

Using the Psalms to evaluate today's "Praise Songs" - a major Essay

Written by Calvin Fox

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A typical Reformed Argument against Praise Songs re-evaluated

Eph 5:19-20 [we are commanded to] ...sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus

Church Music (and styles of Worship) continues to be a bone of contention for many of us. Churches have tried to solve the problems with it by the unhappy compromise of blending of styles or by going all traditional or all contemporary. And the major rationale every time is that, it is said, "the choice comes down to a matter of personal preference- whatever works for me or for us. If someone else doesn't like it they may go to another church. There is no absolute right or wrong about this, it is a personal matter." Really? I respectfully and strongly disagree. I have written about this subject before, using the the Regulative Principal versus the Normative Principle. That did not seem to settle the issue. Today, I will attempt a different, new approach using the Psalms. This one settles the issue for me.

I pray the Psalms every day. All of them have been set to music and were once the Hymns of Israel and the Church. No one can criticize the Psalms as being man-made, contemporary or old fashioned. They are Scripture; they come from the Lord Himself. What do they tell us about Worship and appropriate Music? (The Ephesians 5 text does not really help. It only says we are to sing.)

Psalm 95 Oh come, let us sing to the LORD; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation! Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!

Psalm 100 Serve the LORD with gladness! Come into his presence with singing!

22:26 those who seek him shall praise the LORD!

27:4 One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to inquire in his temple.

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27:8 You have said, "Seek my face." My heart says to you, "Your face, LORD, do I seek."

40:16 may all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you; may those who love your salvation say continually, "Great is the LORD!"

43:4 I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy, and I will praise you with the lyre, O God, my God.

63:1 O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

Here we have texts that teach that the transcendent Lord is present [immanent] in the Temple and we are invited, commanded, to seek His Presence there as well as to praise Him in song. The Psalmist expresses his desire to do that and to experience that spiritual presence of God in the strongest of terms.

Many of the Psalms are filled with passionate, very personal prayers to the Lord about personal troubles and they speak of deep spiritual encounters with Him in which the Lord meets those very deep personal needs of the Believer. The Psalm, in turn, is a testimony to others of what the Lord has done for him personally.

Psalm 34 I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall ever be in my mouth. I will glory in the Lord let the humble hear and rejoice. Proclaim with me the greatness of the Lord; let us exalt his name together. Look upon him and be radiant, and let not your faces be ashamed. The eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous,... and his ears are open to their cry. The righteous cry and the Lord hears them and delivers them from all their troubles. The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and will save those whose spirits are crushed. Many are the troubles of the righteous, but the Lord will deliver him out of them all.

Psalm 31 In you, O Lord, I seek refuge; do not let me ever be put to shame; in your righteousness deliver me. 2 Incline your ear to me; rescue me speedily. Be a rock of refuge for me, a strong fortress to save me. 3 You are indeed my rock and my fortress; for your name's sake lead me and guide me, 4 take me out of the net that is hidden for me, for you are my refuge. 5 Into your hand I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God. 9 Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am in distress; my eye wastes away from grief, my soul and body also. 10 For my life is spent with sorrow, and my years with sighing; my strength fails because of my misery, and my bones waste away.

11 I am the scorn of all my adversaries, a horror to my neighbors, an object of dread to my acquaintances; those who see me in the street flee from me. 12 I have passed out of mind like one who is dead; I have become like a broken vessel. 13 For I hear the whispering of many— terror all around!— as they scheme together against me, as they plot to take my life. 14 But I trust in you, O Lord; I say, "You are my God." 15 My times are in your hand; deliver me from the hand of my enemies and persecutors.

16 Let your face shine upon your servant; save me in your steadfast love. 17 Do not let me

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be put to shame, O Lord, for I call on you. 19 O how abundant is your goodness that you have laid up for those who fear you, and accomplished for those who take refuge in you, in the sight of everyone. 20 In the shelter of your presence you hide them from human plots; you hold them safe under your shelter from contentious tongues. 21 Blessed be the Lord, for he has wondrously shown his steadfast love to me when I was beset as a city under siege. 22 I had said in my alarm, "I am driven far from your sight." But you heard my supplications when I cried out to you for help.

cf Isaiah 57:15 For thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: "I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite."

