

**With What Shall We Come  
Before the Lord?  
Biblical Perspectives on Diversity and  
Division in Church Music**

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## With What Shall We Come Before the Lord? Biblical Perspectives on Diversity and Division in Church Music<sup>1</sup>

Consider the recent Labor Day lineup of musical events in the Dallas/Fort Worth Metroplex: a classical concert for five pianos, the music of *Guys and Dolls*, a tribute to Johnny Cash, a Czech festival, a Jazz festival, a Blues festival, a Country Rock festival, and concerts featuring the musical styles of Scottish pop, Texas folk, post-punk rock, classic rock, Tejano, hip-hop, Country and Western, and alternative metal.<sup>2</sup> What a country! Imagine being in each one of those settings and experiencing the sights and sounds, the people, the décor, the conversations. Now imagine each of those venues as a house of worship where the people have gathered for Christian congregational worship, realizing that each of those styles of music are likely being used in such a way in churches across North America. This illustrates one of the strangest and most divisive debates in our churches today: not so much the acceptable *role* of music in our congregational worship services, but the acceptable *range of styles*. Disagreements over style have cost many music leaders their positions and even led to church splits, yet church leaders have been unable to provide widely accepted guidelines to the debate. This article is an attempt to begin to fill that void, for I believe that God has provided sufficient biblical and ecclesiological guidelines to help a church discern the proper styles of music to be used in its congregational worship.

An obvious question must be asked: if those guidelines exist, why have they not been defined and widely agreed upon before this point in time? I think there are three primary reasons. First, the wider context of this debate, worship, and the specific context, music, are both somewhat rooted in subjectivity and often neglected by church leaders for that reason. Robert Schaper says very appealingly, “Worship is in that category of human experience that has a certain intuitive simplicity and philosophical complexity. It is like love.”<sup>3</sup> Who would presume to offer firm guidelines or categorizations for love? Likewise, who would desire to stir up controversy attached to such a subjective category?<sup>4</sup> I am not saying that Schaper is entirely correct but that such a belief would tend to make one hesitant to suggest guidelines for worship.

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<sup>2</sup>“Go!” *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, 4 September 2009, sec. G, pp. 9–15.

<sup>3</sup>Robert N. Schaper, *In His Presence: Appreciating Your Worship Tradition* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1984), 13.

<sup>4</sup>The fact that the debate over music in worship is often referred to as the “worship wars” only reinforces this aversion. But even seventy years ago, Joseph Ashton wrote that church leaders avoid the issue of music in worship because they find it “trifling” or “thorny,” one best left alone. Joseph N. Ashton, *Music in Worship: The Use of Music in the Church Service* (Boston: Pilgrim, 1943), 2.

However, the debate cannot for that reason be ignored. If Rick Warren is right when he says, “[Music in worship] will determine the kind of people you attract, the kind of people you keep, and the kind of people you lose,” then the matter is of great pragmatic importance.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, if Robert Webber is right when he says, “Worship is not a human invention but a God-given gift,” then the matter is of greater theological importance.<sup>6</sup> Applying this argument to music in worship may seem difficult; it is true that there is not one note of music or any description of musical style in the Bible. If there were, it would automatically become normative for all Christians of all times. There is not, nor are there reliable traditions of the music of the early apostolic church, and on this basis, some church leaders consider music *adiaphora*, a thing indifferent, and as a result not worthy of theological discussion.<sup>7</sup> Against this attitude, Harold Best asks a valuable question: “If we took music out of worship, would we have the same problem and the same set of solutions?”<sup>8</sup> The answer is obviously no, indicating that music must make a unique contribution to the church’s understanding of its worship. That contribution requires serious analysis and discussion.

Second, there is very little agreement as to the goal (or even the rules) of a debate over styles of music in congregational worship. Some books on the debate confuse the issue of music style with service style, others reduce the matter to a cultural evaluation, and others confuse the music’s value with the value of its associated text.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, many proposed guidelines for music in worship have little to do with the music itself and much to do with other important matters of the church.

To account for this confusion, I propose the following boundaries. This debate is not about worship but music, namely the melodies, harmonies, and rhythms that accompany acts of worship. The Bible has much to say about worship and acts of worship and a church cannot ignore God’s Word with respect to those acts; indeed, the church must deal

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<sup>5</sup>Rick Warren, *The Purpose-Driven Church: Growth without Compromising Your Message and Mission* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 280. This idea is not restricted to the church-growth or seeker movements; John Hammett, for example, comes to a similar conclusion in a conservative Baptist context. John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005), 19.

<sup>6</sup>Webber, *Worship Old and New*, 13. Churches holding to the regulative principle tend to agree with this idea. Though Webber does not specifically refer to music here, I believe that anything used in the worship of God should be treated with the same gravity.

<sup>7</sup>One church leader writes, “Anyone with some musical understanding, some common sense, and a willingness to think about it can make good decisions [about music in worship].” R. Kent Hughes, “Free Church Worship: The Challenge of Freedom,” in *Worship by the Book*, D.A. Carson, ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 170.

<sup>8</sup>Harold Best, *Unceasing Worship: Biblical Perspectives on Worship and the Arts* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2003), 75.

<sup>9</sup>For example, of the books cited in this article, Paul F.M. Zahl, ed., *Exploring the Worship Spectrum: 6 Views* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), and Paul Basden, *The Worship Maze: Finding a Style to Fit Your Church* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1999) both fall under the first category, assuming that a style of music is inherently bound up in a style of service (seeker, liturgical, traditional, etc.), and argue the merit of the music on the merit of the service. Both Marva J. Dawn, *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for the Turn-of-the-Century Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), and Ken Myers, *All God’s Children and Blue Suede Shoes: Christians & Popular Culture* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1989) fall under the second category, believing that an appeal to the relative merits of subcultures equally applies to the music associated with those subcultures. Finally, Carson, in *Worship by the Book*, routinely bases judgment about music solely on the texts of the songs, as if every church plays every song the same way.

with the broader topic of worship before it considers music.<sup>10</sup> Also, this debate is not about the texts, including lyrics, associated with acts of worship. The validity or orthodoxy of a text is determined by different guidelines than the propriety of a style of music. If a text does not teach or reflect biblical truth, a church should not use it, regardless of the music associated with it.

Third, and possibly most important, the church tradition that I believe is best positioned to appreciate and adopt these guidelines (and the one out of which, perhaps ironically, they are born) is one that seems the least willing or able to pay this debate proper attention. I will propose that decisions about styles of music in worship are primarily local church matters; the tradition that places the highest value on the local church is the Free Church tradition, which includes Baptists. Unfortunately, as David Dockery politely said, “Worship has not traditionally been one of the strengths of Baptist local church practice,” and music even less so.<sup>11</sup> This may lead to a perception that Baptists do not have much to contribute to debates over music or worship, calling this very article—written by a Baptist—into question. But such a perception would be false.

