

RICK WARREN, MARTIN BUCER AND THE WORSHIP DEBATE  
IN REFORMATION PERSPECTIVE

Michael J. Reimer

American University in Cairo

*Introduction*

Poor Martin Bucer. Little remembered today outside the academy, Bucer was a leading theologian and churchman during the heroic early years of the Reformation, who influenced profoundly the form and content of Calvinist worship. An aphorism ascribed to him puts his philosophy of worship in a nutshell: “The church is built around the hymn.” Alas, if that is the case, then most evangelical churches today, and certainly the biggest and fastest growing among them, are like donuts. They also attach great importance to music, arguably too much importance, but anyone familiar with the music on offer in these churches will know that they lack Bucer’s center, since they are certainly not “built around the hymn.”

Rivers of ink and bile have flowed in a *Kulturkampf* within churches that has come to be known, with hideous exaggeration, as the “worship wars.” The phrase refers to the factional tensions in a wide range of Christian denominations between partisans of what are commonly termed “contemporary” and “traditional” styles of worship. These ideal-types actually mask large disparities in the styles of music that fall under one or the other rubric: “contemporary” could be Bill Gaither or Audio Adrenaline, and “traditional” embraces everything from J.S. Bach to African-American spirituals. But the labels are almost unavoidable and convey a difference everyone feels, even if it’s hard to be precise about it. A pastor-friend of mine seeks to redefine the debate by talking about “relevant” worship environments, but it’s not clear how this moves us forward. Relevance is relative: in a congregation with a

mixture of views, what is joyous to some will be juvenile to others, what is deep and rich to one will be dull and redundant to another.

It is an unhappy dilemma. Compromise seems logical but is hard to achieve because there is always someone who feels cheated. So-called blended worship is nearly always heavily weighted in one direction or another. Meanwhile, some churches offer a worship menu: choose the style you want by attending the service where your favorite music is played. Only a few churches can do this effectively, even fewer are willing to try. One church I visited called its early morning service “traditional” and its later morning service “contemporary”: the total difference was the substitution of a contemporary worship song for a hymn. Probably the most common solution is the tried-and-true Protestant formula of birds of a feather flocking together, at least until they discover that their feathers are actually a little bit different and have to regroup again. Regrettably, rather than working for mutual understanding, or even allowing that persons from different spiritual sub-cultures may have something to learn from one another, congregations become self-selecting. The reason there is no debate in many places is that an unapologetic rigidity is the order of the day. In short, if you don’t like the music here, take your marbles and go elsewhere.

This outcome is painful, dislocating and impoverishing. It is however the outcome that most Protestant churches have tacitly accepted and that our leaders—pastors, music directors, church boards and committees—have implemented. Because of the self-imposed or culturally-generated pressure for bigger memberships, bigger budgets, bigger buildings, bigger campuses, bigger staffs, supported by bigger memberships, bigger budgets, *et cetera ad infinitum*, and the undoubted mass appeal of what is loosely termed pop/rock music, the tendency in most evangelical churches, and some non-evangelical ones as well, has been to move toward a decidedly non-traditional format and sound. I can attest to this from experience, having served as a lay leader in an independent international church that used to maintain a rough balance between semi-liturgical worship on the one hand and colloquial services with nonstop praise songs on the other. When the search for a music director took place, the leadership affirmed that this balance should be preserved. Unfortunately, changes in “vision” for the church’s future caused the leadership to renege. Although there was no discussion as to why the peremptory shift to an exclusively contemporary format was made, it gradually became clear that our new

worship director was not the person we had interviewed for the position: it was really Rick Warren. Warren, founder of the booming Saddleback Community Church in southern California and described by *Christianity Today* as the most influential pastor in the U.S., is a force to be reckoned with, as I discovered. Thus, it was Warren's advice, read directly out of his books, that decided questions to do with worship, so much so that this particular church's music and order-of-worship is now almost indistinguishable from that of Saddleback-model churches everywhere.

