Lord's solemn promise that "the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18).

When Allegations Fly

Worldliness is the chief allegation heading the list of complaints against contemporary Christian music (including the sub-genres of Christian pop, rock, rap, and modern praise and worship). In some groups nothing is more threatening than the prospect of being worldly, especially if said worldliness has to do with music. Yet for all their concern, religious souls tend to be selective in what they count as conforming to the world. In issues of dress, for instance, leaders who are most dedicated to "purity" have few qualms with looking like corporate America business executives while in the

pulpit with their suits and ties. Nor are they particularly bothered when it comes to the worldly cars they drive to church or the technology that they casually use for the church (computers, web sites, blackberries, cell phones). Yet once music enters into the consideration, suddenly all antennas go up.

Religion has always valiantly tried to define a “sanctified” sound but it becomes an elusive quest. The Bible is quiet on the topic of musical styles. Still, some have tried to give it a voice. I recently read a book that condemns the use of contemporary Christian music. Having gone through more than half of it, I realized that the work was loaded with verse references meant to support the anti-position, without one of them actually addressing it. For instance, when the Apostle John wrote, “Do not love the world,” it is not automatically the same as saying, “Do not use a drum in a church meeting.” Nor does it mean “Do not buy slacks that cost more than twenty-five dollars” or “Do not own a car that has power windows.” Would-be expositors dogmatically insert these meanings because to them the applications seem obvious and reasonable. But they are victims of their own blind spots.

Relative to where a person is in life, such pre-defined standards of what it means to love the world might sound laughable. A Christian in a third-world country who can barely clothe his family might find Western middle class prohibitions against wearing Armani strange, indeed. How should a man interpret 1 John 2:15 who can scarcely afford a mule to plow a field? Don't buy a Porsche? Don't vacation in the Bahamas? (What if the poor farmer lives in the Bahamas?). The fact is that personal convictions cannot be imposed on 1 John 2:15. If so, the verse will immediately lose its power over much of the world's population. We must honestly ask ourselves what causes something to be worldly. Who makes up the rules?

When it comes to music, there is a definite tendency to insert meanings. “Be not conformed to the world” (Rom. 12:2), becomes “Be not conformed to the music” and “Friendship with the world” (James 4:4) means “Friendship with the music.” Remember that we could just as easily say, “Be not conformed to the nice home in the suburbs with the private schools.” We could also say, “Be not conformed to a meeting hall with electricity” (since there were neither church meeting halls nor electricity in the first century). This would be forcing the Bible to weigh in on matters that it really doesn’t address.

Having said this, I would like to assert my commitment to reasonable levels of discernment. It is a commendable practice to pay attention to lyrical content. Obviously, Christians should not use music in their meetings that celebrate erroneous concepts. Good music should easily be able to pass the test of fidelity to the faith. In fact, once skeptics examine the words of a great many modern Christian songs, they will not find the boogie man that they imagined would be there. Considerations of content can be a powerful ally in the worship wars. I often used them as a starting point back during the days when our church was LSM-influenced.

Me: “This phrase says that ‘Grace falls like rain on me.’ What do you find objectionable with that sentiment?”

LC Movement Guy: “Well, grace does not fall like rain. It is dispensed.”

Me: “Okay, what if the writer was not trying to define grace according to a footnote, but only capturing his felt appreciation of it. Is there anything wrong with that?”

The sullen silence that followed would always indicate that there was something wrong. It wasn’t with the lyrics, though. It was with the bigoted attitude of the fault-finder himself.

While we might not locate many heresies in CCM, simplistic, almost childish theology could well dominate entire songs. Those who pay attention to CCM lyrics often critique their lack of depth. Indeed, if it weren't for the artist's dazzling musical expertise, the words would kill us with sheer boredom. There are only so many times that one can sing a chorus that says You are mighty, You are Love/Good and worthy Lord above. The question is "Can anyone grow off of this stuff?"

Without doubt, not every CCM song is an example of theological depth and perhaps most of them do not even try to be. But lack of profundity should not necessarily lead to a carte blanche dismissal of the music. Many of the biblical Psalms are not theologically rich, either. Some of them showcase sentiments that range anywhere from complaints to blatant desires for revenge. Regardless of our assessments of what is or isn't shallow, all the Psalms are inspired by the Holy Spirit and exist as pieces to be sung. From the standpoint of inspiration, no hymn written by Watchman Nee, Witness Lee, or Martin Luther can compare to any one of the 150 Psalms considered the veritable Word of God.