Historically, Baptists have made valuable contributions to the development of the practice of congregational worship and music therein. For example, John Smyth (1570–1612), an early English Baptist, was one of the first to offer a written defense of the practice that is now known as free worship.<sup>12</sup> Benjamin Keach (1640–1704), a Baptist leader in London, was one of the first to argue that hymns of human composition should be used in congregational worship.<sup>13</sup> Nathan Hatch argues that separatist Baptists in New England were at the forefront of what became American folk hymnody as part of the larger “democratic impulse” of 1780–1830, writing simple, original texts and being willing to use

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<sup>10</sup>Jesus rejected Satan saying, “You shall worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only” (Matt 4:10). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture references are from the Holy Bible, New American Standard Bible (NASB).

Other important texts on worship include Exod 20:1–6, Pss 95–96, John 4:21–26, 1 Cor 14, and Rev 4–5. From these texts, inasmuch as it helps us understand the context for music, I define worship, individually and corporately, as a response to God in light of the revelation of His Son Jesus Christ, empowered by His Holy Spirit, and directed by His holy Word. Connected with this issue is the question whether congregational worship services should prioritize praise, edification, or evangelism. The church must establish that conclusion before it deals with music in worship.

<sup>11</sup>David S. Dockery, “The Church, Worship, and the Lord’s Supper,” in *The Mission of Today’s Church: Baptist Leaders Look at Modern Faith Issues*, ed. R. Stanton Norman (Nashville: B&H, 2007), 37. The recent Southern Baptist publication, *A Theology for the Church*, devotes four pages to the church’s worship, one paragraph to the church’s singing, and says nothing about the church’s music. Daniel L. Akin, ed., *A Theology for the Church* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2007), 239, 809–12, not including sections on the ordinances. The Baptist Faith & Message reads similarly. For more information about the Free Church tradition, including its unique characteristics and possibilities, see Donald F. Durnbaugh, *The Believers’ Church: The History and Character of Radical Protestantism* (Scottsdale, PN: Herald, 1968), and Franklin H. Littell, *The Anabaptist View of the Church*. The Dissent and Nonconformity Series, Vol. 11 (Paris, AR: The Baptist Standard Bearer, 2001). I have been a minister of music in Southern Baptist churches for nine years, which is why I have such a personal interest in this matter.

<sup>12</sup>See John Smyth, “The Differences of the Churches of the Separation: Contayning, a Description of the Leitourgie and Ministerie of the Visible Church,” in *The Works of John Smyth: Fellow of Christ’s College, 1594–8*, ed. W.T. Whitley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1915); especially 277, 302, and 306.

<sup>13</sup>See Benjamin Keach, *The Breach Repaired in God’s Worship: or Singing of Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs, proved to be a Holy Ordinance of Jesus Christ* (London: 1691); especially 22–45, 80, 93–97, and 102.

secular tunes to increase their songs' popularity.<sup>14</sup> From these historic examples, I would suggest that there is no reason why Baptists should not make important contributions to the field of worship, and music in particular, today.

Indeed, Baptists should take up this mantle, not only for their own benefit, but also because their unique ecclesiological perspective will greatly help to clarify the wider debate of music in congregational worship. The Bible may say nothing about musical styles in congregational worship, but it says something about music, a lot about worship, and a lot about the church. Furthermore, churches have various ways of considering music in worship, and each of those angles should bring a wider perspective and hopefully greater clarity to our understanding of the biblical data. Ultimately, I hope to provide enough considerations for a local church to be able to navigate this entire debate without resorting to personal preference or church tradition, and also know how preference and tradition can be taken into account.

## Music: Profoundly Ecclesiological

### The Biblical Angle

Much of the biblical data about music in worship is found in the Old Testament, where we find examples of different kinds of congregational singing.<sup>15</sup> The worship services surrounding the return of the ark to Jerusalem (1 Chron 15–16) and the dedication of the Temple (2 Chron 5–7) are worthy of careful note. In both, singers and instrumentalists were appointed, in part based on skill, to sing joyful songs accompanied by lyres, harps, and cymbals, horns and trumpets. Their ministry included prayer and praise, and both David and Solomon offered significant psalms and prayers of thanksgiving. Those who worry that a Christian church should not appeal to a now-defunct Old Testament system for any guidance<sup>16</sup> should note that the songs of Moses (Exod 15) and Deborah (Judg 5) predate the Temple, and the Psalms are used in synagogue worship—Jesus and His disciples even sang a Psalm in the context of the Last Supper (Matt 26). Even if these Old Testament models cannot be used to make demands of Christian churches today, they do demonstrate that God is pleased with the use of music in worship as long as the heart is right with God (see Amos 5:18–27).

The New Testament does address music in worship, if only indirectly. Paul, speaking of church services, says, “When you assemble, each one has a psalm (ψαλμὸν), has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done

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<sup>14</sup>Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 146–50. He specifically mentions Joshua Smith, Henry Alline, Elias Smith, and Jeremiah Ingalls, all untrained musically.

<sup>15</sup>Songs such as Num 21:17–18 and Ps 134 point to full congregational involvement. Miriam's song with the women in Exod 15:21 may be a type of responsive or antiphonal singing. Neh 12 may indicate antiphonal singing; certainly Ps 118 is responsive (“His lovingkindness is everlasting”) and with that perhaps Ezra 3:11.

<sup>16</sup>Pilgram Marpeck, an early Anabaptist leader, held a rather strict position. John J. Kiwiet, *Pilgram Marbeck: ein Führer in der Täuferbewegung der Reformationszeit* (Kassel: J.G. Oncken, 1958), chapter 9. The seventeenth-century debate between Baptists Isaac Marlow and Benjamin Keach on the matter of singing in church reflects these concerns.

for edification.”<sup>17</sup> In the biblical literature, “psalm” always refers to a song of praise or an Old Testament psalm; this clearly calls for singing of some kind in church services. Paul also admonishes,

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful. Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms (ψαλμοῖς) and hymns (ὑμνοῖς) and spiritual songs (ὠδαῖς πνευματικαῖς), singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God.<sup>18</sup>

Much has been made of “psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs,” but there is simply not enough lexical data to warrant any absolute statements about them; all three cover the basic lexical range of a song of praise, and none has a known connection with a specific musical style. All we can say with certainty is that Paul has in mind more than Old Testament Psalms in a church’s worship.<sup>19</sup>

There is another important New Testament source for church worship: the heavenly worship found in Revelation chapters four, five, and seven. With respect to music, we can make three observations. First, whereas six of the seven great hymns are simply marked by the discursive λέγοντες,<sup>20</sup> we are told that the creatures and elders sang (ᾄδουσιν) their new song.<sup>21</sup> Second, the newness of the song says nothing about its style, but its content—a new activity of God (see also Rev 14:3, Isa 42:10, and Ps 96:1). Third, people from every nation, tribe, people, and tongue are in the great multitude, perhaps minimizing cultural distinctiveness and certainly embracing cultural inclusiveness.<sup>22</sup> Again, nothing has been said about musical style, but these references to songs reveal that music can be used with multiple acts of worship: praise, prayer, admonition, teaching,

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<sup>17</sup>1 Cor 14:26. The word for psalm, mistranslated as “hymn” in the NIV, is used in the Old Testament for a Psalm and in other literature for a song of praise, usually Christian. This is the word used in Eph 5:19 and Col 3:16 for “psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.” It is difficult to see how this would work in a large church today, although Paul’s subsequent restrictions on tongues and prophecies are helpful. Incidentally, many early Protestant churches took this chapter to mean that women were to remain totally silent in church, not even to sing or pray. It was a Baptist, Dan Taylor, who defended the rights of women to participate in church services in 1786 (although he also argued that pagans and children also should join in singing). See, H. Leon McBeth, *A Sourcebook for Baptist Heritage* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1990), 108–10.