The point here is not to prove Rick Warren (or anyone else) wrong. The spirit bloweth where it listeth; it would be churlish to deny or disparage the wide and constructive impact of Warren's work. It is worth adding that Rick Warren advises strongly *against* "reinventing" your church without the wholehearted support of the church's longstanding members, which is what happened in the events mentioned above. Bearing these qualifications in mind and affirming the basic rightness of his commitment to preach the gospel and have compassion on those in need, it is not superfluous to say that Rick Warren is not infallible; and some basic assumptions *driving* (I use the word advisedly) the programs he recommends and which have been adopted unthinkingly by many churches deserve to be scrutinized.

A caveat: throughout the discussion, the military metaphor is to be resisted. This is not a battle in which those who uphold the value of the Reformation tradition soldier on in the teeth of enemy victories. It is easy to see it this way, after you've been burned by exclusionary politics or when you set the theology-lite singing and preaching that characterizes many contemporary churches over against the *gravitas* of worship upheld by the Reformers. One self-conscious and isolated holdout for historic liturgy puts it this way: "Except for tiny pockets of resistance, the Church has thrown up the white flag to popular culture. She has surrendered her hymnals, prayer books, and pipe organs for soft rock holy pop on overhead projectors."<sup>1</sup> The author of these lines goes on to characterize his church as a lonely outpost of reverence among a throng of "trivial pep rallies." The motif of the embattled remnant stands behind the self-concept of the writer, but the positioning of one's own community of preference as the *sole* representative of

1. See the website <http://www.stlukesrec.org/acts/wars.html>. The article reviews Marva Dawn, *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for this Urgent Time* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

Christian tradition is a pointless exercise in self-justification. Moreover, having attended these “pep rallies” in many places in and outside North America, I believe it is a misjudgment to call them trivial. The church across the world comprises peoples from an extraordinary diversity of cultures and subcultures; they express their worship in ways that are diverse but meaningful to the variety of peoples represented. While I am not myself an avid listener to contemporary Christian music (CCM), I know many persons, young and old, who have been moved with gratitude to God and strengthened in their discipleship by CCM. I recall a friend of my wife, Debbie, a young woman who had turned to Christ after going through her own private hell, who sat on our couch crying her heart out as she listened to the music of Keith Green, a music that pulsates with liberated joy. And I cannot be the only parent who, while finding my own spiritual nourishment in the songs of Luther, Watts and Wesley, is grateful that CCM has supplied my children with a music that is both aesthetically *au courant* and whose lyrics address their generation’s distinctive needs and concerns.

#### *Purpose-Driven Music: An Assessment*

Unfortunately, partisans of contemporary worship formats are also guilty of using highly-charged and categorical language to distinguish what they are doing from the “irrelevance” of tradition-minded churches. Rick Warren is probably the most articulate advocate of the benefits to be derived from using contemporary music, and his program is set out in his church-growth manual, *The Purpose-Driven Church*.<sup>2</sup> The book has its value, most significantly in its reminding the reader that the most effective witness to the truth of the Christian faith is not given in music or sermons but in transformed lives. But while Warren sometimes celebrates diversity, he also scorns any pastor or leader who differs with his own policy with regard to worship music. Speaking directly to pastors, Warren asserts that the choice is stark and there is pretty obviously only one right way: “You must decide whether your church is going to be a music conservatory for the musical elite or whether your church is going to be a place where common people can bring unsaved friends and hear music they understand and enjoy.”<sup>3</sup> To

2. Rick Warren, *The Purpose-Driven Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).

3. Warren, *Purpose-Driven Church*, pp. 290-91.

support this unabashedly rigid position, he offers a threefold defense for having made contemporary music the staple at his church in Saddleback. All three of his arguments are problematic when placed in Reformation perspective. They warrant consideration in detail because, in spite of disclaimers that the book is not intended to be applied mechanically to other churches, it *has been so applied* in more than one church and invites such imitation on account of the minutiae to which it attends, right down to the setting of the thermostat and the distance between chairs.