Yes, I admit that music can play an invaluable role in educating Christians with sound principles of the faith. Remember Grammar Rock? An entire generation of kids that sang along with the lyrics from that Saturday morning program learned the purpose of conjunctions and adjectives just because of the catchy tunes and clever words used in each cartoon vignette. The church universal has certainly (and rightly) used music to aid in absorbing key Christian thoughts. But there are other ways in which music functions that have nothing to do with education. In the Bible we find it also soothing troubled souls (1 Sam. 16:23) or expressing sentiments of thanks and praise (Ex. 15:20-21, Ps. 150).

If we rigidly judge new songs based on the sole criteria of theological depth, the heart will be excised

from the singing, leaving just a head. There will be correctness minus feeling; letters without spirit. For years in the LC Movement there was a trend toward hymns of this sort, whose words rhymed, fit a meter and passed the test of high truth, but the writer completely missed the point. Hearts were untouched; emotions unstirred. In the quest for crystal clarity and profundity, he or she may as well have written the soundtrack to a computer manual.

The LC Movement is against most all contemporary Christian music, regardless of its correctness or effective function. A popular question that emerged from the LC camp was “Why do you have to use music from Christianity?” Our instant response to them was, “Like Amazing Grace? Like How Great Thou Art? Which of those do you want to subtract from the hymnal?” The retort would give pause to the LSM adherent as he was made to momentarily see his own mindless religiosity. Then he would regroup and begin protesting afresh from another direction. No matter what reef of common sense he would run aground on, his deeply programmed revulsion against all things of Christianity would guarantee the argument would continue.

Debate can certainly enrich the subject of musical style in the church as long as it is kept intelligent. Yet critics of CCM frequently grasp at arguments that strain credulity. This includes their use of questionable science, like studies alleging that the sounds created by the bass guitar and drums have deleterious effects upon listeners.

These claims (sometimes backed by research of a dubious nature), have attained the status of urban myth. Christians with no particular love for CCM often refer to them as authoritative and conclusive, saying, “They found out that tunes with a rock beat do something bad to you.” Most people passing these stories around are hard pressed to specify who ‘they’

really are and why the experiments ought to be trusted. Few even know what the supposed 'bad things' are.

One ill effect of the music that does get cited has to do with physiological or psychological weakening in listeners. Even if this finding emerged from a laboratory where subjects were wired to electrodes, we ought to subject it to more realistic, common sense considerations. For instance weightlifting clubs and other athletic facilities that exclusively use pop music have never complained about any supposed weakening effects of the music. In fact, stroll into Gold's Gym and ask the manager to change the music to Mozart and see what reaction you'll get. Real world scenarios always find it hard to concur with quirky research findings.

In addition to the above, critics also commonly believe that the rock beat is psychologically unsettling and therefore not suitable for use in worship. It is claimed that classical music, with its more sedate and orderly composition is far more appropriate. But is there really a musical sound that is natively antagonistic to the human soul? Yes. Ask the Country Western music lover and he will say it is gangster rap. Ask the heavy metal fanatic and she will say it is the "red neck noise" of country music. The preferences of the listener largely determine what is disturbing to the ear and the heart. I for instance, find classical music especially irritating after a few minutes, certainly not awaking in me the winsome moods that are said to be associated with it.

Some evidence suggests that I am not alone. A University of Sao Paulo study conducted in 1985 revealed that exposure to Brahms generated in listeners "diminished feelings of obligation and surprise" (Souza, pp. 53-62), while selections from Tchaikovsky produced "more active states (for example, interest, desire, sexual attraction, anger, fright)" in that same test group. Obviously the results were anything but uniform and

did not as a rule indicate that classical music engendered worshipful feelings.

Whether such musical research provides useful and trustworthy data still remains to be seen. Too many parties have introduced findings that support their own biases. However, the controversy does demonstrate that no single musical style guarantees particular responses.

A further long running allegation is that the beat found in contemporary music stimulates sensuality. The primitive sound, it is thought, provokes base passions making it unsuitable for use in Christian gatherings. This thought, however, fails to consider a simple counter-point: softer musical arrangements are just as linked to sensuality than raucous ones, as many risque moments in movies have aptly demonstrated.