<sup>18</sup>Col 3:15–16. Paul is addressing the entire church (the pronouns are plural) in the context of how they should behave toward one another as God’s chosen people. Though not restricted to church services, this passage certainly applies to them.

<sup>19</sup>There is certainly no justification to read this as indicating “Psalms, traditional hymns, and contemporary praise choruses.”

<sup>20</sup>4:8, 4:10, 5:12, 5:13, 7:10, 7:12. Paul uses a similar word, λαλοῦντες, in Eph 5:19 with respect to “psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.”

<sup>21</sup>Rev 5:9. Even if John projected “on to his canvas the forms and patterns which belonged to his knowledge of the worship of the Church on earth,” the apostolic pattern of singing remains valid. Lexically, the “new song,” ὠδὴν καινὴν, indicates a sacred song in a familiar sense. Ralph P. Martin, *Worship in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 45; Geoffrey Wainwright, *Doxology: The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine and Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 213.

<sup>22</sup>But note that this scene takes place during the Great Tribulation—the multitude is those martyred during that time (as well as the creatures, elders, and angels)—and may not be normative for eternity; furthermore, we nowhere get the impression that God revealed this scene to John in order to make a proclamation about temporal church worship services.

and the Lord's Supper. Such a wide understanding of the use of music in worship will be valuable for our conclusions.

### The Congregational Angle

With respect to a church's congregation (or on a larger scale a denomination's membership), music can be viewed constructively or destructively. Constructively, music plays a critical role in forming community and shaping tradition. Robert Webber argues convincingly that "in the worship of the church, the faith of the church is handed over from generation to generation."<sup>23</sup> Within that worship, Noll identifies music as the key factor for empathizing with and retaining that tradition.<sup>24</sup> Music can be a powerful unifying force for a local community—not just which songs are sung, but the ways they are sung.<sup>25</sup> For good or for ill, music shapes a congregation's identity and its attitude toward itself.

Music can also have an opposite effect on a congregation or denomination. Note that this may not necessarily be seen as destructive. "Alternative worship services" within a single church, primarily defined by the style of music and atmosphere, are commonplace today.<sup>26</sup> Music has been tied to the formation of the Vineyard Movement, the Willow Creek Association (indeed the entire seeker-sensitive movement), and even elements of the emergent church movement.<sup>27</sup> Again, many do not view those developments destructively. However, after a period of years, alternative worship services create distinct sub-congregations within a church—largely based on the musical preferences of the

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<sup>23</sup>Robert E. Webber, "The Impact of the Liturgical Movement on the Evangelical Church," *Reformed Liturgy and Music* 21 (Spring 1987): 114. He says, "For the first fifteen and a half centuries of the Church, cultural transmission was the primary means of the Church's communication. People were evangelized and nurtured into the faith through an immersion into the stories and images that were passed down in worship. The Church was a community, and members learned the language and worldview of the community in the same way they learned their mother tongue: through immersed participation. Faith was not taught systematically from published articles of belief; it was learned through cultural transmission." Idem, *Planning Blended Worship: The Creative Mixture of Old and New* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 24.

<sup>24</sup>He offers Edwards, Whitefield, and Charles Wesley as proof, among other arguments. Mark Noll, "We Are What We Sing," *Christianity Today*, 12 July 1999, 37–41. Interesting corroboration for Noll's assertion comes from Karl Barth who wrote, "If I ever get to heaven, I would first of all seek out Mozart and only then inquire after Augustine, St. Thomas, Luther, Calvin, and Schleiermacher." Barth, *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart*, trans. Clarence K. Pott (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 16; quoted in Frank Burch Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste, & Christian Taste: Aesthetics in Religious Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 161.

<sup>25</sup>See the argument in Wainwright, *Doxology*, 200, 215.

<sup>26</sup>Lutheran Frank Senn was using this term as early as 1995; Frank Senn, "'Worship Alive': An Analysis and Critique of 'Alternative Worship Services,'" *Worship* 69 (1995): 195–96.

<sup>27</sup>See, for example, James L. Brauer, "The Role of Music in Seeker Services," *Concordia Journal* 24 (1998): 11–15. Noll even sees music as playing a central role in the direction of the Protestant Reformation, with the Anabaptists "rejecting all 'worldly' forms of music in favor of unaccompanied congregational song" against the ornate Catholics, the professionalized Lutherans, and the worldly Calvinists. Mark A. Noll, *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000), 17–18. It would probably be fair at this point to exonerate Luther of a frequent misrepresentation. Luther did not say, "Why should the devil have all the good music?" He did not use bar songs; all but one of his tunes were either original or based on folk church music. The one secular tune he used he later replaced because he was embarrassed to hear it sung at a dance hall. See, Paul S. Jones, *Singing and Making Music: Issues in Church Music Today* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2006), 171–75, noting his personal interest in the matter as a Reformed organist.

church members.<sup>28</sup> Denominational division based on musical preference has been called “a sectarianism of worship style,”<sup>29</sup> and such divisions have only continued.

Whether or not one considers these divisions widespread or not, constructive or destructive, it cannot be denied that the spiritual fellowship of God’s people, and even the cooperation of God’s churches, has at times been directly influenced by personal musical preference. These are fundamental ecclesiological concerns. Gordon Borrer explains why music can be so destructive: it is a tool “prostituted by Satan” to divide a congregation and distract it from its mission precisely because it is “one of the very best means of ex-tolling God,” “one of the very best means to teach biblical truth,” and “one of the very best ways to spread the message of the Gospel.”<sup>30</sup> While this angle may not offer guidance for styles of music, it does establish the power of music to unite and divide; such knowledge provides more motivation to find a solution to the debate.

### The Missiological Angle

Because music can be so valuable, it is a central concern in the work of missionaries, and the perspective of mission work offers another angle from which to view music styles in worship. The use of music in evangelistic proclamation, which is part of a missionary’s concern, is an equally important but distinct issue (and beyond the scope of this article); this article focuses on the use of music in cross-cultural church planting. One model of church planting starts a transplanted church, a subject in a later section. Another seeks a contextualized church that is faithful to God’s Word but meaningful to the respondents in their cultural contexts; it hopes to avoid the hazards of planting one’s own culture and syncretizing with or absorbing unbiblical elements of the receptor culture.<sup>31</sup> Obviously, music plays a significant role in the contextualization of a church. One missiologist offers this analysis: “Attempts to set old or foreign hymns to Caribbean tunes or rhythms have generally been applauded. However, for many this does not go far enough. Music and song need to reflect the mood, spirit, temperament and theology of the Carib-

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<sup>28</sup>While these churches still may deny that they have created distinct congregations, many will admit to “distinct worshipping communities.” Dan Kimball, *Emerging Worship: Creating Worship Gatherings for New Generations* (El Cajon, CA: EmergentYS: 2004), 155. Kimball embraces the situation by arguing that community cannot be formed on Sunday mornings anyway, and he is right. *Ibid.*, 120. It is also valid to say that this phenomenon is little different from churches that offer multiple services because of their size, but that is beside the point.

