

RETUNING THE CHURCH

An exploratory discussion paper presented by Dr Barry Chant at the annual conference of the Association of Pentecostal and Charismatic Bible Colleges of Australasia on Friday 19 May 2000.

Author's note: Since this paper was written, some dramatic changes have taken place. Mobile phones, tablets and other portable devices have become almost universal in Western society. Also trends in Christian music seem to be reversing to some degree. Some minor emendations have been made to this paper to reflect these changes. Also references to some recent musical compositions have been included.

It seems to have occurred largely unobserved, but a new trend has fundamentally changed the nature of evangelical and charismatic ministry. It has resulted in a radical new approach to the expression of the faith. It is plainly too much to suggest that this shift of focus could be as significant as the sixteenth century Protestant Reformation, the eighteenth century Wesleyan revival, the nineteenth century Missions explosion or the twentieth century Pentecostal revival. But all the same, its impact should not be underestimated. I refer to the musification of ministry. So wide-ranging and penetrating has been its nature, it is likely to have enormous effects on the future of the evangelical and charismatic movements—and perhaps beyond. There is potential for great blessing—or for great harm.

One apparent difference between earlier movements and the current trend, lies in the clearly defined doctrinal understanding that undergirded the former. Justification by faith in the case of the Reformation; entire sanctification in Wesleyanism; the obligation to preach the gospel to all nations in the Missions movement; and baptism in the Holy Spirit with the sign of glossolalia in Pentecostalism.

At first glance, there appears to be no significant theological basis for the new focus on music. However, all may not be as it seems. Recently, when I was consulting with a song leader about opening a two day seminar program, he asked, 'How long do you want us to worship? Twenty minutes?'

I replied, 'What about two days?'

'I don't think I could play my guitar that long!' he responded.

'Ah, you're talking about music,' I said. 'I was talking about worship.'

Is there a subtle new body of thought that has crept into evangelical and charismatic thinking that sees worship and music as one and the same thing? That through worship we 'enter the presence of God' (a statement commonly enough heard in charismatic meetings). That without music, we cannot draw near to God? That unless someone is singing something, we cannot have an 'altar call'? That we can't pray for people unless there is a musician around? Have we, unknowingly, actually arrived at a position where music has replaced faith as the means by which we appropriate God's blessings and where the 'worship leader' rather than the evangelist is responsible for bringing people to God? While no one has actually spelled out such a theology, in the way Luther did for the Reformation, this new faith in music is both pervasive and intrusive. Are we in danger of worshiping music itself, rather than the God it serves? At first glance, this seems an extreme and even foolish question. But is there more truth in it than we think?¹

¹ Jarrod Cooper describes a time when his church abandoned music altogether to test the genuineness of their worship. Although it was difficult at first, they learned to worship without music and the quality was greatly enhanced. 'If you were on a desert island, and had no CD player, no worship leader or Bible reading plan, would you still worship, pray and meet with God easily?' he asks. See Jarrod Cooper, 'New Heights of Worship: a radical look at corporate worship', *Joy Magazine*. (This article was given to me undated.)

1. SONGS OF FAITH

Now this is not to denigrate music. To quote Shakespeare's Lorenzo—

The man that hath no music in himself,
Nor is not moved with concord of sweet sounds,
Is fit for treason, stratagems and spoils;
The motions of his spirit are dull as night
And his affections dark as Erebus:
Let no such man be trusted.²

In the light of this, I am relieved to say that I love music. I don't know if I am unusual, but as far as I am aware, in my waking moments, there is always a song in the back of my mind. Even when I am conversing or working or in a meeting, a tune may be found dancing and skipping its way through the corridors of my brain. My wife tells me she always knows when I am around because she hears me humming or whistling. As I am actually rather shy in public, most people are mercifully spared this knowledge.

Music has always been a dominant and prominent part of the Christian faith. Without it we would be destitute. The Psalms are sufficient evidence of this. Time and again they exhort us to sing and make music to the Lord (e.g. Psalm 67:4-5; 92:1-4; 95:1-2; 96:1-4; 98:1-6). Old Testament prophets often prophesied with music (1 Samuel 10:5; 1 Chronicles 25:1). In fact, such was the power of prophetic music that it could drive away demons (1 Samuel 16:23) or release the hand of God (1 Kings 3:15).

