

Reforming Church Music

By Michael S. Horton
Part 3 of a 6-part series on Worship

Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, Inc –

In the words of the distinguished Yale historian Jaroslav Pelikan, "the God of the Reformers inspired artistic works of enormous majesty, power and perfection." Columbia University professor Eugene F. Rice adds: "The doctrines of God's predestination and pardoning mercy measures the gulf between the secular imagination and the 16th century's intoxication with the majesty of God. We can only exercise historical sympathy to try to understand how it was that an entire epoch of the world's most sensitive intelligences found a complete, a total, liberation in abandoning themselves to the omnipotence of God."

But of course, we don't have to resort to mere historical sympathy. After all, the convictions and vision of God that inspired Bach, Handel, Mendelssohn, Rembrandt, Vermeer, Pascal, and founded so many of the great academies of the modern world is still with us. It is the same undiminished treasure, waiting to be discovered by another generation that is willing to explore it in God's revealed Word. It is the same theological orientation that pulsates through the mind, heart, and imagination of the Psalmist and gives hope to the despondent Jeremiah. Isaiah is cheered, looking off into the distance, to see this vision and, at last, the Baptist announces, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" The apostle Paul gets so worked up over doctrine that it often leads him to detours from his original topic, in order to offer up thanksgiving, worship, and praise. After explaining our election, calling, justification, and glorification, Paul exclaims, "What shall we say then in response to all of this? If God is for us, who can be against us?" In other words, the doctrinal explanation had a point: It was to bring God's people low before their God in worship, praise, reverence and delight.

That is why the Psalmist rhapsodizes, "My heart overflows with a noble theme." You see, emotion is something you can't just work up. It is the effect of a stirring announcement, a report of a tragedy, a piece of good news--these things cause us to respond and our hearts and bodies follow our thoughts. This is why Paul calls us to the renewing of our minds, for "as a man thinks in his heart, so is he."

Theology is a word that scares a lot of people off, but that word simply means "the study of God." How often do we find invitations in Scripture to study and meditate on God's attributes and works? The entire book of Psalms is just such a studied meditation, and those who come to the Bible looking for helpful hints for happy living will never be able to make sense of the richness and depth of divine revelation. It is a book about God, not about us. It is about what God has done, is doing, and will do, through the person and work of Christ, not about what you and I have done, are doing, and will do, through our own piety and spiritual experiences.

Why am I making this point on a program about worship? Simply because I want us to see that it is the content of the biblical record, and not the content of your own personal spiritual odyssey, that should shape the communal worship of God.

The Reformation was simply one great recovery of this God-centered perspective. We find it also in Nehemiah, where the Word of God is rediscovered and the people demand that it be read and preached to them day and night. We see it in more recent centuries, following the Reformation, in the Great Awakening here in America.

In the mid-18th century, George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards, and many others began to preach in churches and open fields and their message was very simple. It was, once again, this vision of God and his grace in Christ that so baffles the secular imagination today. Sermons on justification by grace alone through faith alone because of Christ alone dominated the preaching, attended by sermons on God's wrath and mercy, his electing grace, and the end for which humanity was created. These have always been the great issues and no church is worth anything that is not always recovering these riches for a new generation. As a result of opening up these great biblical texts again, a generation that had forgotten God repented and looked to Christ for redemption. The results were broad-sweeping: Out of this great revival, with the recovery of that biblical theology, families could be heard singing the Psalms and reciting the catechism in their homes and out of it, Yale, Princeton, Dartmouth, and Rutgers universities were founded.

But today, we can't seem to produce very much in society except culture wars. And why is this? Why is everyone so apathetic about God, even in our churches, even though we are even more interested in running society than were these people of the Reformation and the Great Awakening? We at CURE would submit that it is because there is so little genuine worship of God, based on the preaching of the Law and Gospel, and the great themes of God's attributes and works, most clearly seen in the person and work of Christ.