With that background, let's look at what a Calvinist Professor of Systematic Theology has to say about Worship and Music in many of today's churches. Do these Psalm-Hymns pass muster as "Reformed, Calvinistic" Hymns or do they fall under the category of "Contemporary Praise Songs" reflecting neo-Gnostic elements in worship. "New-Gnostic elements"? What are neo-Gnostic elements? According to Michael Horton, Professor of Systematic Theology at Westminster Seminary California, this is the yardstick by which he judges contemporary Worship and Music. He describes the two major "New-Gnostic elements" are as follows:

A "**Lightness of Being**", i.e.- an atmosphere and environment that conveys an "anti-material, spirit-like existence ("lightness") The space where the Service is held promotes a sense of Divine Immanence rather than Divine Transcendence. There is little sense, if any, of the "weightiness", the sovereignty, of God. The church (the gathering place) is designed to be user-friendly, congenial, informal, comfortable and relaxed

"**Narcissitic Expressivism**" i.e.- Self-worship. The "expressive self is center stage". "Self expression is the goal of everyone". People are free and encouraged to exhibit or express the "ecstasy of intimate, immediate encounters with God." "Personal feelings" are tantamount. Sharing experiences is very important. Songs are centered around personal feelings and longings.

Dr. Horton weighs contemporary Worship and "Praise Music" and finds them seriously wanting. They fail the Neo-Gnostic test. How do the Hymns in the Psalter measure up using the same test?

The Psalmist quoted above is not guilty of The Lightness of Being nor of Narcissistic Expressivism. The Psalmist quoted above has a "heavy" view of a transcendent God and he also freely expresses personal experiences which are deeply spiritual and passionate; but, his songs are obviously Scriptural.

Dr Horton is rightly concerned about what he perceives as "individualism, inwardness, and emotional and experiential ecstasy" in Worship Services today. Should we all be? He sees this trend as a serious departure from sound Doctrine and the Gospel. If so, such Worship is false and dangerous. If people say, "Well, I like it. It is meaningful to me. That is what is important.

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That is why I go to my church. If you do not like it, go somewhere else.”, he believes they are illustrating and proving his point. The way we worship is not about our personal preference, meaning-“whatever works for me“). What we do in corporate Worship and how we do it must be Scriptural and what God wants. If we are going to chose something, shouldn't that be what we choose?

True Worship following the New Testament and Protestant Pattern is centered on the Word and Sacrament. Many conservative Protestants will question the second part as they are anti-Sacramental, anti- Catholic. But it is true that the New Testament and original Protestant (16th Century Reformation) pattern and practice of Worship is centered on preaching the Gospel and celebrating Communion (the spoken Word and the visible Word- remember what Paul said, “as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim [preach] the Lord's death until he comes” - 1 Cor 11:26)

Horton's main point, and I agree with him, is that it is through Word and Sacrament that worshippers meet God and receive Saving Grace, not through “mystical, individualistic encounters and experiences”. Saving Grace comes to Believers through external, not internal, means. Salvation (Justification) comes from without and not from within. Justification is imputed to us by God and not generated in us by anything we do. Horton rightly is concerned that churches are preaching a false Gospel if they teach or allow unsaved sinners to believe they can find God or have a personal relationship with God (Salvation) by becoming members of a Community and participating with that Community in “spiritual” experiences, especially through music, in “Worship” Services. This is definitely a false Gospel.

But, while absolutely true, there is another dimension in the Believers relationship with God. And that dimension is conveyed by the following Psalms (and many other Scripture verses). A good Calvinist can agree with all the following texts and do what they teach.

Psalm 147 Praise the Lord! How good it is to sing praises to our God; for he is gracious, and a song of praise is fitting.

Psalm 148 Kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all rulers of the earth! Young men and women alike, old and young together! Let them praise the name of the Lord, for his name alone is exalted; his glory is above earth and heaven.

Psalm 149 Praise the Lord! Sing to the Lord a new song, his praise in the assembly of the faithful. Let Israel be glad in its Maker; let the children of Zion rejoice in their King. Let them praise his name with dancing, making melody to him with tambourine and lyre.

Psalm 32 I acknowledged my sin to you, and did not conceal my guilt. I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord'; then you forgave me the guilt of my sin. Happy are they whose transgressions are forgiven, and whose sin is put away! Happy are they to whom the Lord imputes no guilt, and in whose spirit there is no guile. Be glad, you righteous, and rejoice in the Lord; shout for joy, all who are true of heart.