At the last supper, Jesus and his disciples sang a hymn (Mathew 26:30). While there are no explicit biblical references to the use of musical instruments in the early church, there are clear indications that singing was an integral part of worship. Paul and Silas sang aloud when imprisoned in Philippi (Acts 16:25). Glossolalic melodies and psalms were used in Corinth (1 Cor 14:15, 26). Paul instructed the believers in both Ephesus and Colosse to use psalms and hymns and spiritual songs in their meetings together. In this way they could both give thanks to God (Colossians 3:16) and teach one another (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16). Further, what seem to be early Christian hymns are quoted by Paul (Philippians 2:5-11; 1 Timothy 3:16).

In Scriptural times, there were many reasons for singing and making music. These include—

- Prayer—Psalm 51:1-19; 57:1-11; 61:1-8; 64:1-4; Isaiah 31:29-30; Acts 16:25
- Teaching—Deuteronomy 31:19-22; 32:1-47; Colossians 3:16
- Thanksgiving—Exodus 15:1-18; Ephesians 5:20
- Deliverance—1 Samuel 16:23; 2 Kings 3:15
- Prophecy—1 Samuel 10:5, 6; 1 Chronicles 25:1; Ephesians 5:19
- Celebration—Exodus 15:1; 1 Chronicles 15:16; Psalm 59:16-17; 122:1; 149:2-5
- Edification and inspiration—2 Chronicles 20:18-19; Ephesians 5:18-19
- Worship—Psalm 92:1-4; 95:1-2; 98:1-6
- Evangelism—Psalm 105:1-6; Acts 16:25
- Exhortation—Psalm 117; 95:1-11

In the Ante-Nicene Fathers, there are documented cases of Christian martyrs singing in the midst of their suffering; and of the people of God using music as a vehicle for praise and instruction from the earliest times. The heretic Arius promulgated his beliefs through song. Hymns attributed to Patrick of Ireland survive today, including the well-known 'Be Thou My Vision'. Medieval monks developed a comprehensive system of sung prayers. Jan Hus and Martin Sattler sang as they were led to the stake. The Protestant Reformers used music. Some of Luther's hymns are still published today. The Wesleyan revival ignited a blaze of new hymnody. Charles Wesley ('And Can it Be?') Isaac Watts ('When I Survey the Wondrous Cross') and William Cowper ('There is a Fountain Filled with Blood') are still renowned for their compositions.

The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw a new surge of songs. Fanny Crosby ('Blessed Assurance'), Joseph Scriven ('What a Friend We Have in Jesus'), George Duffield

² W.Shakespeare, *Merchant of Venice*, V:I:28ff.

(‘Stand up for Jesus’), Sabine Baring-Gould (‘Onward, Christian Soldiers’), Thomas Chisholm (‘Great is Thy Faithfulness’) and Charles Gabriel (‘Since Jesus Came into my Heart’) are just a few of many. More recently, the Pentecostal revival has seen an explosion of new compositions. Dale and David Garratt (‘Scripture in Song’), Graham Kendrick (‘Shine, Jesus, Shine’), Nolene Prince (‘Holy, holy, holy’), Geoff Bullock (‘The Power of Your Love’), Darlene Zschech (‘Shout to the Lord’), Keith Getty (‘In Christ Alone’), Stuart Townend (‘How deep the Father’s Love’), Dennis Jernigan (‘You Are My All in All’), Matt Redman (‘Ten Thousand Reasons’) and Helen Turner (‘Take me to the cross’) are just a few of many exciting contemporary Christian composers.³

2. THE MUSIFICATION OF BOTH WORLD AND CHURCH

If music has always been such a prominent and valued part of Christian ministry, what is different about the current trend? This is the kind of question that might have been asked in the sixteenth century about Lutheranism. Why did Luther’s teaching spread so rapidly and so widely where earlier reformers such as Hus and Wyclif had limited success? This is a complex question and there are many significant answers, but one factor is universally recognised—the invention of printing by moveable type. It was the printing machine that enabled Luther’s teaching to spread to people all over Europe more rapidly and effectively than that of any of his predecessors.