<sup>29</sup>Michael S. Hamilton, “The Triumph of the Praise Songs,” *Christianity Today*, 12 July 1999, 30. Hamilton went on to say, “There is nothing we can do to stop the new worship divisions, any more than we could stop the doctrinal divisions over who, when, and how to baptize.” *Ibid.*, 34. The elevation of worship style to a primary doctrine is astounding but not hard to believe.

<sup>30</sup>Ronald Allen and Gordon Borrer, *Worship: Rediscovering the Missing Jewel* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1982), 163. See also Marva Dawn’s argument based on powers from Col 1–2 and Eph 6; Dawn, *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down*, 53.

<sup>31</sup>David J. Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 200, 1. Ecumenist Jonah Katoneene says, “Our struggle, in brief, is not to Christianize our African traditions but to Africanize the Christian faith so that we understand and appreciate Christianity within our African context.” Jon Michael Spencer, ed., *The Worshipping Church in Africa*, *Black Sacred Music: A Journal of Theomusicology*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 10. The Acts 29 network, for example, follows a contextualized church planting model.

bean person.”<sup>32</sup> Not every church planter agrees. There is a broad spectrum of attitudes toward music in church planting which can roughly be illustrated by four scenarios: a missionary uses his home church’s hymnal in a church plant; a missionary uses his home church’s hymnal but translates the text into the local language; a missionary sets his home church’s hymnal to local or modified melodies and rhythms and takes greater liberty with the translation; and a missionary works with members of his church plant to write new songs for use in church services.

Southern Baptist “music missionaries” have experience with each of these approaches, as a few case studies can explain. In Columbia and Argentina in the 1960s, the first Southern Baptist music missionaries fought for greater emphasis to be placed on “contemporary folk-style music” in their church plants, but the unfolding of their efforts took some telling turns. After spending time among their people groups, they found local musical traditions to be underdeveloped, so they used and taught Western music notation (which is inherently bound to Western theory), Western music education, and Western performance. Out of perceived necessity, they also imported their own instruments (piano and organ) for use in music education and church services. In the end, our church plants looked and sounded a lot like American churches.<sup>33</sup> In Lebanon, however, the missionaries worked with the local university to create an Arabic hymnal that applied Eastern modality:

Because many Arab Baptists have thought of their hymns and indigenous instruments as inferior to those of the West, Willmon [a Southern Baptist music missionary], through his work at the seminary, is seeking to instill into each student a sense of national pride, and as a result, more of them seem to be enthusiastic about Eastern tunes and a hymnody analogous with their own culture—a hymnody that is their own unique response to God.<sup>34</sup>

I do not want to launch into a discussion of Mission Board policies except to point out that in just these two examples, we see all four scenarios in play.

### **Culture: A Human Tension of Babel vs. Rome**

That last quote introduces one more critical element of this debate: culture. Missionary church planters have to make significant assumptions about the culture, and in many ways, contextualization simply asks a basic question, “Whose culture shall we allow to inform the text for us?”<sup>35</sup> The same can be asked of music. Missionaries who import their home music to the mission field are making a cultural evaluation. At the same

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<sup>32</sup>Pedrito U. Maynard-Reid, *Diverse Worship: African-American, Caribbean & Hispanic Perspectives* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), 146. He specifically mentions the sea as a dominant motif (not mountains or snow), and sea life as a primary rhythm and energy.

<sup>33</sup>M. Fred Ellerbe, “The Music Missionary of the Southern Baptist Convention: His Preparation and Work” (Ph.D. diss., Catholic University of America, 1970), 19–36. Ellerbe paints a similar picture for British church plants in Hong Kong with less emphasis on contextualization. *Ibid.*, 162–64.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, 138–147, quotation on 145.

<sup>35</sup>Hesselgrave, *Contextualization*, 115.

time, some Christians believe that certain cultural forms are so connected with non-Christian values that they should not be admitted to Christian worship. Finally, some missionaries believe that classical Western music traditions are superior to local folk music traditions and should be used in worship for that reason. Biblical counsel on these matters will affect our position on the choice of music in worship.

### **The Fall of Man or the Image of God (or Both)?**

Genesis chapters three through eleven describe a discouraging progression of affairs for humanity: the Fall, the first murder, the flood, the tower of Babel, and the scattering of the nations. In isolation from God, Adam's descendents created a culture of wickedness that God had to destroy by flood. Later, Noah's descendents created a culture of pride that God had to disrupt by confusion.<sup>36</sup> In the New Testament, Paul laments over the fallen state of humanity, that both Jew and Gentile live in a crooked and perverse generation whose only taste is for evil, a sinful state that only the divine act of the last Adam, Jesus Christ, can overcome.<sup>37</sup> But the Bible also reminds us that man has been created in the image of God; the Fall did not destroy it, as God confirms in His covenant with Noah.<sup>38</sup>

This sinfulness of humanity and the image of God intersect our debate in the subject of "culture," the shared body of knowledge that defines a group's behavior, patterns of communication, values, and artifacts.<sup>39</sup> Some Christians assert that churches have made a mistake by incorporating musical elements of the surrounding culture in their worship. They invoke Paul's exhortation in Romans 12:2, "do not be conformed to this world," and some even point to Israel's cultural compromise in her worship as "a significant factor in the divine judgment."<sup>40</sup> The world's culture reflects the fallen nature of humanity and has no place in a church. There is a great deal of truth in this assessment.

However, all music is culturally influenced. To account for this, Kenneth Myers suggests categorizing cultures: high culture, rooted in antiquity, which includes its associated musical form called high music (sometimes simplistically referred to as "classical" music); folk culture, which reflects diversity, and its associated folk music; and popular culture, a child of secular modernism, and its associated popular music. Marva Dawn illustrates these categories by comparing them to fine dining, home cooking, and fast food.<sup>41</sup> Myers and Dawn approve of high culture and folk culture (which includes high

<sup>36</sup>Especially Gen 3:17–19, 6:1–6, 11:5–9.

<sup>37</sup>Especially Rom 1:21–32, 3:9–18, 5:12–21. See also, 1 Cor 15:42–49; Phil 2:14–16.

<sup>38</sup>Gen 9:6; see also, Ps 8; 1 Cor 11:7. Of course, there is a great debate as to the nature of the image of God that we simply cannot recapitulate here. As a starting point, I offer the opinions of two musical theologians: "It is being human, not being saved—it is the image of God in us, not regeneration—that establishes the capacity to recognize the distinctions between the beautiful and the ugly, between order and chaos, between the creative and the stultifying." Myers, *All God's Children and Blue Suede Shoes*, 51. Or, the image of God is "the urge to believe, the ability to make up and think." Best, *Unceasing Worship*, 175

<sup>39</sup>Hesselgrave, *Contextualization*, 158.