Prof. Horton does make it clear that there is legitimate emotional response to the Gospel. It is

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true. Being saved does bring joy and the Christian does praise God with all his heart and voice for what the Lord has done to save him. There is nothing dull or boring about the Doctrines of Grace. Preaching those Doctrines has brought many of us to tears and to gladness. It is a delight to hear Biblical preaching and receiving Communion can be a very moving emotional experience. The important point here is that all this deep emotion is in response to an external Source, to objective, propositional, verbal Truth being presented to the Believer.

Continuing with what he calls "Gnostic" influence in contemporary Worship, Dr Horton describes what he believes are characteristics' of the lyrics of Praise Songs. He singles out the songs of Bill Gaither (Southern Gospel), Promise Keepers, Maranatha Music and the Vineyard.

I agree with Horton that the chief characteristic of most of this Music is Romantic Individualism. The songs are primarily self-centered and focus on personal experience. They have very little Doctrinal content (specifically, the Calvinist Doctrines of Grace) and even less of the Gospel (specifically, the Reformation Doctrines of Salvation). The Christ they emphasize is not the objective, Risen Christ without, but the spiritual Christ within. This is not surprising inasmuch as many (most?) Believers do not know the Reformed Doctrines of Grace or the 5 Solas. They can not incorporate these Teachings into their Music or Worship if they are not grounded in the Scripture.

The Gaither songs (and many other that I used to love singing as a fundamental Baptist) are also often escapist. They focus on personal salvation from sins and a longing for the Rapture or going Home to personal glory. The current Praise Music emphasizes a kind of mystical intimacy with Jesus. Jesus seems to be seen almost exclusively as a friend and the words express mutual love the singer and He share with each other within. The desire is often expressed to touch Jesus or to be touched by Him. There is praise for Jesus as perfect Friend and Lover but the experience of the one praising Him seems to be more central to the lyrics than Jesus is.

This type of song is very different than the ones Calvinists sing. And that is because they reflect a very different Theology. I agree with Horton's critique of many of the contemporary lyrics. I have a real problem with many of them. This is not a matter of "Different strokes for different folks. You sing what you like and I will stick with what I like." It is not that simple! Different understandings of Truth, Doctrine, the Gospel, Salvation, the nature of Worship and the nature of Christian Living are all involved here. That is not a matter of "Oh, well." The differences are crucial! When was the last time you analyzed the music you use in church (or privately) in these terms?

Reformed Christians tend to be a self-controlled, serious, cerebral lot. We crave certainty in our Doctrine and system in our Theology. We are concerned with error and heresy (i.e.- deviations from our Doctrines and Theology, especially our "Confessions"). Calvinists like to think that they come to their faith-system based on *Sola Scriptura*, but the reality is that they also tend to be "Left-brained" people (dominated by logic, analytical thinking, and verbal communication rather than emotion and creativity) and that proclivity also influences how they come to their faith-system. And it greatly influences how they see and judge the Culture around them.

We tend to not appreciate and respect Right- Brained folks with an opposite temperament than

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we have. We tend to be afraid of expressing emotions and are repulsed, or at least disturbed, by (maybe even distrust) those who do. We might even accuse them of Gnostic Tendencies in worship when they do not really have them. We may actually misunderstand what they are doing or why they are doing it when it comes to Worship. At any rate, a dose of humility would become all of us as we seek to understand and explain the things of God.

It is here that I part ways with Dr. Horton's critique of "Praise Songs". Reformed thinkers tend to underestimate and misunderstand their own spiritual nature and what it means to live in the Spirit. Even though John Calvin gave much attention and importance to the Holy Spirit, Reformed writers, who are Calvin's "children", tend not to do that. (Of course there are marvelous exceptions)

The Holy Spirit is Christ dwelling in our hearts. The New testament has a great deal to say about the operations of the Spirit within Believers and that is very relevant to the subject of Worship, Music, Preaching, Prayer and the Sacraments

Rom 8:9 ... the Spirit of God dwells in you...the Spirit of Christ v.10 ... is in you,

It is Scriptural to talk about that spiritual Presence within and even to sing about it. An important verse in this regard is from Paul-

Gal 2:20 ...Christ lives in me. I live by faith in [Him] who loved me and gave himself for me.