In a similar way, today, it is another technological advance which has given music a degree of influence never previously known or experienced by earlier generations. I refer to the electronic media. In the last quarter of a century, the use of public address (PA) systems, tape recordings, compact disks (CDs), radio, television, video, MP3s, mobile phones, tablets and portable players of all kinds has empowered the music world in a way people of earlier generations could never have begun to imagine.

This is true of society generally as well as the church, of course. Music has crossed all barriers. For example, in the 1940s and 1950s, it was impossible to foresee that by the turn of the century as many boys as girls would enjoy music and would actually want to become musicians. Boys who liked music then were the exception. In my class at school, I was the only boy I can remember who was learning to play an instrument. Nowadays, young people of both sexes are music enthusiasts. The musification of both the world and the church is virtually complete.

In churches, the PA system and the use of electronic instruments have irrevocably changed the way things are done. Public address systems are used in even small churches. It is almost standard practice for even the tiniest congregations to have a bank of microphones, amplifiers and loud speakers ranged across the front of the hall. The result is simple: the musicians dominate—and determine—what happens. This development has had significant repercussions.

3. THE POWER OF MUSIC

The power of music over young people, in particular, is remarkable. The burgeoning mobile music market and the popularity of television music programs and rock groups bear ample witness to this. Not only do certain kinds of music attract young people, but other kinds equally effectively repel them. In a recent experiment, some railway station masters in Sydney, NSW, began playing Beethoven and Mozart over their public address systems. A few months later, they reported a 75% decline in vandalism, apparently as the result of young offenders either being soothed by the music or, more likely, moving elsewhere.⁴

Recently a Churchill Fellowship was awarded to Christian Heim, a medical student, to investigate the healing properties of music. Heim claimed that medieval music, folk music and chanting help to relax both body and mind and that patients thus suffer less pain, require less

³ Some of these names have been added since this paper was first presented.

⁴ Reported on ABC radio news, 3 May 2000.

medication and recover more quickly. Not surprisingly, rock music did not have the same effect.⁵

Not that this is a particularly new discovery. Three hundred years ago, the English playwright William Congreve (1670-1729) wrote, 'Music has charms to sooth a savage breast'.⁶ And Shakespeare's Duke Orsino paid tribute to the magic of melody—

If music be the food of love, play on;
Give me excess of it...
That strain again! It had a dying fall:
O, it came o'er my ear like the sweet sound
That breathes upon a bank of violets.⁷

The power of music in Christian worship is obvious. Music can have many qualities—spiritual, emotional, theological, intellectual. We may respond in a variety of ways. Militant songs stir our spirits; quiet songs make us reflective; bright songs set our toes a-tapping; joyful songs cheer us up and so on.

In recent years, the power of music has been enhanced by external factors. First, because music has now become so dominant, it is not unusual for song leaders to spend as much or more time with the people than preachers. The 'worship' often extends for forty minutes or more. The preaching is not usually longer. Then when a few closing songs are added, the musicians, in terms of time, at least, have more public presence than ministers of the Word. Similarly, in most churches, public reading of Scripture lasts only for a few minutes at the very most. The amount of time given to singing is immeasurably greater.

This is not in itself a negative factor. Where the songs are biblical, Christ-centred and faith-inspiring, they can touch people's lives in a powerful way. An encouraging, moving, Christ-centred song can inspire us in a manner that no other medium can do. Godly, sanctified singing can thrill the soul and stir the heart so the spirit is lifted to new heights of faith and joy in the Lord. I can still remember a Sunday morning service, two days after my conversion over sixty years ago, when we sang Isaac Watts's hymn, 'When I survey the wondrous cross.' During the last stanza, my ten-year-old heart swelled with a passion to follow the Lord all the days of my life—

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were an offering far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.

Some years later, in our small, suburban Baptist church on a cold, winter's Sunday night, we sang a lesser-known hymn. The latter part reads—

He is breaking down the barriers, He is casting up the way;
He is calling for His angels to build up the gates of day:
But His angels here are human, not the shining hosts above,
For the drum-beats of His army are the heart-beats of our love.

Hark! We hear a distant music, and it comes with fuller swell;
'Tis the triumph song of Jesus, of our King Emmanuel:
Zion, go ye forth to meet Him; and my soul be swift to bring
All thy sweetest and thy dearest for the triumph of our King!⁸

Even as I write, I can still feel the sense of exultation of soul that song evoked.