<sup>40</sup>David Peterson, *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992), 284.

<sup>41</sup>Myers, *All God's Children and Blue Suede Shoes*, 56–61; Dawn, *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down*, 181–88. Inasmuch as this illustration is accurate, the case presented in *Franchising McChurch* is quite clear that popular culture has painfully distorted American churches. The question is how the argument translates to popular music. Thomas White and John M. Yeats, *Franchising McChurch: Feeding Our Obsession with Easy Christianity* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2009)

music and folk music) and direct their ire against popular culture and popular music, reflected in “oldies” rock, contemporary rock, and so on. Some Christians argue that the transient nature of popular music alone makes it unacceptable for the worship of God.<sup>42</sup> Others believe that popular music is too closely bound to the immorality of popular culture to be used in worship. It has been difficult for missionaries in Mexico and Latin America to create an ethnic hymnody precisely for this reason, where the local culture is considered secular and European culture is sacred.<sup>43</sup>

There are several challenges in this line of thought. First, it assumes that music is or can be made a moral agent of popular culture; following this line would lead to a radical reevaluation of a number of church elements that have been appropriated by pop culture.<sup>44</sup> Second, the line between popular music and folk music is very blurry; heavy metal behaves as a folk tradition in certain populations, and some country music is now considered pop culture.<sup>45</sup> Third, it compares the value of cultures; is European culture more sacred than Latin American culture? This exercise is so important that I devote the next section to it.

### The Lure of a Christian Culture

The history of the Roman Catholic Church contains many confluences of Christianity and culture, the pursuit of both “evangelisation” and “civilisation,” or a Christian culture.<sup>46</sup> The insistence of a uniform Latin Mass should be seen as an expression of this belief.<sup>47</sup> Although the floodgates of the vernacular were opened with the Protestant Reformation, seemingly promoting the many folk cultures, the actions of Protestant missionaries and the tragedy of slavery unmask a lingering belief in cultural superiority. Ignoring the rhetoric, consider the opinion of Desmond Tutu:

And so it seemed logical, since virtually everything native was inferior, pagan, heathen, and unchristian, that they should be turned into black Europeans for their sakes . . . This missiological policy has left a sad legacy in Africa, where much that was worthwhile in our religion, music, culture,

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<sup>42</sup>“As much as the evangelistic motive may explain jazz band or rock ‘n’ roll inspired Christian music, it does not account for the inability of born-again Protestants to see the inconsistency of standing for religious values that transcend time and place while packaging those truths in forms that are singularly disposable.” D.G. Hart, *Deconstructing Evangelicalism: Conservative Protestantism in the Age of Billy Graham* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 174. How many churches still sing 80s songs?

<sup>43</sup>Maynard-Reid, *Diverse Worship*, 141, 190.

<sup>44</sup>See the example of reggae and calypso music in Maynard-Reid, *Diverse Worship*, 140.

<sup>45</sup>See Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste, & Christian Taste*, 238. Most church agencies now support the practice of using folk music traditions in creating ethnic hymnodies, believing those traditions to be more preserved by the image of God than marred by the Fall. In support, let me suggest that it is meaningful that every major awakening has been accompanied by a dramatic outburst in folk music.

<sup>46</sup>See, for example, Yves Congar, *Christians Active in the World*, trans. P.J. Hepburne-Scott (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), 70–86, quotation taken from 71.

<sup>47</sup>When Hildebrand writes, “Do we better meet Christ by soaring up to Him, or by dragging Him down into our workaday world?” in defense of the ancient Roman Rite, he essentially argues that Latin is the most divine language. Dietrich von Hildebrand, “The Case for the Latin Mass,” <http://www.latin-mass-society.org/dietrich.htm> (Accessed 14 September 2009).

drama, and so forth was uprooted. We have been made ashamed of being African.<sup>48</sup>

With respect to music, an attitude of cultural superiority rejects local musical forms that are less sophisticated as inferior and unfit for Christian expression. It subtly influences many local church debates (often without the full awareness of the church members). Too often it devolves into a personal or sociological evaluation, which I have tried very hard to avoid. One resource for evaluating music is the field of aesthetics, which claims to seek an objective determination of beauty or value. This field is very philosophically formed, making it unappealing to the Free Church tradition as I will explain later.<sup>49</sup> Roger Scruton, for one, does not believe that such objective universals even exist; however, he makes an interesting suggestion, “Granted that there are no universal rules of taste, there is nevertheless a difference between the person with taste, and the person without it.”<sup>50</sup> While I will deny his premise, the concept may provide a bridge between several elements of this debate and will be taken up later.

This leads to a final question: what is the acceptable interchange (if any) between a church and its surrounding culture, namely the culture’s music? Niebuhr grossly oversimplified the possibilities in *Christ and Culture*,<sup>51</sup> but where you lean on his spectrum profoundly affects your attitude toward the choice of music in worship. Let me suggest a corrective: Jesus did not come to transform the culture; He came to proclaim the coming kingdom of God and call men to repentance and faith—not to inaugurate that kingdom in a consummatory sense.<sup>52</sup> We live in the tension of being in the world, but not of it; “to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.”<sup>53</sup> Consequently, those who seek to redeem “music” are misguided, but those who ignore it are foolish.<sup>54</sup>

### Cultural Baggage Check

In order to share the gospel, a church must be able to communicate with the surrounding culture, and the language it uses is itself culturally formed. Consequently, James’ call to be pollution-free, or Paul’s call to non-conformity, cannot mean absolute cultural disengagement; there must be enough of the *imago dei* in the culture to allow this interaction. Indeed, when we are told to eschew “this world” or “this age,” it is specifically that part of this world that stands opposed to God—His wisdom, His gospel, His standards.<sup>55</sup> In the context of Romans 12, we are to abhor what is evil, that which obscures

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<sup>48</sup>In Spencer, *The Worshiping Church in Africa*, vii–viii. I am unsure what he means “religion” to be.

<sup>49</sup>Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 219.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*, 378.

<sup>51</sup>Christ against culture (rejection), the Christ of culture (accommodation), Christ above culture (synthesis), Christ and culture in paradox (dualism), and Christ the transformer of culture. H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1951).

<sup>52</sup>Matt 17:24–27, 20:28, 22:15–22; Luke 5:32, 19:10, etc.

<sup>53</sup>Matt 5:13–16; John 17:6–19; Phil 2:12–17; Jas 1:22–27; 4:1–10, etc.

<sup>54</sup>“To withhold all judgment, as though a taste in music were on a par with a taste in ice-cream, is precisely not to understand the power of music.” Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music*, 502.