That is due, in part, to the effects of the Second Great Awakening. In sharp contrast to the Great Awakening itself, the Second Awakening shifted from a God-centered, Reformation theology to a human-centered, Arminian one. In fact, nothing in theology really mattered, except for the belief that human beings had the natural powers to convert themselves if the evangelist could just find the right principle or technique that worked. Charles Finney, a mid-19th century evangelist, said that religion is the work of man, not God, and that the doctrines of total depravity, election, the substitutionary atonement of Christ, justification by grace alone through faith alone, and the supernatural nature of the new birth had to go. They interfered with the evangelist's plea to the sinner to change his ways and clean up the country. Finney called these "new measures," as they were known, "excitements." The evangelist, he said, must produce excitements sufficient to cause a response of repentance and conversion, Finney insisted.

At least this essentially pagan evangelism only came to town every now and again and the worship of the local churches often went on with somewhat biblical sermons about God and the Gospel, with a form and style of worship that was consistent with that message. Eventually, however, the revivalistic tradition transformed even Sunday worship itself, so that every Sunday was an evangelistic revival meeting.

This focus, then, on being "seeker-sensitive" and directing the mission of the churches to the "felt needs" of the unchurched, is not all that recent. It is rooted in this revivalistic tradition, which turned very sharply away from the God-centered, Christ-preaching, content-laden reformations and awakenings of the past.

Worship Music Contrasts

Its Purpose

Reformation Music: To lead the congregation in praise and thanksgiving by recounting the drama of redemption

19th Century Revivalism: To evoke an experience of praise by the use of "excitements"

20th Century Revivalism: To entertain those who are generally uninterested in doctrine

Its Object

Reformation Music: God in Christ, apprehended through faith (knowledge, assent, and trust). In other words, the faithfulness of God toward his whole church throughout history.

19th-20th Century Revivalism: The individual believer's piety and faithfulness toward God, experienced through sentiment

Its Depth

Reformation Music: Determined by the depth of biblical revelation (human existence, explained by Scripture, means that the music is shaped by the rich variety of emotional responses to God: love and fear, obedience and angry disappointment, joy and sadness, pleasure and pain).

19th-20th Century Revivalism: Determined by the depth of one's own experience (one-dimensional focus on joy and happiness, victory and triumph).

Its Musical Quality

Reformation: Enduring innovation, highly prized by Christian and non-Christian alike

Revivalism: Fleeting innovation, repetitive and singularly unimpressive to Christians and non-Christians with musical training. (Our 20th century contribution to Amazing Grace is the verse, "Praise God," sung ad infinitum.)

Reformation Hymnody

The liturgies of the 16th century Reformation reflect the desire to reform, not eliminate the previous 1500 years of the church's expression in worship. To be part of "one holy, catholic, and apostolic church" and a "communion of saints" means that worship not only has to be connected to this time and place; it must connect us to the whole history of God's people. The whole church sings and praises God, whether in heaven or on earth. To that end, even the modern Lutheran and Reformed hymnals include, at the beginning, hymns and sung responses that date back to the worship of the earliest Christians. The centrality of the content is highlighted by the fact that, for instance, in The Trinity Hymnal, the hymns are listed according to doctrine, not according to the title. God is known in his works, not in our experience. That is why the Psalms recite God's works. Very often, in the contemporary praise music that uses the Psalms, the part of the Psalm that is a response is included, while the recitation of the works is excluded.

Examples from Reformation Hymns

Josiah Conder, 1836: "Tis not that I did choose thee, for Lord that could not be. This heart would still refuse thee, hadst thou not chosen me"

Augustus Toplady, 1770: "A debtor to mercy alone, of covenant mercy I sing; nor fear, with thy righteousness on, my person and offering to bring. The terrors of law and of God

with me can have nothing to do; my Saviour's obedience and blood hide all my transgressions from view." "Fountain of never-ceasing grace, thy saints' exhaustless theme, great object of immortal praise, essentially supreme; we bless thee for the glorious fruits thine incarnation gives; the righteousness which grace imputes, and faith alone receives."