This is not to say that pop sounds are completely without negative context. Enough bad things happen in association with rock concerts that there seems to be abundant evidence that the music is linked to drug use and illicit sex. However, if we want to get beyond simplistic cause and effect statements, we need to ask ourselves what is really going on. First, it is inaccurate to say that music itself makes anyone do things that they weren't going to do anyway. Some concert-goers, for example, expect to behave inappropriately at a rock event before they even leave their homes. Once there, they take their cues from ungodly onstage behavior, provocative lyrics (that is words, not the sound itself), and from other attendants around them. Ultimately, all that the music provides is background noise for a wild party.

Often believers have memory baggage from some of these events. They complain that CCM reminds them of their sinful past and therefore do not wish to use it in their worship. Yet Christians are people who learn to redeem things if possible, not banish them. For instance, just because promiscuity was part of one's

past, doesn't mean he or she should give up sex, but learn to enjoy it legitimately, in the confines of marriage. In the case of contemporary music and instruments, rather than discard it, why not enjoy it in relation to good lyrics and with the intention of worshipping God?

The critic's trump card, his high ace against CCM will always involve demonic conspiracies. It is common knowledge that African tribes use drums and rhythms in their pagan religious ceremonies. Participants enter frenzied states and apparently under the control of unclean spirits begin to exhibit strange supernatural behavior. This is hardly proof positive that particular instruments or sounds should be banned from Christian worship. Sociologists report that these tribes employ a great diversity of musical beats, by no means conforming to some primary "demonic" sound. The instruments are varied as well, including drums, flutes, rattles, and oboes (Rouget, pp. 69, 75, 85)—instruments that one hardly needs to travel to Africa to see (check out any symphony orchestra worth its salt). Observers have also reported that some tribes used no instruments at all in their demonic ceremonies (Rouget, pp. 113-114, 149, 312-13).

Conversations concerning emerging musical styles should continue, but when the debate resorts to exaggerations and hearsay, then it is time to ask whether truth is being sought or merely victory. Indeed, many points that are made contain small strands of truth (bad things happen at rock concerts, pagan tribes use drums, etc.). It should be remembered, however, that counter-arguments exist that tell the rest of the story.

At the end of the day, there is no conclusive reason for setting aside contemporary Christian music, no "magic bullet" that settles the issue. In fact, the tenacious way the music itself seems to hang on with the people of God, reveals not the power of the devil, but

as we will see, the very way the human heart communicates.

Music—a Language All Its Own

Years ago, I gave a cassette tape to a fellow who was new to the Local Church scene. It was an LSM product whose music dutifully captured the theme of a recent training.

“Did you like the tape?” I asked him later.

“Honestly?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I hated it.”

“Why?” I asked, stunned.

“The music was cheesy and those voice-overs...weird.”

I tried to salvage the situation. “How about the words, though?”

“I’ll be honest with you, John. The musical arrangement was so bad that I didn’t even notice the words.”

I wanted to protest that it was all about the words, but then I realized that if it really were, then what was the point of music anyway? Why have it at all? Wouldn’t it be good enough to print everything in book form and just have people read the information—eliminate the music and leave the poetry?

In the midst of my disappointing exchange with my friend, I had honestly, forgotten my own reaction when someone had first loaned me an LSM-inspired training song tape. I was twenty years old at the time and listening to music every day. I lived in a thoroughly musical environment where guys talked, swapped, and listened to music constantly. So when I got that tape I was appalled that anyone with a straight face would have given it to me. The music sounded like some sort of unfunny joke—amateurish, canned, and bland. Even the words did not strike me as instantly Christian. Terms like “manifest” and “economy” which were anchor

points in some of the selections seemed vaguely dissonant. Ultimately I did not connect with any musical Christian sentiment until I heard the likes of Amy Grant and “Willie Nelson Sings the Gospel.” Although I have moved on in my tastes, that kind of music became the entry level experience for a kid who had no knowledge of the Bible or any evangelical background.

Although the LC music tape had been a non-starter, after years of immersion in the Movement, I eventually decided I liked it and all the other LSM fare. But without a thorough reinforcement day and night, my first “whiff” had been less than motivating.

Nothing reaches the inward parts of people more than music. There’s no denying it. It is the most powerful cultural force on our planet today. Music is a heart language that affects everyone, exerting even the power of emotional recall by bringing back memories and feelings of where you were when you first heard a particular song. As Plato once said, “Musical training is so powerful...because rhythm and harmony find their way into the secret places of the soul, bearing grace in their movements and making the soul graceful. Let me write the songs of a nation and I care not who makes her laws” (Protagoras 326).