The first argument concerning music seems plausible enough: Warren asserts that there is no such thing as “Christian music,” only “Christian lyrics.” Music is a neutral thing and carries no spiritual meaning in and of itself, varying from time to time and place to place. This is an argument based on the nature of music itself, and on the realities of cultural and historical relativism. It is an argument with which most people would readily concur and I would go a long way with it myself. It is based on the fact that music is constrained by instrumentation, rhythm, tonality and language, and since these are specific to certain periods and cultures, they necessarily vary over time and space. There was a time when all church music was done *a capella*; certain medieval instruments were added and were gradually accepted; organ accompaniment became standard in the Renaissance. Later, as new instruments were invented, they too became available for use in worship. The process was evolutionary, and it is silly to suggest that only one kind of music, specific to a certain culture at a certain period of its history, is the only kind appropriate for worship.

However, a little reflection shows that this argument also has its flaws. While music *in the abstract* carries no spiritual meaning, we never encounter music in the abstract. In every time and place, certain kinds of music will have built up associations. For example, a melody *all by itself* can make us smile or weep, want to dance or march, cause us to contemplate life’s goodness or its tragic brevity. Of course, when there are lyrics, a melody can and ideally should complement them. (In this respect, CCM has attained some brilliant peaks; but there are also some ugly troughs and a vast swamp of mediocrity in between.) Thus, certain kinds of music do have a churchy feel: in fact, Warren acknowledges this when he advises *against* the use of the organ. He knows that organ music all by itself is *not* neutral, and he implies that on account

of its archaic associations that alienate the church from its potential constituency in the world, it is actually *wrong* to continue to use it.

Whether or not he is right about the organ—having studied organ at one time, I think the instrument badly underrated—one can easily appreciate the goal behind these imperatives, which is the fulfillment of the church's evangelistic task. Many people like the kinetic excitement of contemporary music, and since there's nothing inherently wrong with it, let it be adapted or, if you wish, "redeemed," for the service of the gospel. Warren is reacting here against a rearguard criticism that CCM has no place in the church. I think he is attacking a straw man, but however that may be, on this count he is 100% correct in pointing out that times change and music changes with the times. Rock 'n roll music, it is true, was once the music of a subculture of protest—although what rock musicians were protesting against was often the kind of bourgeois complacency that runs cross-grain to the radical claims of the gospel, as well. It is also true that some rock musicians have been advocates of libertinism, violence and drug abuse. But the entire genre of rock music cannot be tarred with the same brush; it has undergone a process of *embourgeoisement*, being made respectable, perhaps even too respectable. At any rate, the reactionary attacks on the very existence of CCM are stupid, displaying a bigoted ignorance of music's history. The music of the Reformation was the music of the sixteenth century, and by analogy the church in the twenty-first century must use the music of the twenty-first century.

But there's the rub. What *is* the music of the twenty-first century? Certainly it is not only the music that was written in the twenty-first century—if that were the case, even most of the worship songs now sung would be excluded. In fact, if the postmodernists have taught us anything, we should by now be aware that the salient mark of our era is the uncomfortable, irremovable reality of *pluralism*. In philosophy, pluralism means acceptance of the coexistence of radically different worldviews; in aesthetics, it means acceptance of the coexistence of tastes and genres, none of which can claim superiority to the other—certainly not on the basis of temporality. Thus the music scene embraces all kinds of genres: country-western, rap, hip-hop, blues, classical, alternative, jazz, as well as the venerable pop/rock recommended by Warren. While the affirmation of aesthetic pluralism can be taken to an absurd extreme, making artistic merit entirely dependent on individual likes and dislikes, all these kinds of music are actually

*contemporary*. Thus, it is perfectly correct and legitimate, if a bit paradoxical, to say that the music of Bach is twenty-first century music: it is currently being performed and enjoyed by people who live in the twenty-first century. In fact, if it were not twenty-first century music, if it were exclusively eighteenth-century music, that would be the end of Bach.