Great Christian music has the potential to stamp our lives forever with the touch of God. Where songs are neither biblically sound nor centred on Christ, however, there is cause for concern. The effect here can be as damaging as the impact of godly music can be good.

⁵ 'How music can make us well,' *The Daily Telegraph* 11 May 2000:18.

⁶ W. Congreve, *The Mourning Bride* I:i.

⁷ W. Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, I:i:1ff.

⁸ H. Burton, 'There's a light upon the mountains'.

4. CONCERT-GOERS OR CONGREGATIONS?

Some churches have become concert-goers rather than congregations and the music team have become performers rather than pastors. The singers, with the benefit of microphones and loud speakers, can be easily heard above the voices of even the largest crowds. Which earthly congregation with mere mortal voices can compete with the huge output of modern amplifiers? Even the choirs of heaven might be struggling! The result is that in many congregations, it is not unusual during a song service for us to give up trying to sing. We listen, but we don't participate. The truth is that sometimes we can't even hear our own voices, let alone those of the people next to us. So celebrating in song has become a thing we listen to, not something we do. Jarrod Copper puts it bluntly: we have turned our local churches, he says, 'from power houses to theatre houses'.⁹ No doubt there are many exceptions to this. But these comments are based on wide experience in many churches. By and large congregations do not sing as well as they used to. I have often observed churches where less than half the people are actually joining in. Sadly, the leaders often seem blissfully unaware of this. If they have their eyes closed, which is not unusual, they blunder on, assuming that everyone is enjoying the same 'blessing'. They forget the others don't have microphones to help them or glasses of water to refresh them. What for the leaders is a pleasure may for others be an ordeal.

In one church in America, a study was made of congregational singing habits. They found that the men, on average, would only sing for six and a half minutes at a stretch. Even in an inspiring service, too much singing ceased to be effective.¹⁰ So they modified their program accordingly. It is an interesting experiment to invite a congregation to sing a capella. The response, without the competition from the PA system, is usually outstanding.

It should also be noted that the days of singable folk songs with three simple guitar chords are long gone. The increasing sophistication of Christian musicians has resulted in more complex songs that are more suited for performance than congregational participation. Some of these are exceptional in quality. Recent years have seen the production of some magnificent compositions. But they are not easy for ordinary people to handle and this discourages congregational singing. Given that Christian worship has always been koinonial, if everyone is not involved, are we doing it right? Let's have great music, by all means, but when it comes to worshipping God in fellowship, let's keep it singable!

5. 'I'VE GOT MUSIC, I'VE GOT RHYTHM'

A combination of rock music and PA systems have changed the nature of instrumentation. Once the keyboard gave the lead: now keyboards have become backing instruments; the lead comes from vocalists. Many keyboard musicians simply play chords, as if they are sophisticated guitarists. With the vocalists now so powerful, it is of little consequence.

However, this has also affected composition. While some pieces are complex, an unhealthy number of new songs focus more on rhythm and harmony than on melody. In practice, one can sing the same tune to any number of songs without any noticeable discord. In one service I attended, the musicians played loud rhythmic chords for twenty minutes. There was no apparent melody. The people basically sat and waited until they finished. Then the song leader said, 'Wasn't that an awesome time of worship?' It was neither awesome nor worshipful. But the musicians seemed to have had a good time.

More seriously, the insistent, frenetic, pounding rhythms so popular today reflect the pulse of contemporary life. In an age of instant experience and instant communication, instant music is to be expected—that is, music which has an immediate, sensate, physical and emotional impact upon us.

One of the major causes of illness today is stress—often known colloquially as 'hurry sickness'. The most common stress factor is a sense that things are getting out of control.¹¹

⁹ Jarrod Cooper, 'New Heights of Worship: a radical look at corporate worship', *Joy Magazine*.

¹⁰ Rick Murren, in an address at the Christian Revival Crusade national conference in 1997.

¹¹ K. Sehnert, *Stress/Unstress: How you can Control Stress at Home and on the Job*, Adelaide: Lutheran Publishing House 1981:85-97.

