



s a i n t l o u i s

Center for Christian Study

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201 S. Skinker Blvd. St. Louis, MO 63105 314-721-3314 greg@christianstudy.org

UPDATE: I've been teaching recently at Kirk of the Hills on *Nose Rings, the Loop & Liturgy: Reaching the Postmodern Half of St. Louis*, have brought to a close a year of involvement with Memorial Presbyterian Church's long-range planning process, continue leading a small group with Memorial, and continue to answer a host of emails about Christianity through the website. The Study Center ended the year on a better financial footing, but after three years I have only raised half the minimum financial support I need to serve full-time, with no prospects for improvement. I have committed to start examining my options more fully. I am not prepared to seek another part-time job when the seminary position ends in the coming months—I need to be engaged in full-time ministry in my areas of giftedness. I value your continued support. Please continue praying with me and for me as I seek God's leading. —Greg



Q & A about Postmodern Worship *Contemporary Music & Ancient Liturgy*

Q: You speak highly of liturgical worship. Does this mean you dislike all contemporary worship music?

Not at all. A few Reformed leaders have railed against everything new. In my view, that's a cheap way of avoiding biblical discernment. If you simply reject everything new, you avoid the responsibility of evaluating each new thing, and thus reject the good along with the bad. Of course, you also tend to idealize the old just because it's old. For every terrible modern praise chorus, I can show you a terrible Victorian hymn. Or two.

Q: Some reject contemporary worship music because it's theologically weak. Do you agree?

Some songs are, and some aren't. Trained worship leaders can help discern the difference. Some great Christian musicians have been engaged in an attempt recently to renew contemporary worship music—the *City on a Hill* project in particular stands out. Many of these artists are Reformed, and many are drawing on ancient models of corporate Christian worship. *God of Wonders* is probably my favorite song for corporate worship, though I've never sung it in church. A group like *Indelible Grace* is also helping break down the artificial distinction between new and old songs by arranging many of the old ones for acoustic praise bands. I know that sort of thing upsets musical purists—I'm not a musician and don't pretend to know enough to have an opinion on it. (I really love the organ.) If it helps overhead projector-laden evangelicals fall in love with good hymns, though, I have to appreciate it. Anything to calm the worship wars.

Some of the newest music is some of my personal favorite. I think of the truly excellent worship music produced in recent years by Steve Hindalong (*At the Foot of the Cross*, 1992; *City on a Hill*, 2000, vol. 2, 2002) and Caedmon's Call (*In the Company of Angels: A Call to Worship*, 2001). I've posted a list of a few recent songs that are fitting for corporate worship online at <http://www.christianstudy.org>.

There is no reason for churches to find themselves stuck in a Maranatha-rut, where they use the same handful of choruses from the 1970s and 1980s again and again. If a church is going to use contemporary music, it can't freeze it in time, as if we're singing the great classics of the faith. We aren't. Moreover, if I had to step back in time and be stuck in one decade forever, the 1980s aren't the decade I'd choose.

Q: What do you make of the charge that newer songs are simplistic?

Again, a lot of them are, but a lot aren't. It's inaccurate to characterize all contemporary worship music as simplistic. I think most of these songs require guitar accompaniment if possible, which helps. If they were written for guitar and we play them on a keyboard, even if we play them very well on a keyboard, they'll sound too rigid. The vocals—not the keyboard—should carry the tune with most contemporary choruses.

The charge of being simplistic is a fuzzy one, for that matter. If we only used simple songs in worship, over time we'd train ourselves to think only simple thoughts of God. But if you consider the only songbook God has ever given us—the 150-song *Psalter*, which was the hymnal of ancient Israel—some of those songs are really, really simple. Some are repetitive. Some were sung antiphonally. Some were very complex. All of them were emotional, but if you want to charge them with being emotionalistic, don't stand near me on judgment day. God wrote them, and I'm tan enough already.

Q: You say biblical music is emotional, but you reject sentimental music in corporate worship. What's the problem with sentimentality, and how can you develop emotion in worship?

Sentimental music is music with lyrics directly addressing the affections. All worship music should work on the affections, but there are two ways of doing this. The biblically faithful way to work the

emotions in music is indirect—through God-centered content. A song addressed to God, a song that proclaims his holiness, power, transcendence or grace, or which expresses to him our utter needfulness of him; such songs work the heart with the head.

A sentimental song seeks to bypass the mind and speak to the emotions directly. It's the "I'm so happy" syndrome. If you sing about being happy, you won't necessarily be happy. In corporate worship, sentimental lyrics communicate how we're supposed to feel, rather than directing us to a God who is altogether desirable. Sentimentality can work in private worship—provided you actually feel the way the lyrics say you should feel. It doesn't work in corporate worship, however. What actually frees us to worship God is a demonstration of who God is and how he is committed to us. It's the truth that sets us free, not singing about how syrupy we feel (or don't feel, turning us further inward on ourselves).

Q: This is a little abstract. Could you give an example of sentimental emotionalism?