One thing we don’t seem to ever understand (or at least refuse to), is that no one musical style connects with everybody. A quick survey of radio stations in any major American city will attest to this simple fact. You will find pop music, hip hop, heavy metal, country, and then classical as the tiniest sliver of the pie. Yet, strangely enough, many religious folk have chosen the music with the smallest appeal, classical, as having an innate propriety over and above all others. This means the style least likely to seize the hearts of the majority has been chosen to accompany the most important message in the world—the gospel. It would be like choosing Latin as the only approved language in which

to talk about God, since it was the language of the medieval church. Naturally this would severely limit those who could receive the gospel message to hardy souls who would be willing to learn the language. Although we would never adapt the content to suit the people we are trying to reach, we certainly would use their spoken language, and I strongly suggest we ought to be using their musical heart language as well.

Even those who are against CCM may unwittingly reveal that their heart language is anything but classical. I read an amusing account just recently of two ministers who got into a car to ride somewhere together. The one driving was an avowed enemy of Christian rock. His friend in the passenger seat reached out and turned on the radio (before he could be stopped), only to find that all the station presets were rock stations. The driver, red-faced, tried to explain it away, but it was too late. His “closet” musical tastes had been exposed.

Many of us feel that a legitimate dichotomy exists between our taste in music on our radios, versus the kind used in our Christian meetings. It has grown acceptable to speak one “language” in the privacy of our automobile or on I-pods and then speak an antiquated foreign one on Sunday morning.

Of course I am not advocating a wholesale import of the Rolling Stones play list into Christian meetings. Those lyrics inform everyone that that music was made for a different purpose than the worship of God. We are talking about forms and style here, not advocating for words or volume, sex, wild gyrations, or marijuana.

Yet a hesitation remains, a lot coming from our prior worship experiences. We all have golden memories that have become an unconscious standard by which we judge everything else. Some of my happiest worship occurred when full-time ministers in the Midwest were getting together and belting out heroic strains of “Come Jesus, Lord.” One hundred men and

women congregated, who had quit their jobs with no means of support and no additional aspirations other than pleasing the Lord and meeting Him as though He were coming back that very evening. Our instrument had been one piano. Our music had been written for the most part by people who had died long ago.

For me, those were days of Pentecost. We recorded the sessions and I listened to the tape until it literally wore out. Very rarely has anything come close to my musical experience of the Spirit than during those times. What was the secret of our anointing back then? I could very easily point to that lone piano, that black hymnal, shirts and ties, head coverings, and the distinct absence of drums. I could emphasize not only those, but many other items as requisite for the Spirit's move, but where would the formula for success justifiably end? With hard plastic chairs? Orange shag carpet?

Yet some of us go almost this far. While trying to recapture in our music the "lightning" of the past, we enshrine externals. We are certain that since lightning struck somewhere under certain conditions many years ago, then if we duplicate the same conditions, it is only a matter of time before it will strike again. Many mainstream denominations have petrified while continuing under that expectation. But centuries can come and go while waiting for it to happen. Meanwhile, anything new that comes along, even if it has a reviving effect, is perceived as suspicious at best since it does not line up on prior positive experiences. This is what it means to plant a flag on a hilltop that isn't Calvary.

Needless to say, as time marches on, such "flags" that represent positions on church traditions, preferences, and the like, shrink farther and farther back on the horizon. A freshly rising generation of Christians just don't respond to canonized past experiences. We lament its lack of spirituality. We wring our hands. Where is the commitment? Where is the camaraderie of fellowship that was seen in

yesteryear? Meanwhile the church of Jesus marches on. The Holy Spirit does not seem to be in the business of trying to resurrect the past. His ministry has little to do with transplanting people backward into 1974 or 1989 or 1998.

This is most painfully observed the way young Christians among us indifferently treat the supplemental songs of our past. Local Church ditties/folksy choruses that thrilled our hearts don't seem to impress them. The John Denver or Peter, Paul and Mary style as a staple, week after week, demonstrably fails to engage them.