This leads us naturally to Warren's second argument, which is drawn from history, and from the decisive moment of history for Protestants, the Reformation. Warren says that the Reformers themselves *borrowed* the music of their day as the setting for their newly-composed hymns. Again, this statement has a surface plausibility and, since Warren is not writing a treatise on church history or hymnology, he may easily be forgiven for having gotten the story wrong at several points. He repeats the tale about Luther setting "A Mighty Fortress" to a popular German tune, probably a drinking song; suggests that Calvin hired secular musicians to put his theology to music; and gives the impression that the Wesleys didn't hesitate to borrow tavern music for the purposes of revival. On the contrary: the most up-to-date scholarship on the Reformers has Luther composing the setting for "A Mighty Fortress" himself (he was a gifted musician). Calvin's musical assistants can hardly be described as "secular," having been powerfully influenced by Reformed theology before he employed them. Reformed church music was never intended to propagate Calvinism but to edify the congregation through the singing of Scripture, in particular, the Psalms. The Wesleys borrowed secular tunes on rare occasions, it is true, but nary a tavern song—here the matter of music's emotive associations was crucial since the Wesleys were evangelizing alcoholics. But Warren is right about a couple of other points that are intended to show how drastically musical judgments can change. For example, the use of freely-composed hymns, some of which have become models of hymnody, met with fierce resistance in many churches, including his own Baptist tradition. It is also true that Puritan clergymen made idiots of themselves by criticizing Handel's *Messiah*, mainly, it seems, because it was performed in the "corrupt" venue of an opera house.

Still, there is something slightly perverse about enlisting Martin Luther or John Calvin to argue for adapting music and orders-of-worship to contemporary culture, especially since this entails jettisoning nearly all liturgical forms as well as an entire corpus of hymnody that has stood the test of time. If Luther regarded the music, language and

liturgy of the church as *adiaphora*, matters that were doctrinally indifferent, he did so with a view to retaining as much of the Mass as possible within the evolving patterns of worship in the Lutheran churches. Calvin, likewise, was cautious about innovation and so fearful of the seductive powers of music that he insisted on the use of a “sacred style” that would supply dignified settings for sacred texts. He was especially anxious to ensure that the music not detract or distract from the text, a concern that is relevant to the use of any kind of worship music. His goal was not to overthrow Catholicism by means of a new ideal of worship, but to eliminate medieval accretions of what he believed was a pattern going back to the New Testament itself, in short, the rigorous implementation in the liturgy of the Reformed churches of *sola Scriptura*. Although Calvin’s strictures to ensure simplicity in worship were, by our criteria, unduly severe, I appreciate the one aspect of his program which he shared with all the Reformers—the insistence that worship must give primacy to the word of God rather than the words of men. It is a point to which we will return.

### *Doing the Math*

The third argument for contemporary music in *The Purpose-Driven Church* is the *argumentum ad numerum*, and for Warren it is decisive, given the evangelistic imperative that stands behind his entire ministry. Indeed, when the subject of worship formats is mooted in any church with a vision toward rapid growth, the pastoral leadership is certain to make *numbers* the argument against which all existing claims or prior commitments shatter. Warren explains the decisions Saddleback took regarding music thus:

We use the style of music the majority of people in our church listen to on the radio... They like bright, happy, cheerful music with a strong beat... After surveying who we were reaching, we made the strategic decision to stop singing hymns in our seeker services. Within a year of deciding what would be “our sound,” Saddleback *exploded* with growth. I will admit that we have lost hundreds of potential members because of the style of music Saddleback uses. On the other hand, we have attracted thousands more because of our music (*italics original*).<sup>4</sup>

4. Warren, *Purpose-Driven Church*, p. 285.

This is a plausible argument but it hides several troublesome assumptions. Let us take them one at a time.