The Doctrine of the substitution Atonement is here but so is the truth that the One who died, did it for me because he loved me. This is very personal! If I sang a praise song about this, would it be Gnostic and unscriptural?

Rev 1:5 Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth ... loves us

The Doctrine of the long ago Resurrection and Ascension is here, but so is the truth that the King of kings is loving us right now [present active participle]

If I sang a praise song about this, would it be Gnostic and unscriptural?

1 Peter 1:8 Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory,

If I set these words to music as a testimony to others, about my love for Jesus and the joy I have because of the assurance this gives me of Salvation would that be Gnostic and unscriptural?

He loves me. I love Him. Would a song about this be out of order in a Worship Service? Of course not. This is not about Salvation. This is not about an unregenerate sinner seeking and

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finding God through music and some spiritual experience in a church somewhere. No, the issue we are writing about here is balance in a Christian's life. The issue is not "either or", the issue is balance between two aspects of the interior and the exterior of the Believer's relationship with God. The Scripture does speak much of Christ's work on our behalf, but it does not omit the reality of the intimate love relationship with Him we may have (and sing about).

On the other hand, to dwell on the latter, to focus on it more than anything else and to neglect or omit the former would be very unscriptural, wrong and detrimental to both that relationship and our Worship. I am very concerned that this imbalance wrongly characterizes much of what goes on in "Praise Music" and contemporary Worship; but, we Calvinists are also very wrong and unscriptural when we fail to engage our "spiritual" and Right-brained side in our Worship and Music.

Many of us believe the Song of Solomon may be read metaphorically about our love relationship with the Lord and what is written there makes that relationship very passionate and intimate. Such a relationship is not a Plan of Salvation. It is a life lived and enjoyed after Salvation has come. Again, the Psalmist illustrates this well-

Psalm 13 1 How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? 2 How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me? 3 Consider and answer me, O LORD my God; light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death, 4 lest my enemy say, "I have prevailed over him," lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken. 5 But I have trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. 6 I will sing to the LORD, because he has dealt bountifully with me.

Psalm 16:1 Preserve me, O God, for in you I take refuge. 2 I say to the LORD, "You are my Lord; I have no good apart from you." 3 As for the saints in the land, they are the excellent ones, in whom is all my delight. 4 The sorrows of those who run after another god shall multiply; their drink offerings of blood I will not pour out or take their names on my lips. 5 The LORD is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot. 6 The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; indeed, I have a beautiful inheritance. 7 I bless the LORD who gives me counsel; in the night also my heart instructs me. 8 I have set the LORD always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken. 9 Therefore my heart is glad, and my whole being rejoices; my flesh also dwells secure. 10 For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption. 11 You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

These words and sentiments would make the lyrics of a good song! And how about the following words of admiration and adoration toward Christ the King- He is the subject, not the Psalmist; but it is the feelings of the Psalmist for the King that exude from the song. Is it Gnostic? No, it is very Scriptural. Such exultation in Christ should characterize our relationship with Him and be a part of our Worship.

Psalm 45:1 My heart overflows with a pleasing theme; I address my verses to the king; my tongue is like the pen of a ready scribe. 2 You are the most handsome of the sons of men;

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grace is poured upon your lips; therefore God has blessed you forever. 3 Gird your sword on your thigh, O mighty one, in your splendor and majesty. 4 In your majesty ride out victoriously for the cause of truth and meekness and righteousness; let your right hand teach you awesome deeds. 5 Your arrows are sharp in the heart of the king's enemies; the peoples fall under you. 6 Your throne, O God, is forever and ever. The scepter of your kingdom is a scepter of uprightness; 7 you have loved righteousness and hated wickedness. Therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions; 8 your robes are all fragrant with myrrh and aloes and cassia. From ivory palaces stringed instruments make you glad;

Conclusions? Much contemporary Worship is both God- and Christianity-Lite. Such Worship suffers from an absence of solid Reformed Theology and is predicated on a false Gospel. And it is also true that many lyrics of Praise Songs are neo-Gnostic and unscriptural. However, Christians do have a personal love relationship with their Savior and it should be cultivated and enjoyed and there should be opportunity to do that within the context of Worship and singing, as long as that is kept in balance and harmony with solid Biblical Doctrine.

The Articles by Michael Horton can be found here

<http://www.modernreformation.org/default>.

<http://www.modernreformation.org/default.php?page=articledisplay>