Apparently the sentiment of a song can also lose its edge, depending on the context of the times. In one of our meetings, we decided to sing It's the sabbath day/and you can't pick corn (sung to the tune of "I'm Leaving on a Jet Plane"). I glanced around the room, noting the vacant, bored looks of second-generation kids and the clueless lone visitor. It simply made no sense to them. I realized that when the song was written, it symbolized burdensome religious authority. Young Christians in the Local Church Movement, involved in an idealistic struggle with Christianity, saw themselves as unfairly oppressed by the religious establishment—"The Man." It occurred to me that if the kids in the room were thinking about powers-that-be squelching their freedom of worship and expression, the odds were excellent that they were thinking about us, not the hierarchy in the local Baptist church.

Every congregation says that it wants to numerically grow and be effective in reaching people. But a huge majority of those same congregations want to conduct outreach strictly on their own terms. They expect the people in the neighborhoods surrounding them to wholeheartedly embrace meters, rhythms and instruments that they don't find compelling. This virtually means we're expecting them to speak a foreign language and be comfortable in it. That idea fits right

along with the logic that only King James English should be used when praying, complete with “Thee,” “Thou,” “Thine,” and “Thy.” When seekers are forced to make these strange concessions, suiting up in artificial rigging, they typically choose to stay at home.

Some Guiding Principles

At the time of this writing, only a few Local Churches have had any experience seriously updating their music ministry. Those that have not done so, will no doubt wish to make changes before long if they wish to survive. For this reason, some short remarks on incorporating a music service are in order.

First there is something to be said about putting energy into assembling a worship band rather than merely allowing default accompaniment to happen in meetings. A group of believers who study, practice, listen and learn music during the week is a great blessing to the church.

Although everyone can sing, not everyone can lead in a ministry of music. The typical devout Jew could certainly sing the Psalms of David for personal devotions or in celebration together with others. However, David, and then later Nehemiah sat up an entire course of worship involving people who were specially trained in it. Music was expected to be a part of the worship and service to God (2 Chron. 7:6, 30:21, 34:12-13, Neh. 12:36).

We shouldn't have a knee-jerk reaction when the word “band” is mentioned. The operative ideas to remember in relation to it are “helps,” “service,” and “worship,” not “performance.” I realize that there are some concerns about pride issues arising in the musicians. These are justified to some extent, but remember that anyone who occupies a visible role is in danger of pride.

Conceit isn't the sole domain of musicians. For years I watched senior workers in the LC Movement quite happy with evoking "ooohs," "aahs," during messages, hearing "brother so-and-so said" during the testimony time, and in post meeting fellowship, listening to subordinates gush on about how superb the ministry was. Within every one of us is a fallen hunger to ride the parade float. I have also heard saints, "little potatoes," recount personal triumphs like giving a good testimony, sometimes months after the fact. Do we really want to outlaw a ministry because of pride? If so, nearly everyone would need to pack up and go home.

Admittedly, there is nothing in the New Testament about bands or worship leading. But neither is there anything concerning the use of instruments at all in the church, including the venerable and unquestioned piano. Nor is the use of a bound hymnal even hinted at in scripture. Yet Christians today, including those in the LC Movement, use all of these things, not requiring any biblical proof of their legitimacy. It seems more than a bit hypocritical, then, to demand verses that allow musical service groups. Besides, as pointed out earlier, at least scripture does record such things in the Old Testament.

Music creates the possibility for an entire service area that was previously occupied by one person sitting at a piano or a few playing acoustic guitars. Slots open related to vocals, playing various instruments, band management (which involves admin and shepherding), and technical production (running a soundboard or powerpoint slides, etc). That means many more people serving and feeling a responsibility for the church. In the Upper Arlington assembly, the band is the best and clearest example of dedicated service in the entire church. The saints who participate are at the meeting place hours before the meeting starts, praying, reading the Word, and practicing the morning's songs. As a group, they are also the most reliable when it comes to

participating in any church event. This is not to mention that most of the band helped launch this new church!

If we are truly reaching out to our community, we will come across people who are already skilled in music and desire to serve the Lord with it. Obviously this does not mean that anyone who can manage a few notes is entitled to a microphone. The church shouldn't have to endure bad American Idol performances in order to keep feelings from being hurt.

Policy ought to govern music ministry. In the Upper Arlington assembly, not only do we look for a certain level of musical expertise, but we require additional things before interested parties begin to play. They must commit to regular practice with the rest of the band and agree to moral, spiritual, and practical standards spelled out in our ministry covenant. Obviously, they must be committed to our congregation.