<sup>55</sup>For example, in Rom 12:2 Paul warns us about “this age” (αἰῶνι τούτῳ), a phrase he uses elsewhere in the context of true wisdom (1 Cor 2:6–8, 3:18–20), the darkness that hinders the gospel (2 Cor 4:3–6; Gal 1:4), the denial of Christ (Eph 1:18–23), and the presence of sin (Eph 2:1–4). This “world”

the will of God and the fellowship of the body, and cling to what is good, that which promotes love and service.<sup>56</sup> Note that this focuses on use, not quality. Later, Paul defines what is good as that which is true, honorable, right, pure, lovely, of good repute, excellent, and worthy of praise.<sup>57</sup> Again, note that there does not seem to be anything subjective about this evaluation, so it cannot be applied to music in a qualitative sense (how appealing it is to the listener). If we want to use cultural affinity as a guideline for rejecting music in a church, there must be a real, objective connection between that music and active or moral hostility toward God, not some superficial connection with the feared pollution of pop culture.

Evidence for this connection may come from two of secular music's key supporters in Christian circles: "Both Chuck Smith and John Wimber stated that the sensuality and violence that characterize music of the last decade are simply not congruent with Christian values, and consequently they are struggling with building a bridge to the current generation of youth."<sup>58</sup> In other words, even with Christian lyrics, these styles of music do not belong in Christian worship. This is an interesting statement because I do not believe music can communicate with the clarity of symbolic languages; certainly it can express emotions such as joy and anger, but not why it is joyful—such specificity requires lyrics or drama.<sup>59</sup> This statement then indicates that certain emotions are incongruent with Christian worship, and I would have to agree. With respect to worship, the Bible speaks of joy for salvation, awe for God, sorrow for sin, and a somber resolve to discipleship. It is hard to see how the chaotic frenzy of speed metal, uncontrolled anger of death metal, or raw sensuality of certain forms of R&B, for example, could be reconciled with the worship of God.<sup>60</sup> There is another consideration; music also finds meaning in association (Scruton calls it "metaphor"); over time, a group—anything from an informal high school peer group to a formal church tradition—creates associations between certain

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(κόσμου) from which we are to keep unstained (ἄσπιλον) in Jas 1:27 should be understood in the same way, namely as that which is opposed to or hostile to God. But this reflects an inward condition. Jesus also says that "this age" is marked by the divine institution of marriage, Luke 20:34–35, as opposed to heaven, so the term does not indicate a blanket condemnation of temporality.

<sup>56</sup>Rom 12:9, we abhor that which is "evil" (πονηρόν, a term which often has the connotation of being socially worthless, but may be being used as an abstract substantive), and cling to that which is "good" (ἀγαθόν, often used of that which is useful or beneficial, its likely meaning in this context).

<sup>57</sup>Phil 4:8. Some philosophers will point to the objective nature of this verse as support for an aesthetic standard ("whatever is lovely"). But the words have entirely moral connotations (not sensory); the one possible exception is "lovely" (πρόσφιλῆ), but that is only because we do not have enough lexical data to make firm declarations.

<sup>58</sup>Donald E. Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism: Christianity in the New Millennium* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 84. Chuck Smith is a pastor of Calvary Chapel and founder of the Jesus Movement; John Wimber is a founder of the Vineyard Movement. For these men, it is not simply about reaching another generation; it is about contextualizing the church for that generation, a process that they believe must account for these styles of music. Their belief merits further study.

<sup>59</sup>See Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music*, 149–60, 171–86. Consider Beethoven's "Ode to Joy."

<sup>60</sup>Col 3:16; Pss 51:17, 96:9; and 1 Cor 14:26, for example, especially in light of Ezek 16. Brown perhaps overstates the claim that easy listening and commercial jingles fail for the opposite reason, that they are akin to "choosing to praise or thank God in the tone of voice one would ordinarily use to order pizza or to cheer a touchdown—or perhaps even to make the most casual sort of love," but the accusation is quite concerning. Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste, & Christian Taste*, 247. Brown also rejects what he considers fake emotion in a type of work he calls "kitsch." Kitsch is essentially entertainment before art, designed or manipulated for commercial success. If he is right, then churches should avoid such commercialized forms because they are emotionally hypocritical. *Ibid.*, 146.

songs or genres and events, ideas, or emotions.<sup>61</sup> Sometimes these associations may even seem irrational to someone outside the group. Furthermore, over time, they will probably change.

This concept of music association plays an important role in the debate over the appropriate styles of music in congregational worship because every church represents a unique group that is able to create its own associations. Every church is then liable at least to two possible errors. This first is that its conclusions are indefinitely binding; such an attitude smacks of conciliarism, something free churches should know to avoid. The second assumes that a group's decisions are always right, despite evidence to the contrary—in other words, that music's value is entirely in the ear of the group.<sup>62</sup> This attitude tends to arrogance, possibly ignoring the chance of error or the counsel of others.

Like the missionary church planter, the local church must always keep two observations in mind. It exists within a culture and must be able to communicate with that culture. As members of the surrounding community are saved and brought into the church, they will bring parts of that culture with them. In some ways this is good, for it means that the church is always growing; existing church members should not necessarily seek to impose their current culture in its entirety on those new members. But at the same time, culture has been marred by the Fall; churches, like missionaries, must be very cautious in their interaction with the surrounding culture. In some situations the churches themselves set the rules for that interaction, but not always—God's Word always overrules human opinion when the two disagree. Now the important final question must be asked: how does a church go about setting the principles by which it defines its music tradition and decides which styles of music are appropriate for its worship of God?

### Toward a Free Church Ecclesiology of Music

Dawn offers a meaningful summary of the goals described in this paper when she says, "The Church's worship ought not to be so 'alien' that it does not communicate with the culture around it, but at the same time it dare not be so 'resident' as to empty the gospel of its transforming power."<sup>63</sup> Realizing this goal has been a terrible challenge; every church tradition approaches it from a unique perspective, some of which have been described in this paper. Now I would like to explain why the Free Church tradition has the

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<sup>61</sup>"Metaphor" is what we hear when we hear sounds as music. Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music*, 80–96. "In church circles, judgments of musical taste are almost always tied closely to questions of tradition—and for good reason; for it is tradition that determines, in part, what sorts of music will seem appropriate. It is tradition that trains a given community to hear certain kinds of religious meaning in particular kinds of music." Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste, & Christian Taste*, 182. Though less familiar to some Americas, there is also the phenomenon of music being so closely tied with old religions that it is seen as hostile toward God. In parts of Africa, "To use drum and dance in worship is to revive an entire spirituality, a whole style of mystical communion, where measurement against original and traditional Christianity might be difficult." Wainwright, *Doxology*, 367. This situation is governed by Rom 14.

<sup>62</sup>See Maynard-Reid's argument that no musical idiom is secular, but rather that the secular culture has adopted those idioms. *Diverse Worship*, 140.

<sup>63</sup>Dawn, *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down*, 293. Along these lines Brown says, "I claim that, from a Christian point of view, aesthetic virtues should include—in the interests of love and community—the cultivation and appreciation of aesthetic diversity, rather than the exercise of rigidly exclusive likes and dislikes. Yet Christian tastes also need to learn to be discerning and discriminating." Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste, & Christian Taste*, xiv.

strongest foundation on which to build a coherent and cohesive ecclesiology of music and summarize what that ecclesiology would look like when carefully and faithfully constructed according to fundamental Free Church doctrinal principles.