Much contemporary music reflects this. Post-modernism has taken over. Absolutism has been retrenched and relativism welcomed in. Whereas until half a century ago, Christians sang songs in which there were disciplined rhythms and rhymes, and both melody and lyrics followed an obvious orderly pattern, today's rhythms are more likely to be disruptive and disjointed. Gaps occur unexpectedly between words which logically should flow together. Lyrics are untidy and undisciplined, too often without the hard polishing they need and too often loaded with clichés which have passed their use-by date. Theology may be sacrificed on the altar of experientialism—'feeling' is what matters. So the pulsating rhythms throb through our beings, the compelling beat makes our bodies respond and the intellectual or biblical content only needs to be sufficient to justify calling what we are singing 'Christian'.

This approach is often justified on the premise of cultural relevance. If we are to communicate with today's generation, the argument runs, we must talk their language. In the same way a missionary to Papua New Guinea must learn to speak Pidgin—and perhaps even the local 'place-talk'—to reach Papua New Guineans, we must learn to speak a dialect called 'rock' to reach Generation X. Often, missionaries also adopt local customs, live in village huts, even wear village clothing. But there are limits. Immodest clothing, for instance, is inappropriate, no matter how culturally relevant it is. Habits like chewing betel nut or polygamy are equally unacceptable. Similarly, using rock music to communicate is one thing, but unthinkingly adopting the customs and practices that go with it is another altogether. An obvious example is the way many secular guitarists hold their instruments: sexual innuendos are obvious. Yet it is not unusual for young Christian musicians to slavishly imitate their secular counterparts without pausing to reflect on the philosophy behind what they are doing. Being 'all things to all men' is a fundamental principal of Christian mission. But being 'all things to all men' does not mean doing all the things they do.

The reality is that no matter how innovative and unconventional music may be, there are still absolutes. Middle C is still middle C, not matter how we shape things. If a band is to play with any kind of consonance, the stringed instruments must all be tuned to the same key and the brass and keyboard must also be in harmony. Similarly, the gospel also has absolutes: we abandon them to our peril.

Primarily, we need to be sure that the mood of the music we use is consistent with the spirit of the gospel we preach. Is music that alienates the soul or damages the health appropriate for the people of God? If certain kind of music bring healing, what should we do with other kinds that shatter the senses?

When our youngest child was a teenager, he played me a new Christian cassette he had acquired. Afterwards, he asked, 'What did you think, Dad?' I was unable to comment on the lyrics because I had not understood one word. However, I was disturbed by the wild nature of the music and the stress on emotion and physical sensation that it displayed. I did not want to be too negative, however, as it is obviously very important to tread gently on teenage sensibilities. I thought desperately for the correct response. I replied, 'Son, I can understand people preaching the gospel. I can understand someone singing or shouting the gospel. But why anyone would want to scream the gospel is beyond me.'

'Um, that makes sense, Dad,' he replied. I don't think he ever listened to that album again.

Joyful, celebratory music is one thing; frenetic, exhibitionist cacophony is another altogether.

I don't imagine anyone wants to go back to the days of accompaniment from just a piano or organ. Current instrumentation can achieve remarkable effects and enhance our music and worship in a delightful fashion. But whether we are preaching, teaching or singing, the medium is, whether we like it or not, also the message, and must reflect the nature and character of the God we serve.

6. 'OUT OF THE MOUTHS OF BABES'

Because of the nature of electronic music, many of its most fervent exponents tend to be young people. On the positive side, their enthusiasm usually comes through with great passion and joy. Their exuberance and energy are infectious and inspiring. Recently, at a conference,

my wife and I were going to bed when we noticed a group of young people still singing in the hall. 'Come on, let's join them,' said Vanessa. I was exhausted after several hours of teaching that day, but reluctantly, I agreed. A young guitarist with a soaring voice and an infectious smile was leading the group as they sang and danced. Soon we put our weariness to one side and joined in. Eventually, we did retire, but we did so refreshed in spirit. The youngsters were still going when we fell asleep. As long as young people rejoice in the Lord, there is hope for the future.

Electronic media have given young people a voice through which they can be heard; but they have also given them a tool with which they can influence the nature of the Christian faith to an unprecedented degree. We cannot turn back the clock. Thank God for a new generation of enthusiastic, lively, bright musicians and songsters with their fresh, innovative, contemporary music. But it is crucial that this music points us to Christ, brings us closer together and presents sound biblical doctrine.