I'll pick one that's not obvious. This will probably get me in trouble, since it's everyone's favorite hymn: *How Great Thou Art*. It's a fine hymn for private worship, but unless you know that every "soul" in the sanctuary will be "singing" (the hymn's emphasis) at 11:47 AM next Sunday, then it's not ideal for corporate worship. The song is about how much the singer's heart soars at God's creation, working the emotions directly. Someone will always be in the audience thinking, "I don't feel this way." Instead, they'll feel manipulated. Other examples of sentimental hymns are *The Old Rugged Cross* and *Blessed Assurance*. (One popular, sentimental hymn that's not fit for corporate or private worship is *In the Garden*, which is actually pretty a heretical song.)

Q: Is there a period of hymnody that is more characterized by sentimentality than others?

Sure, there is a history here. Of course, you have to exercise the same care in evaluating songs—no guilt by association. That said, tons of sentimental hymns were written between 1850 and 1950. Broad cultural shifts in that period led to sentimentalism. One feminist historian has described the period as the "feminization of American hymnody." We're still dealing with the fallout.

Before the mid-nineteenth century, religion was a mental category in its own right. The Victorians engendered religion, however. For the Victorians, religion became a *girl-thing*. Politics and commerce were part of the man's sphere; they involved action and power, which were considered male attributes. Family and religion, however, were defined as the woman's sphere. Since worship was feminine, it ("obviously," they would add) had to be about emotion rather than action, feeling rather than thinking—sugar and spice and everything nice. (This is when Christian men first became viewed as a bunch of sissies, by the way.) I like the Victorians' architecture, but I don't like their assumptions about religion and gender.

Because religion was defined as feminine, Victorian and post-Victorian hymns became characterized by "womanly" sentiment. (I should have sent a roll of Tums with this article; I know it.) Calvinism—and its sovereign and majestic God—became unfashionable and even offensive. Instead, one sees the rise of the God-crying-cosmic-tears-for-the-lost-pleading-begging-them-open-the-door-he-can't-open-it-please ("God as Battered Victorian Wife"). It's often hard for American Christians to realize how far such language is from the language God uses about himself in Scripture.

Instead, God became viewed primarily as arms we lean on, the one who talks to us in the garden, that sweet baby in the manger, calling to us tenderly. Waltzes and lullabies replaced anthems. (Can you imagine Isaiah in the temple singing a lullaby to God about how "sweet" he is?) Pre-Victorian hymnody, by contrast, had stressed God's rule, transcendence, power as Defender, the liberating power of his gospel, and his amazing commitment to us in Christ.

Contemporary examples of sentimentalism aren't hard to find, either. Tim Keller observes the implications for worship leadership:

We should not tell others how they should feel at the moment ("Don't you really just want to...?" or "Isn't the Lord just so good?"). Both are manipulative and "bathetic," working directly on the feelings instead of pointing to the Lord.

I want worship to be more emotional, not less. However, authentic affection for God comes as we turn our hearts to him, not as we sing about how we feel. Earlier Protestant sacred music, some new worship music, and ancient Christian liturgical patterns are designed to turn us to God, working on our emotions indirectly by turning us beyond ourselves to the Desired of Nations.

Q: If you think a lot of contemporary music is good for corporate worship, then what do you mean by ancient liturgy?

Liturgy doesn't speak about the *style of the music*, but rather the *structure of the service*. The basic concept behind liturgical worship is that the service is a dialogue between God and his people. Almost any style of music can fit within a liturgical structure, provided the music is singable, God-centered, biblical, and appropriate for that movement in the liturgy. The dialogue might go something like this:

G: God calls us to worship him.

P: We respond by singing praise to him.

G: He receives our praise, but speaks his law.

P: We confess to him our disobedience and plead for mercy for Jesus' sake.

G: He forgives us, assuring us of pardon.

P: We respond to his mercy with song.

G: He speaks his Word of grace to change us (Scripture reading and sermon).

P: We respond by affirming our loyalty to him by confessing him in the Creed and by offering our monetary gifts to him and singing a doxology inviting all creation to join us in worship.

G: The Lord then invites us to his table, with all the privileges of table fellowship, declaring the saving work of Christ for sinners.

P: We respond to his offer by interceding before him for those in need. After each intercession, we agree publicly before him by saying "Amen" together as one, concluding our intercession with the prayer he himself taught us to pray, saying "Our Father...."

G: He then has the bread and wine distributed to us all, nourishing our spirits.

P: We respond to him in song.

G: He sends us out with his blessing (benediction).

The key point is that there are only two parties in liturgical worship: the Triune God and the congregation. Pastors and worship leaders disappear—they are merely God's voice speaking his Word. Unlike the 1980s-style contemporary worship service, where musicians and a power preacher dominate a passive congregation, ancient worship (if faithfully done) lets God take his central place and frees the congregation to respond to him at every stage of the dialogue.

Q: What did the earliest liturgical structure look like?