### **A Free Church Doctrine of Music: Ground Principles**

I do not have enough space to repeat what Malcolm Yarnell has effectively proposed in his book, *The Formation of Christian Doctrine*, but he summarized his own case for the understanding of proper Free Church theological method saying,

Its foundation is a complete yieldedness to Christ in covenantal discipleship. The ground principles are Christocentrism, the coinherent work of the Word and the Spirit, fidelity to the biblical order against human invention, and a covenantal community interpreting and living out the Word. On this foundation and from these principles are derived the free churches' understanding of the proper development of doctrine.<sup>64</sup>

Let me briefly describe how these should affect the discussion at hand.

The key to any free church is its commitment to personal and congregational discipleship to Jesus Christ. If we would only take that seriously, how many of these destructive debates—including the style of music—would quickly disappear? For example, a common argument against a musically blended service is that it makes no one “happy.” Basden says, “The only way for a blended service not to degenerate into an us-versus-them experience is for sacrificial love to prevail.”<sup>65</sup> Should that not be the case for all Christians in all times? Also, how could a church leader or musician drift into cultural elitism if he has the attitude that was in Christ Jesus? Or how could a church willingly split over a style of music if it were united in spirit and intent on one purpose? That might sound overly simplistic, and perhaps I am naïvely optimistic, but let me explain how this concept relates to each of the ground principles of a Free Church theological method.

The first principle is Christocentrism, starting with a personal salvific relationship with Christ and continuing with lifelong submissive discipleship to Christ.<sup>66</sup> This principle clarifies the purpose of a church's worship service which helps us understand the context for music. Peterson argues that the primary purpose of a church's gatherings is edification,<sup>67</sup> and consequently music should have a very didactic tone. I counter that discipleship is always a celebration of salvation, and the feel of joy and thanksgiving should always have a presence, especially in music. At the same time, this principle demands the full rehearsal of discipleship, including its great cost, which leads to a wide range of emotion in song. But that range is not up for vote, for we are also reminded that a free church is not a democracy, but a Christocracy. I am sensitive to the sentiment that “[p]ropriety,

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<sup>64</sup>Yarnell, *The Formation of Christian Doctrine*, 106. The biblical case he proposes based on Pilgram Marpeck's framework is extensive; I only present his conclusions here.

<sup>65</sup>Basden, *The Worship Maze*, 111.

<sup>66</sup>Obviously, each of these principles has a significant impact on the content of a worship service and the text of a song, and those are at least as important as the topic at hand, but I am intentionally restricting this discussion to music. And though this observation is technically off-topic, it is important to note that the Christ-centered foundation immediately rules out the possibility of a non-Christian leading the music or making a musical offering to a God from whom he is separated.

<sup>67</sup>Peterson, *Engaging with God*, 206–15.

not mere popularity, must guide those who plan worship music,<sup>68</sup> but remind that propriety is determined by Christ, not the church. Finally, it sets the standards for those who lead music in church: humility, self-denial, and true love for people. The Anabaptists may have overcorrected by preferring unaccompanied unison singing, but their desire to avoid music (and musicians) that draws attention to itself instead of its Creator is certainly within this principle. This is the ultimate repudiation of the performance mentality that infects so many churches. Self-denial helpfully reminds the church and music leader not to consider his personal preferences, learning to “distinguish between personally liking a kind of music and judging it appropriate for worship in a particular community.”<sup>69</sup> His motive therein is love, and his great fear is the accusation, “‘Not in my style’ may really and truly mean ‘Not my kind of people.’”<sup>70</sup> Subtle prejudices are a snare to the work of every free church.

The second principle is the coinherent work of the Word and Spirit, or the proper relationship between inspiration and illumination. Remember Scruton’s earlier claim that although there is no universal standard of taste, there is a difference between a person with taste and without it; I am very uncomfortable with the strong elitist tones, but he may inadvertently have a point. When John Smyth spoke of “spirituall worship,” he said that it was guided by the “sanctified judgment” and “sanctified affections,” which worked together to “discerne & judge truth from falsehood, right from wrong, good from bad, fit from vnfit,” and “be moved according to the qualitie of the matter & kind of the worship.”<sup>71</sup> I believe these two concepts intersect; the “difference” which identifies a person of taste for the church’s benefit is the Holy Spirit, not specialized training in music or aesthetics. A wise old sage, a lifelong, humble servant of Christ, is far better equipped to discern the propriety of music for a church than any new Christian, no matter how gifted he or she may be musically. I do not dismiss the value of music education any more than the preacher improving his skills as a communicator, but the priority is the sanctified judgment—spiritual maturity must come before musical maturity (or oratorical maturity, and so on) and must be held in higher regard in a church.<sup>72</sup> But there is more at stake than the discernment of music; there is the discernment of people, which musical training alone cannot provide. Truly sanctified judgment is able “to listen to and through the rhetoric and sometimes curious logic of particular claims regarding music and worship so as to discern the underlying musical and religious perceptions, values, and judgments.”<sup>73</sup> Because the music ministry (and every other ministry) belongs to the entire church, any leader in music must have the sanctified judgment necessary to cross through such strange and sometimes dangerous territory.

The third principle is the biblical order versus human invention, or imposing any order on a church that has been devised by anyone other than God. Certainly, this rejects liturgical music as an obliged condition (but not absolutely, for all church music is litur-

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<sup>68</sup>Dawn, *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down*, 197. The book title *What Would Jesus Sing?* is painfully cliché, but nevertheless it is the right question.

<sup>69</sup>Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste, & Christian Taste*, 196.

<sup>70</sup>Best, *Unceasing Worship*, 181.

<sup>71</sup>Smyth, *The Works of John Smyth*, 276.

<sup>72</sup>Realize that this is no different than any other church servant; following the earlier example, a church should not consider a preacher’s oratory skills before his personal walk with Christ.

<sup>73</sup>Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste, & Christian Taste*, 236–37.

gical<sup>74</sup>), but there is a more musical way of viewing this principle: submitting a text to a tune. Martin describes proper church music saying, “In Christian expression the music must always be the servant of the text—it must help make it meaningful and communicative.”<sup>75</sup> Luther followed this principle, altering the rhythm to match his text and not the other way around, as is common today.<sup>76</sup> In some ways, this can be seen as musical humility, for the music should never obscure or upstage the text. This applies not only to music writing but also music execution. As has already been suggested, this tends toward symphonic simplicity and restrained instrumental volume—but not at the cost of a musician’s “best.” I am not suggesting, as some do, that a musician should offer less than his “all,” but that he should learn to discern how his skill best supports the chief instrument of praise, the congregation. In the context of a worship service (not other musical settings), everything must be done for edification, not gratification.