On the negative side, young people may be unaware of the broader implications of life, of experience, of God, of faith, of the whole nature of ministry. Hence, in their choice of songs, they are likely to be driven by the music rather than the lyrics. To them, movement and energy are what matter. The gospel is better experienced than understood. So questionable doctrine and shallow teaching may be overlooked at the expense of attractive rhythms. With their own high levels of energy, young people may also be unaware of the discomfort experienced by older people who are subjected to excessive decibel levels or who are kept standing for unconscionable lengths of time. They don't understand that not everyone enjoys the strident, pounding beat of their favourite songs and that people of an earlier generation have difficulty adjusting to the new, unpredictable, post-modernistic rhythms. The danger of polarisation is ever present.

Of course, there is an obligation on older people to be tolerant of their younger fellow-believers and to remember that they themselves were young once. Encouragement and careful guidance is a better approach than criticism and complaint.

7. MUSICOLOGY OR THEOLOGY?

However, none of these factors touches the core. There is another significant and rarely recognised aspect to this retuning of the Christian church. This is the real issue and its implications are both exciting and frightening.

It has always been the case that songs, unlike sermons, can be readily repeated. A congregation who would protest hotly if their pastor preached the same message four weeks in succession, have no objection whatever to singing the same songs for much longer than that. In fact, they will ask to sing them again and again. We can't always blame them: to be honest, any songs may be more enjoyable than some sermons! But the consequence is that music, rather than exposition of Scripture, has the most profound and lasting influence on Christian life and behaviour. Yet hymnody that does unlock the truths of God's Word has an immeasurably positive effect

Some of the great Wesleyan hymns, for instance, have been major tools of teaching and encouragement over the years. It is probably not an exaggeration to argue that millions of people who have never read one of John Wesley's sermons have sung his brother Charles's songs numerous times. And what could better describe the wonder of the gospel than Charles Wesley's—

And can it be that I should gain
An interest in the Saviour's blood?
Died He for me who caused His pain?
For me who Him to death pursued?
Amazing love! How can it be
That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?
Or Fanny Crosby's—
Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine!
Oh what a foretaste of glory divine,
Heir of salvation, purchase of God,

Born of His Spirit, washed in His blood.
 This is my story, this is my song,
 Praising my Saviour all the day long.

Similarly, later writers like Norman Clayton ('Now I Belong to Jesus') and Graham Kendrick ('Meekness and Majesty') have only added to the power of the gospel through their compositions. Jack Hayford's 'Majesty' has given people the world over a fresh appreciation of the exalted Christ—

Majesty, worship His majesty,
 Unto Jesus be all glory, power and praise;
 Majesty, kingdom authority
 Flow from His throne
 Unto His own
 His anthem raise.
 So exalt, lift up on high the name of Jesus,
 Magnify, come glorify, Christ Jesus the King!
 Majesty, worship His majesty,
 Jesus who died,
 Now glorified,
 King of all kings.

But we can go further than this. It's not just what happens in church. Now, for the first time in history, through tapes, CDs, videos, radio and various portable devices, we can listen to those songs over and over again during the week as well. Whereas we hear the proclamation of the Word of God only once, we hear some songs innumerable times. We may spend little time in prayer or reading the Scripture, but we may pass hours every week absorbing Christian music. Of course, we can also listen to recorded preaching, and many people do. But it would be fair to argue that we only play a teaching or preaching recording when we intend to give it our full attention. Music can be played any time and it often is.

The implications are both exciting and troubling. There are questions that must be asked. Is contemporary Christianity being shaped more by what we sing than what we teach? Are musicians now determining our belief-systems? Are younger Christians being raised on musicology rather than theology? Is the musification of ministry a fait accompli?

If the response to these questions is affirmative, this is not necessarily a cause for alarm. If the songs concerned are biblically sound, musically and poetically excellent, encouraging and inspiring, it is good that they are listened to repeatedly and even better, learned by heart. In fact, as Robin Mark has pointed out, the use of recordings has given us a marvellous means of spreading the gospel and making disciples through music.¹²

On the other hand, there are possible negative connotations. Good preachers spend years in theological study and training; they pray much before ministering the Word; they labour with passion and intensity over their messages. Ironically, a song composed in only a few minutes, with little content, may have a much greater influence.¹³

Sadly, some contemporary Christian songs are biblically and theologically shallow. Alison Clark has clearly shown that during the 1980s and early 1990s, there was a sharp and marked decline in the number of songs specifically portraying the gospel. After an examination of nearly 2000 compositions, she concluded that whereas in the 1950s, some 50% of songs made specific reference to either the cross or the blood of Christ, by the early 1990s, the percentage had dropped to a mere 19%.¹⁴

This trend can be observed as a subtle development over the last five decades. A vastly over-simplified view¹⁵ of the last fifty years suggests that the most popular Christian songs could be classified as follows—

¹² Personal communication, 27 April 2000.