There is no one, single, ancient liturgy. Different cities had different variations in the early church, and every service differed somewhat from the last. Many of the elements of ancient worship are persevered in Anglican, Episcopal, and Lutheran services, as well as some Presbyterian churches. It's not just a Catholic and Orthodox thing. We're all working with the same model from the early centuries of the church, which itself may have developed from earlier Jewish synagogue worship. Scholars aren't really certain how the transition from Jewish worship was made. Certainly the New Testament speaks of the early Christians devoting themselves to "the prayers" (Acts 2:42)—a reference to formal liturgical prayers like the ones in the synagogue, not to spontaneous or personal prayer. There are numerous such connections in the New Testament.

Q: Do we have any early liturgies?

No complete ones in the first two centuries. However, we know the early Christians used the *Sursum Corda* before the Eucharist. This is Hippolytus' description (c. 215 AD):

The Lord be with you.

And they shall say: And with your spirit.

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them up to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the Lord.

It is fitting and right to give him thanks.

The same exchange took place every week in every church. Cyprian, a Latin-speaking Christian leader in North Africa (martyred in 258 AD), also describes it, as did Origen and Cyril of Jerusalem, who explained it as a call to the worshiper to acknowledge God's presence, lifting the mind to heavenly things.

Q: What else was included in ancient Christian worship?

The Word of God was always read, and then preached. The Eucharist was celebrated weekly, intercessory prayer interposed between the Words of Institution ("This is my body...") and the distribution to the people. Prayers ended with the congregation saying the "Amen," followed by the offering. During the persecutions a hundred years after Christ, Justin Martyr explained the practice:

And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things. Then we all rise together and pray, and, as we before said, when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and the president in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people assent, saying "Amen," and there is a distribution to each, and a participation of that over which thanks have been given, and to those who are absent a portion is sent by the deacons. And they who are well to do, and willing, give what each thinks fit; and what is collected is deposited with the president. (Justin Martyr, *First Apology* LXVII).

Q: Is this pattern compatible with the Reformed "regulative principle" of worship?

Yes, though Reformed churches on the Continent enjoyed more flexibility than the English Puritans. The regulative principle states that Scripture determines what is and is not acceptable worship to

God. We can't make up whatever we think might be nice worship. Nevertheless, while Scripture gives us the basic elements of worship and principles to guide us, it leaves us a great deal of freedom, too. In one of his main liturgies, John Calvin himself included chanting of the ancient *Kyrie eleison* after the singing of each of the Ten Commandments—and this every week. As God's law was metrically sung, we would cry out *Kyrie eleison* and (presumably) *Christe eleison*—Latin for *Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy*—a pattern dating back to the earliest Christian centuries. Calvin also included a modified *Sursum Corda* in his communion liturgy.

The *Ten Commandments*, corporate confession and absolution, the *Apostles Creed*, *Lord's Prayer*, and *Aaronic Benediction* ("The Lord bless you and keep you...") were included every week. Calvin tried to re-establish the ancient (and likely apostolic) pattern of weekly communion as well, which he considered the biblical pattern.

Q: So how is ancient liturgy a better fit for postmodern people?

1. Postmodern people expect to participate. Liturgy when done rightly (and unlike many a Roman Catholic mass) is participatory, while most Protestant worship is passive. This is as true for pastor-oriented "traditional" (re: Victorian) sermon-sandwich services (hymn-sermon-hymn) as it is for the modern band-oriented and personality-driven "contemporary worship experience." When the officiant in the *Sursum Corda* says, "The Lord be with you," he is asking the congregation's permission to lead them in worship. If they don't respond, saying, "And also with you," then the service ends right then. No worship leader can presume to lead without congregational permission.

2. Postmodern people are multi-sensory in orientation. They weren't raised sitting in front of a radio, but an *Atari 2600* or later. Many a Protestant worship service is oriented toward the ear alone. Listen to a sermon. Listen to a choir. Postmoderns want to see it, taste it, smell it, hear it, and feel it. Idolatry isn't an option, though, so we have to mine the Scriptures to see if there are multi-sensory elements in Scripture. What do we find? The Eucharist. Feel, taste, smell, see and hear Christ and his gospel—all in one multi-sensory, biblical, liturgical, Christ-centered worship experience. You also see in Scripture language of darkness and light, mystery and revelation, lamps and oil. You see incense rising up before God's presence symbolizing the prayers of the saints. You see amazing art—the textile art of the priestly robes, the statuary and carvings in the Temple—visual, and all ordained explicitly by God for worship.

3. Postmoderns are also nostalgic about the past and long for a connection to history. Liturgical worship is the historical form for Christian worship. It is ancient and joins us with centuries of worship.

4. Postmodern people also desire identification as part of a larger community. The "contemporary worship experience" is designed to elicit intense internal, private, emotional experiences, which the recipient is to identify as the presence of God, overlooking the psychological tricks through which skilled music leaders manufactured the feeling. Boomers often ate this up for a decade or two, but charismatic churches are now closing at a rate of seven closing for every one opening. Too many charismatic burnouts have left it behind to find God's grace elsewhere without the emotional manipulation. Postmodern people aren't looking for private experiences so much as communal ones. They want to pray together, speak together, and act together. Liturgy treats the congregation as one body, not just 200 individual experiences. ✕