The final principle is the believers’ church, a regenerate membership maintained in covenantal discipline, autonomously practicing a congregational hermeneutic in humble mutual service. This is the sieve through which everything said to this point must be filtered not only for proper application but even for proper understanding, for every principle must be applied and every decision must be made in a concrete context: the local church. By this principle, the local congregation is the focal point of all church music. Consequently, we can establish a number of important characteristics for church music that can be summarized as “simple, humble, and variegated.”<sup>77</sup> “Simple” does not mean simplistic, for that would inhibit variegation, but a tune must be singable by a diverse congregation with a potentially limited range and rhythmic ability. The same can be said of the accompanying instrumentalists whose skill set will be equally diverse. It must be “humble,” a servant of the text, helping the congregation learn the truths in the song by not obscuring the text and by edifying the tone or emotional intent of the author. “Variegated” reflects the nature of the congregation itself, often covering a range of ages, occupations, interests, and in today’s world cultures and ethnicities, unity in diversity. Best believes the “creative friction” in diversity eventually leads to “stylistic synthesis;” ultimately, every local church’s music would be as unique as its own makeup.<sup>78</sup> To this list I would add a fourth characteristic: “durable.” The congregation should not grow weary of the tune after two or three services, but look with anticipation upon every opportunity to sing it (assuming the leadership does not overuse it).

This leads to another important consequence of the believers’ church, namely the role of the congregation in the judgments concerning music. Judgments of style can and

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<sup>74</sup>Peterson unintentionally demonstrates this when he complains, “Skilled worship leaders may select music with the intention of leading worshipers from adoration to confession to assurance to thanksgiving and preparation for instruction, but this is not the norm. The more likely mindset is that worship leaders will select and sequence music that will wake people up, then get them fired up, then settle them down for the Sermon, and send them home afterward feeling good.” Peterson, *Engaging with God*, 70. “Liturgy” simply refers to the order of a church’s congregational gatherings, not necessarily to a specific example of a liturgy such as one found in the *Book of Common Prayer*. Every church follows some sort of order, written or not, and music generally fits into that order for a specific and intentional end.

<sup>75</sup>Martin, *Worship in the Early Church*, 167.

<sup>76</sup>Jones, *Singing and Making Music*, 173. Another way songwriters submit their text is by compromising a word choice to match a rhyming scheme.

<sup>77</sup>Best, *Unceasing Worship*, 75.

<sup>78</sup>Ibid. Best, an ecumenist, means this macroscopically; his conclusion is nonsensical.

should be made by the congregation.<sup>79</sup> Brown describes four circles of judgment: oneself, one's particular community and time, the limited public, and universal; I would argue that one's particular community is a sufficient category for appropriate church music if the local church is following the principles previously mentioned.<sup>80</sup> If a church is maintaining its regenerate membership through covenantal discipline, and the members are spurring one another on to Christlikeness in humble service, it has the mutual spiritual discernment that is the Free Church tradition at its best, the mind of Christ discerning the things of the Spirit. How does a local congregation discern the mind of Christ in the matter of church music? The same way it should come to any important decision. Under the guidance of spiritually mature moderators (who may or may not have special musical abilities), the members of the church should be led to talk through their thoughts about church music in faith that the group's sanctified judgment will see through to the spiritual heart of the matter. This conversation should be ongoing as the church and the world around it change. This recommendation probably seems impossible, but perhaps that is because our churches have not been led to take these steps.<sup>81</sup>

### Final Considerations

There are a few final consequences of the Free Church model that pertain to music. First, I have already pointed out that music has a unifying ability. Ecumenists use this to build their global identity, and evangelicalism has done the same among independent traditions in the United States. Free churches should be wary of this drift. A music style's popularity among many groups does not necessarily equal acceptability. Second, free churches should never forget the secular nature of culture and its ability to sneak into a church through music; the same is true of non-Christian religions. As autonomous bodies, with no governing watchdog, they must be ever vigilant against this danger, mindfully researching unfamiliar sources and suggestions. Third, free churches tend toward traditionalism, a human invention. This sabotages a free church's inner workings by cutting off its ongoing self-evaluation and discernment. Finally, I have not said much about the importance of composition. Too many churches seem to believe they cannot write their own music and are always looking through external sources for the "right" song. This is unfortunate. I am unsure why this is the case, except to wonder if our emphasis on performance somehow leads to a de-emphasis on composition. Whatever the reason, the creativity that will produce enduring and meaningful tunes and texts requires great nurturing and encouragement, something a free church with sanctified judgment can provide if it is intentional about that role. The benefits are undeniable: "By improving the quality

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<sup>79</sup>I realize that polity plays an important role, whether a church is congregational or elder-led. This is one situation where an elder would be well-served to defer to the congregation.

<sup>80</sup>Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste, & Christian Taste*, 193–94. There is no universally approved musical element. "Holy, Holy, Holy," and "Doxology," two examples regularly mentioned, are primarily Western phenomena. If there were, it would probably have to be normative for all Christians.

<sup>81</sup>Bryan Chapell's recent book, *Christ-Centered Worship: Letting the Gospel Shape Our Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), proposes a different solution to this specific issue. He suggests that the gospel—the pattern by which every human enters into a saving relationship with Christ—should be the determining factor in matters of music style. While his approach has much to commend it, I find it lacking, for it eliminates the role of the local church. Although he rightly condemns traditionalism and popular vote (121), he seems to believe that the gospel itself answers all questions of style in every cultural context. If he is correct, I would counter that the local church must still know to apply the gospel.

of present practice in church music, we are not only avoiding stagnation in the present but also are preparing a richer store for future recall.”<sup>82</sup>

### Conclusion

What is the proper style of music for a church to use in worship? Unfortunately, the answer is not as direct as I had hoped. I had hoped for clear musical standards and found very few. Yet what I did find is almost certainly more helpful because it emphasizes the basics of church and individual Christian life. The Bible has a great deal to say about the purpose of music in congregational worship. It says very little about styles of music but a great deal (indirectly) about those who lead music in worship. It says very little about issues such as specific instruments but much about those who play them. It says very little about the mechanics of music decisions but much about the churches making those decisions. Is what the Bible says enough? Yes, for churches focused on Christ-like humility, with members focused on love for one another and the outside world, are able to make proper decisions of all kinds, including those of music.

How does this apply to the earlier illustration of the church that wants to set a psalm to music? Ultimately, I believe that that church has access to a wide range of musical styles (assuming the style edifies the tone and emotion of the psalm’s text). The church has the right and the ability to make that decision for itself. Perhaps one member submits a tune for the church to consider; perhaps a group of people works together; perhaps they sing through multiple alternatives all together. I now contend that the spirit with which that church goes about the decision is actually more important than the mechanics or the result. There are a near-infinite number of melodic possibilities (not including arrangements) and many methods for making that determination. But if in the midst of the process the church finds itself being contentious and divisive, perhaps music is being used as a scapegoat to mask a deeper problem—a church that has lost its identity or its first love. That church should step back and take another look at itself; a healthy free church has all of the tools it needs to address and resolve this debate. Music is a critical matter today, one that churches should not ignore. Hopefully my humble suggestions will help them understand that they do not have to ignore it.

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<sup>82</sup>Ashton, *Music in Worship*, 13.

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