¹³ Of course, the reverse may also be true. Some songwriters may labour and pray more over there compositions than some preachers do over their sermons.

¹⁴ A. Clark, *What are we singing?* Sydney: Tabor, 1995:75ff. This is an important piece of research and merits close study.

¹⁵ This chart is based almost entirely on my personal memory of these years. Naturally, there are many exceptions. But as a summary of the most popular *themes* of each period, I think the chart is fair.

Decade	Theme	Examples	Style
1950s	Witness and Testimony	Since Jesus came into my heart Blessed assurance Jesus Saves Christ for me	Simple harmony; singable; country
1960s	Radical discipleship	Pass it on I have decided to follow Jesus Just a closer walk Hallelujah	Folk music
1970s	Celebration through Scripture in Song	Oh sing unto the Lord a new song This is the day Great is the Lord Jehovah Jireh	Joyful; celebratory
1980s	Praise and Worship	Majesty I exalt Thee I love you, Lord Give Thanks	Anthemic
1990s	Personal aspiration and blessing	Jesus, Lover of my soul Refresh my heart As the deer	Meditative
2000s	Eclectic; worship; the cross	How great is our God My Jesus, my Saviour How deep the Father's love Every Blessing Bless the Lord O my Soul	Performance-oriented

For all its commendable qualities—sincerity, passion, fervour, earnest desire—has the recent emphasis on personal needs been a cause for concern? Have we drifted from a focus on the finished work of the cross to the unfinished work of our personal holiness? The shift has been subtle. Whereas in the 1950s the themes were patently based on the gospel taught in the New Testament, by the 1970s and 80s this was not so clear. Many were Old Covenant in their theology. So we pleaded with God to bring us nearer to him, ignoring the fact that he has already brought us near through the blood of Christ (Ephesians 2:13). Or we prayed for a clean heart, overlooking the fact that our hearts have been made clean through Jesus (John 15:3; Hebrews 9:13-14). Or we yearned to enter the holy place and live in God's presence, forgetting that Christ had already accomplished this for us (Hebrews 10:19-20). Or we sang about fighting battles that have already been fought—and won! (2 Corinthians 2:14; Colossians 2:15).¹⁶

By the 1990s, a significant segment of popular music expressed pre-Christian aspirations or yearnings for blessings or experiences that have already been secured for us in Christ. Attaining the favour of God by much praying or yearning or sacrifice was widespread. Couple this with a post-modernistic disregard for absolutes, and the subsequent shoddy theology of many songs, and the dilution of the gospel of grace was complete. It is difficult to find contemporary Christian songs which are only about Christ or the gospel. Too many are experiential or self-centred in their focus. They refer to Jesus, perhaps, but often in the context of successful living or personal happiness. There are many exceptions, of course, but the fact

Although some songs were written in earlier years, I have noted them in the decade where I remember them being most popular. Obviously, there is also overlap between decades.

¹⁶ For a different perspective on the effect of the emphasis on worship see John Piper, 'Preaching as Worship: Meditations on Expository Exultation' in D.Moo (ed), *The Gospel and Contemporary Perspectives* Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1997:167ff.

that even a few such songs exist is a matter of concern. Clark offers evidence that this trend is being reversed. Thankfully, there seems to be growing evidence that she is right.

There are some songs which have traversed the decades. ‘And can it be’, ‘Blessed Assurance’, ‘How great Thou art’ and ‘Amazing grace’ are obvious examples. More recently, the resurrection of compositions like ‘My Hope is Built on Nothing Less than Jesus and His Righteousness’ is refreshing. Great hymns of the faith span not only decades, but centuries. It is noteworthy that these are all sound in doctrine.