First, Warren is assuming that nearly all people want the music they listen to every day to be the music they get in church. This demand for an “everyday” atmosphere at church spills over into other recommendations as well, such as using common, ordinary words in song lyrics and sermons. One reason given for eliminating the organ is that people don’t listen to organ music at home or at the office, so why should they be subjected to it at church? But this is illogical and inconsistent: there are lots of things that take place at church that are not everyday occurrences, that are emphatically once-a-week, even once-a-month or once-a-year events. I don’t sing with large groups of people during the week, I don’t take consecrated bread or wine with my friends, and I certainly don’t listen to sermons on weekdays, nor do any “adult seekers” that I know. Music can be, must be, culturally authentic—I am not arguing for the *exclusion* of pop/rock music—but at the same time, it does not have to be just like the music I hear every day to qualify for use in the church. While Christians must guard against employing an insider jargon that is impenetrable to the world, is there really no room for the intrusion of elevated language and music that rises to express the greatness of God? Are Dante and Milton and Gerard Manley Hopkins automatically excluded from reference because they don’t meet the “simple language” requirement?

Warren goes so far as to suggest in one passage that “Jesus used simple stories to help people understand and relate to his vision.”<sup>5</sup> And basing himself on the model of Jesus, he suggests that simple preaching is always the best. Where on earth did this idea come from? It’s certainly not the Jesus of the gospels, whose teaching is poetically dense, rich, enigmatic, elliptical and seemingly designed to provoke a battery of questions. “To him who has will more be given, and to him who has not, even what he has will be taken away.” (Has what? Given what? By whom?) And this is true not just of the many “hard sayings,” the “kingdom of God” pronouncements foremost among them. As Middle East scholar Kenneth E. Bailey has shown in his studies of Luke, even the shortest parables of Jesus turn out to possess unsuspected dialectical

5. Warren, *Purpose-Driven Church*, p. 113.

thrusts and unimagined theological complexity.<sup>6</sup> Jesus was no doubt a master of rhetoric and his preaching drew large crowds, but he cannot by any stretch of the imagination be called a simple preacher.

A second point is that however much people like bright, happy music, their lives are not always—perhaps not even often—bright and happy. Rick Warren knows this very well, and by far the best parts of *The Purpose-Driven Church* are his heartfelt exhortations to touch, help, listen to and come alongside the broken people who come within the circle of our communities. So why does not at least some of the music we sing reflect social and personal realities, realities which are, by the way, fully represented in Scripture, as in the anguished cries of the psalmist? Note the dialogue between author Marva Dawn (her book, *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down*, deserves wide circulation) and a pastor, in which she asks him to take a mental inventory of his congregation. The question is: How many families in your church have undergone a profound trauma in the past two years? The answer: Nearly every one. Her response is worth quoting verbatim: “Now, think about the songs you’ve done in worship in the past two years. Basically, every Sunday you’ve had somebody who has walked into church whose life has been just ripped apart. Was there anything that connected with where they were?”<sup>7</sup>

A third troubling implication of Warren’s words is the seemingly unavoidable conclusion that the adoption of a strict diet of contemporary music was the principal *cause* of Saddleback’s rapid growth—and although Warren uses “growth” in a more nuanced way elsewhere, here it obviously means numbers pure and simple. I don’t think this is really his point, since he says elsewhere that it is a myth to suggest that there is one and only one key to church growth. Indeed, his book gives plenty of other more credible explanations for Saddleback’s growth. It is interesting, however, that, like the anti-populist quoted above, the military metaphor dominates this discourse about worship formats.

6. Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976).

7. Dawn, *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down*, cited in *Grassroots Music Magazine*, feature article on “Indelible Grace,” (June 2005) accessed at <http://www.grassrootsmusic.com/feature/indelible>. Dawn has more to say about this in the book, see pp. 88-89.

Thus, the decision to exclude all other kinds of music was “strategic:” there were casualties, in the loss of hundreds of potential members and the report of mission-accomplished and final victory resulted in the *explosive* increase in those who have been attracted. It is not only solid military logic but irrefutable mathematics: a thousand is *bigger* than a hundred, hence *more important* than a hundred. Warren, it seems, would not shrink from this conclusion. A commitment to fulfilling the Great Commission (Mt. 28:19-20) informs everything he does, and that apparently includes whatever and whoever must be sacrificed in order to achieve the goal. Now, he is operating in an environment in suburban southern California where there are literally hundreds of alternatives to Saddleback and he can justifiably argue that if people don’t like the Saddleback sound they can seek satisfaction elsewhere. Nevertheless, not every church exists in an environment with so many options. More importantly, his approach won’t do anything to encourage people with different spiritual orientations to learn from each other. But the really unfortunate thing about this passage is that it has been and will be cited to justify a ruthlessly utilitarian approach to worship and other church programs elsewhere—right is what draws a big crowd, wrong is what doesn’t. The question must be asked: is this really the only or even the main criterion to use when assessing how a church should worship or where a church should be investing its resources?