Isaac Watts: "Alas! And did my Saviour bleed, and did my Sovereign die! Would devote that sacred head for such a worm as I! Was it for crimes that I had done he groaned upon the tree! Amazing pity! Grace unknown! And love beyond degree! Well might the sun in darkness hide, and shut his glories in, when Christ, the mighty Maker, died for man the creature's sin. Thus might I hide my blushing face while his dear cross appears; dissolve my heart in thankfulness, and melt mine eyes in tears. But drops of grief can ne'er repay the debt of love I owe; here, Lord, I give myself away, 'tis all that I can do." The Word and sacraments, not our experience, communicate God's blessings: "There sup with us in love divine; thy body and thy blood, that living bread, that heavenly wine, be our immortal food!"

Horatius Bonar, 1870: "Not what my hands have done can save my guilty soul; not what my toiling flesh has borne can make my spirit whole. Not what I feel or what I do can give me peace with God; not all my prayers and signs and tears can bear my awful load. Thy work alone, O Christ, can ease this weight of sin; thy blood alone, O Lamb of God, can give me peace within. Thy love for me, O God, not mine, O Lord, for thee, can rid me of this dark unrest, and set my spirit free." "Blessed Lord, in thee is refuge, safety for my trembling soul...I, too, unbelieving, 'midst the tempest been, and my heart has slowly trusted what my eyes have never seen."

Revivalistic Hymns

As a rule, they are about "me," not about Christ. And when they are about Christ, they are about what he does in me and how I experience him right now, only rarely about his objective work for us. Even the songs about the cross reflect the moral influence theory of the atonement: "I love my Savior dear. When I think of the love that brought him from above, I love him, my Savior dear." Even "Blessed Assurance": "Perfect submission, perfect delight; visions of rapture now burst on my sight. Angels descending, bring from above, echoes of mercy, whispers of love. Perfect submission, all is at rest, I and my Savior am happy and blessed. Watching and waiting, looking above, filled with his goodness, lost in his love." Even the titles of hymns such as "I Surrender All," or "The Touch of His Hand on Mine," should make us cautious. But here are a few more examples:

On The Mountain Top: "On the mountain top above the world below, where the fruits of vict'ry in abundance grow. There the streams of blessings flow from fountains of his grace. I've been on the mountaintop and seen his face." Many of these hymns speak of seeing God and Jesus face-to-face, not just one day, but right now, through a direct experience.

Deeper and Deeper: "Into the heart of Jesus, deeper and deeper I go, seeking to know the reason why he should love me so....Into the will of Jesus, deeper and deeper I go, bowing in full surrender at his blessed feet....Into the cross of Jesus, deeper and deeper I go, following through the garden, facing the dreaded foe....Into the joy of Jesus, deeper and deeper I go, rising with soul enraptured far from the world below...."

Just Keep On Praying: "Pray till the light breaks through. Just keep on praying till light breaks through. The Lord will answer you. Just keep on praying till light breaks through."

Since Jesus Came Into My Heart: "I have ceased from my wand'ring and going astray, since Jesus came into my heart, and no dark clouds of doubt now my pathway obscure."

It Pays To Serve Jesus: "Tho the pathway to glory may sometimes be drear, you'll be happy each step of the way."

May God Depend on You?: "See, they come on sable pinions, come in strong Satanic might,--powers come and dark dominions from the regions of the night. God requires the brave and true; may he then depend on you?"

Live In Sunshine: "This world is not a place for gloom, while sunshine lights the morning sky, while blossoms store their sweet perfume, for everyone who passes by. Then let not grief your heart beguile, meet every trouble with a smile. Are any sad, go make them glad and live in sunshine all the while."

Commune With Me: "Commune with me between the wings of cherubim. I worship you...", and "I will meet you there, between the wings of cherubim" (Maranatha Music).

In Moments Like These: "...I sing out a song, I sing out a love song to Jesus" (Maranatha Music).

Dr. Michael Horton is the vice chairman of the Council of the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, and is associate professor of historical theology at Westminster Theological Seminary in California. Dr. Horton is a graduate of Biola University (B.A.), Westminster Theological Seminary in California (M.A.R.) and Wycliffe Hall, Oxford (Ph.D.). Some of the books he has written or edited include *Putting Amazing Back Into Grace*, *Beyond Culture Wars*, *Power Religion*, *In the Face of God*, and most recently, *We Believe*.