Furthermore, the literary standard of some contemporary songs is very poor. The same shallow sentiments, the same banal rhymes (if there are any rhymes at all), the same trite clichés, occur over and over again in the lyrics. Words like ‘holy’ are prostituted. Offensive slang expressions are used (‘gonna’). There is a desperate need for song writers to give the same loving care and attention to the lyrics that they do to the score.

Recently I visited a church where the following song, which I had never heard before, was sung—

I bow my knee
I give myself
As a living sacrifice for you
I lay me down
Before your throne
Take my past
I will stand for you
Let your blood wash over me
You have cleansed my heart
And set my spirit free
You are my Lord
I’ll love you more and follow you
No matter where
No matter when

Now the sentiments expressed here are obviously admirable. The song writer clearly has a heart for God and a passionate desire to serve him. But from a poetical, literary and biblical view, the piece is sadly in need of repair. For a start, it hardly qualifies as verse. It is simply prose written out in short lines. Few of the normal qualities of poetry (such as a disciplined metrical pattern; original imagery; creative vocabulary; imagination) can be detected. The song is addressed to no one in particular. Then the composer cannot make up his mind—is he bowing, lying down or standing? Even though God has cleansed his heart, he still asks for the blood to wash over him. There are several themes strung together apparently at random—sacrifice, forgiveness, cleansing, freedom, love, discipleship. The phraseology is just an amalgam of popular Christian clichés strung together. Where is the creativity? Fortunately, there is no serious heresy here. The pity of it is that with a little more care and discipline, it probably could have been a great song.

8. SERVANT OR MASTER?

I believe a revolution has taken place in contemporary Christianity. We have remarkable tools at our disposal that no other generation has had before. Like the printing press, they can be used for good or ill. It is important for us to realise the enormous power and potential that is now in our hands and to see that we treat it always as a good servant and never as a bad master.

What are the implications for Christian training institutions? This needs more detailed discussion than is possible here. But the obvious one is our need to reinforce the absolute and undeniable primacy of the proclamation of the word of God. Jesus commanded us to preach the good news. He placed this above prayer and above worship. In Paul’s pastoral letters, one quarter of the verses refer to preaching and teaching; none refers to music.¹⁷ There are no New Testament references to musical instruments being used in early church worship.

¹⁷ With the possible exception of 1 Timothy 3:16 which appears to be a quotation from an early hymn.

Inasmuch as music assists us in presenting God's Word, it has a vital role. If it supplants the Word, it has dangerously exceeded its role. Other lines of action are, I think, obvious—

- We must cultivate a love and passion for the Word of God greater than the love of music
- We must ensure that students are taught sound doctrine
- We must encourage student composers to use standards of excellence, musically, spiritually, theologically and grammatically
- We must prepare students so that when they become leaders they will manage music and musicians wisely
- We must teach students to focus on the lyrics as well as the score
- We must, as Colleges, ourselves produce great songs

Music has adopted a position it has never had before. It has almost become a new means of grace. Yet this musification of ministry has much to commend it. If we can get it right, we can use music as a most powerful tool of proclaiming the Word of God. In Old Testament days, prophetic music brought transformation (1 Samuel 10:6-7) and deliverance (1 Samuel 16:23). Music could initiate the touch of God (2 Kings 3:15). People celebrated through music (Exodus 15:1-18; Psalm 122:1-2). In the New Testament, music is a means of teaching God's word and of thanksgiving (Ephesians 5:18-19; Colossians 3:16).

Eternity rings with the songs of the redeemed (Revelation 5:9-10; 14:3). Worship fills the universe. From the voices of a few seraphim and cherubim, the song spreads until more than one hundred thousand angels lift their anthem to the Lord; and finally every voice in heaven and earth and beneath the earth sings the great and everlasting song of the Lamb!

And they sang a new song, saying, "Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth."

Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!"

And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying, "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!"

And the four living creatures said, "Amen!" and the elders fell down and worshiped (Revelation 5:9-14)

What is remarkable here is that although salvation has been accomplished, the song still celebrates the death and resurrection of Jesus. The gospel of grace will never cease being the everlasting theme of the people of God. The reason is not hard to find. What greater theme could there be? Who could ever conceive of anything else more worth singing about? Who could ever compose a more wonderful song?

Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive honour and glory and praise!
Hallelujah! Selah! Amen!