The great German theologian Helmuth Thielicke, a man who himself preached to huge crowds in postwar Germany, wrote insightfully on this obsession with numbers, so characteristic of nearly all modern institutions. In his book on the parables, Thielicke notes the gospel writers’ emphasis on the large crowds who came to hear Jesus, so large that he is forced to secure a boat in order to address them. It is no accident, Thielicke comments, that precisely at this point in his ministry Jesus tells the Parable of the Sower, a parable about numbers if there ever was one. But the moral of the story is not that numbers count but that they *don’t*—the seed falls uselessly in so many places, but the fruit emerges from those very few areas that are really fertile.<sup>8</sup> The explanation of the parable makes it clear that Jesus is unimpressed by the size of the crowd around him since he knows that most of his listeners will never bear fruit. Even more awkward for any cut-and-

8. Helmuth Thielicke, *The Waiting Father* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1959), pp. 52-60.

dried attempts to make Jesus a populist, he deliberately *conceals* the explanation of the parable from the crowd and reveals it only to his disciples. The moral is that it is simply wrong to imply that visible success is the criterion for what is right or true in matters of faith, because what faith seeks is not and cannot be realized in one generation or perhaps even during our earthly life at all, as Hebrews 11 makes clear. At a deeper level, I would argue that “success” is a category that, while profoundly North American, is nonetheless antithetical to the paradoxical nature of New Testament spirituality: “When I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor. 12:10).

As we have seen, then, there are some solid reasons to question the Saddleback worship-music model. But I think the Saddleback phenomenon and the worship-music debate also reflect deeper issues that compel us to revisit some basic tensions within Protestantism. Not surprisingly, they are issues that have been around since the days of the Reformation and on which the wisdom of the Reformers can offer us some positive guidance. These issues can be treated under three rubrics: ecclesiology, especially the relationship of the church to its own history; theology, with its permanent tension between God’s hiddenness and revelation; and, finally, the teleology of worship itself.

### *The Church in Time: History and Identity*

The question of ecclesiology is logically first in analyzing the Saddleback model as it applies to worship, because Warren’s program stretches to the breaking point the historical conception of “church.” It would perhaps be less confusing if it were called the Rick Warren Evangelistic Corporation, which describes more accurately its overarching purpose and its hierarchical polity. But it is *not* called that, and the fact that it is not only labeled a church but increasingly is taken to be the *model* church, that is cause for concern. Like so many megachurches, it seeks to establish itself in the broader community on the basis of its uniqueness—a church that is not like other churches because it goes as far as possible to assimilate to the surrounding culture. It is church *de novo*, unconstrained by history. But like it or not, the church *has* a history, in fact a very long one. Is it really possible, or desirable, to abolish that history and just start over? It is this error that has caused modern societies to become, in some respects, less creative and diverse than their supposedly tradition-bound predecessors. Thus it

has been observed that megachurches like Saddleback are generally more similar to one another than they are to churches in their own denominations, having become practically denominations in themselves. These inter-church uniformities are reinforced by an intra-church homogeneity which is caused by the forces of self-selection mentioned above. The drive for big numbers seems to require the sacrifice of genuine variety and inter-generational amity. It is no accident that you will hear the same songs, done in the same styles, with the same instruments, employing the same technologies, advertised by the same logos and other visuals, and followed by the same homiletical themes preached in the same idiom, if you visit these churches. As one sociological analysis points out, the megachurch is the spiritual analogue of the shopping mall in contemporary American society—and while each mall may offer its patrons a variety of options, the total experience of the mall is strikingly, and too often cloyingly, similar from place to place.<sup>9</sup>