Smaller churches may not have the resources to start a band in the sense that we usually think of it. That isn't a problem. There is no sense in being hung up on microphones and drum sets. If all a congregation can manage is a couple of guitars and a bongo that's okay. Even if it's just one person with a guitar, you can make it work. It all depends on the attitude of the person involved. If he or she loves it, believes that it is a holy service to God, and would like to draw others into it, your music ministry has hope. Stark simplicity can be dressed up well with passion, excellence, and inventive musical approaches.

Never let simplicity become the excuse for sloppiness, like waiting until the thick of a meeting to try and learn guitar chords. When it comes to Christ and the church, doing things well (just as you would do for your boss or for your professor) ought to go without saying. Besides, if music is truly someone's ministry, shouldn't we have to encourage them to put their

instrument down every now and then, and not the reverse?

In terms of your selected musical style, remember the heart language of the people you're trying to reach. A small church in New Mexico that is trying to reach middle-age ranchers might not want to insist on using contemporary Christian music. Maybe the populace will relate better to traditional hymn singing or music with a country-western or folk feel to it. The form must make sense to them.

Ill-fitted forms will not only fail to connect with local people, it might make you look hopelessly out of touch and downright silly. An assembly in California hoping to connect with high school students will most likely not want to go with an operatic sound. Otherwise, while sister so-and-so is hitting those high notes, the kids will be snickering and rolling their eyes.

Years ago I did a gospel work among inner city youth. It was successful up to the point of trying to bring them into the Local Church. The oddly dated Caucasian-Chinese setting (which we called the One New Man), was burdened with music that made no sense to them. Neither Witness Lee hymns nor redeemed '60's and '70's tunes from the Carpenters, the Beatles, or the Captain and Tennille ever made a dent. Eventually I gave up, ignorantly concluding that my young black friends just weren't interested in knowing the Spirit.

About fifteen years later, a Midwestern-LC sponsored outreach occurred in that same area. One of our youth bands began singing in the middle of a Community Park fairly dominated by African American presence. The spectators seemed completely unmoved by the music, even though it was contemporary and had a full complement of instruments. Then, a black sister among us got up and began singing gospel in the African American tradition. There was an immediate

reaction and a crowd assembled. It was a good reminder about music as heart language.

Don't fall into the age-old religious trap of branding such a thing as show business. If your kind of Christian music, perhaps something with the feel of Bach or Mozart, had drawn a crowd of classical music lovers, would you still be so quick to call it show business? Some would say, "Of course not, then it would be the Spirit drawing people." I have sat in fellowships where such blatant double standards were modeled. Words like "life" were used in order to confer legitimacy upon traditional LC music. Derogatory terms like "shallow," "soulish," and "emotional" were applied to contemporary forms.

Anyone can claim that the Spirit has a preferred "sound" and then as evidence, cite his own subjective criteria to make the case for it. But proof based on a person's internal experience hardly closes the case for everyone else. For one thing, when someone says, "My spirit does not bear witness with this music," how do we know that it isn't his or her musical preference not bearing witness with that music? Often, believers who claim a deeper walk with Christ and do not particularly like CCM, assert that those who prefer the music are either spiritually insensitive or simply immature. But again, how do we know that the allegedly advanced person isn't the one who has become hardened, insensitive, or in this respect, immature concerning what is acceptable?

All the Lord's children have a right to conscience concerning meat or vegetables, this day or that, and yes, musical style. However, when the church is considering how to labor, move on, and reach the community, a great deal of wisdom and prudence is needed. Otherwise, the entire congregation will bog down in traditional LC convention (for views concerning internal conflict, see chapter 8, Choosing Methods as a Team).

If you want to help people appreciate the rich Christian musical heritage of the past, there are ways of doing it. Strategically place a hymn in your CCM play list now and then. Make it a special event by announcing it in the meeting, or calling people's attention to it. You may even want to teach the hymn, not leaving any poetic prose or archaic words a puzzle in the minds of meeting attendants. Too many times in traditional circles we exuberantly sang of a "firstborn seraph" and a "terrestrial ball" with no clue of what it meant. Don't continue singing about unknowns. Take the time to make sure everyone is on board. Another idea is to try some new instruments with older music or even rewrite the original music entirely. Remember, the Bible cannot be changed, but that prohibition doesn't extend to hymns—either the words or tunes.

Any group wanting to "go public" and get out into the world with the testimony of Christ must consider the music that they use to express their message. Music isn't an afterthought. It's the top communication medium of the masses. Just check with God. The longest section of his Word is a songbook.

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