The irony of modernity is that, while opening up the exciting possibility of doing things in new ways, including new ways of “doing church,” it also has, because of its impatience with history and historically-derived institutions, an almost gyroscopically-driven tendency to end in near total conformity. Worship music and formats are fine examples of this tendency. What began several decades ago as small steps in the direction of innovative worship has evolved steadily toward becoming a straitjacket to throttle variety. It so happens that this transformation coincides almost exactly with my lifetime. I can remember when the debate was whether or not electric guitars and drums were appropriate instruments for worship (yes, they are); there are now many churches where worship would be inconceivable without them. The problem here is not that one type of instrument is more sacred than another; it is, nonetheless, true that every instrument has limitations, which determine the kind of music that one is going to have, and the kind of music that one is *not* going to have. Similarly, prayers in most churches used to be set prayers belonging to the liturgy, and extemporaneous prayer was the exception. Here the reversal has been

9. The foregoing comments are based on the valuable study and generally quite-favorable assessment of megachurches in Scott Thumma, “Exploring the Megachurch Phenomena: Their Characteristics and Cultural Context,” *Hartford Institute for Religion Research* ([http://hirr.hartsem.edu/bookshelf/thumma\\_article2.html](http://hirr.hartsem.edu/bookshelf/thumma_article2.html)).

almost complete, and you will be lucky to hear even the Lord's prayer repeated in most churches that have moved in the direction of colloquial worship. It is pretty clear to everyone that this tendency has gone too far, and the "just reallys" of spontaneous praying have become every bit as routine as the set prayers of the past. A recent innovation has been the introduction of projectors and screens into worship. Once this had been introduced in my former church, a proposal to have part of a worship service without using the projector was firmly rejected, the use of *any* printed music or readings having been definitively eliminated. Again, as with instruments, the technology used determines to a significant degree what can and can't be read, prayed, or sung; but that is a message that technophiles don't care to hear. Finally, coming back to our major concern, I can recall when the introduction of popular praise songs caused a stir because hymn-singing was considered sacrosanct by an older generation. Their opposition was born of an ill-considered conservatism. But as it turned out, the camel's nose was followed by the rest of the camel; short repetitive choruses have now driven out hymns almost entirely in many megachurches and megachurch "wannabes" around the world.

Thus, in the past couple of years I have visited a variety of evangelical Protestant churches in North America, Europe and the Middle East. The musical fare has been remarkably uniform, with a small number of generically-similar worship songs holding the field. I would estimate that the number of widely-sung worship songs does not exceed twenty-five. They are not, by the way, the worship songs that held the field a decade ago and you can be sure they will not be the ones that we will be singing in a decade, since they are currently being sung to death. Anyone who doesn't believe that a song can be killed in this way hasn't lived very long. Rick Warren cites a study that showed that after a song had been sung fifty times, it became a meaningless recitation to those who sang it.<sup>10</sup> It is germane that this study was done by Columbia Records and applied to popular music that is sold by means of constant repetition in the mass media, that is, just the kind of music that has come to dominate in evangelical churches.

Meanwhile, the hymnals that used to be standard equipment in Protestant churches but have disappeared in the more "progressive" churches, contain *hundreds and hundreds* of songs on a wide variety of

10. Warren, *Purpose-Driven Church*, pp. 288-89.

scriptural passages and themes, that were originated in a variety of different cultures and languages, and were written over many centuries. The difference between the two kinds of music is not trivial; the homogeneity of the music offered by the contemporary church will exact a price in the long run. We have come to recognize the significance of what is called biodiversity; genetic sameness can put an entire species at risk. So in the spiritual realm: a spirituality locked up in its own narrow temporality cannot possibly recognize, let alone overcome, its own deficiencies. C.S. Lewis, in his *Screwtape Letters*, puts words in the mouth of the devil that say it well:

And since we cannot deceive the whole human race all the time, it is most important thus to cut every generation off from all others; for where learning makes a free commerce between the ages there is always the danger that the characteristic errors of one may be corrected by the characteristic truths of another.<sup>11</sup>

As far as I can see, this cutting-off of the current generation from the past is precisely what is being effected by the Rick Warren program.

In our culture, a great deal hangs on images, and the hymnbook definitely suffers from an image problem. Tragically, it is not generally recognized as a treasury of Christian spirituality, containing the “characteristic truths” and theological insights of past generations. For Christians whose experience of worship has been confined to contemporary-format services, and especially the under-40 crowd, a hymnbook is nothing but a compendium of lugubrious music and old-fashioned poetry. I think that the clergy are culpable here; instead of educating the laity in its value they have taken the easy way and simply discarded it. This is not to say, by the way, that hymns are inherently better than contemporary worship songs; there are plenty of bad hymns, and even the best lyricists of the past produced forgettable material. The advantage that the hymn has over the worship song is largely one of time: the judgment of generations has worked to weed out the musical and lyrical ephemera in hymnbooks. The older hymns have an additional time-related advantage over contemporary worship songs in not only teaching us what previous generations have learned but also in serving to bind the church together across *time*. Thus, the Apostles’ and Nicene creeds conclude with an affirmation about the holy catholic church and the

11. C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: Macmillan, repr. 1974 [1942]), p. 129; letter XXVII.

communion of saints; hymns are a fine expression of that reality. We sing what they sang in recognition of the faith our ancestors demonstrated, to which we aspire and which we hope to pass on to our children and grandchildren. On an emotional level, I find myself strengthened in knowing that I sing words that have lasted, and that have sustained women and men over many centuries. God really was a mighty fortress to Luther, and so he will be to me. And, cognitively, I want my children to know that the faith of the Church is not an innovation; to some extent (there is certainly room for debate here as to how much) the antiquity of our faith must be made real in a respect for received traditions. It is significant that Protestants who have converted to Catholicism or Orthodoxy in recent decades cite this lack of *rootedness* as one of the most important deficiencies in the churches they have left.<sup>12</sup> Along the same line, as I have talked to many people who have left or are disillusioned with popular evangelical churches, the word that they consistently use to describe them is “shallow.”

It is a measure of how far we have come within the church in the past fifty years that such an argument must even be made; whereas it was once innovation that had to be justified while tradition was part of the world-taken-for-granted, it is now almost every traditional practice or policy that must defend its *raison d’etre*. But when I compare the Church’s relationship with its history to my relationship with my children, the need to render a presumptive if discriminating respect to tradition is not hard to understand. Just as I hope that my children will respect and learn from me, so I must model before them a respect and willingness to learn from my own parents, and more broadly from the generations before me. As the English social philosopher, Edmund Burke, wrote: “People will not look forward to posterity, who never look backward to their ancestors.”<sup>13</sup> We might add as a corollary that the children of people who have not looked back to their ancestors are unlikely to show much respect for the ideas and institutions of the generation that raised them. But at any rate, it is clear that Burke and Lewis are warning against the same danger, which is the historically-isolating

12. Mark Noll and Carolyn Nystrom, “Is the Reformation Over?,” *Books and Culture: A Christian Review* 11.4 (2005), pp. 10-18 (<http://www.ctlibrary.com/bc/2005/julaug/1.10.html>).

13. Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Indianapolis: Hackett, repr. 1987 [1790]), p. 29.

effects of concentrating on developing new ideas, practices and institutions, at the expense of respect for received ones.

And from whence are these traditions received? They are, it is true, received by fallible persons and from fallible persons, but their ultimate origin is not solely human. Thomas C. Oden has suggested that to ignore or devalue the historic Church is to disparage the work of the Holy Spirit in fulfillment of Christ's promise that he would lead us into all truth (Jn 16:13). This Scripture, furthermore, lays a responsibility upon the Church as it reproduces itself across the years:

When one generation of Christian discipline fails, it is much more difficult for the next generation. But the church must understand itself to be an inter-generational process, because it exists in time. There is no non-historical shortcut to fulfilling the church's mission, no easy all-at-once way to accomplish the task of the church on behalf of every generation.<sup>14</sup>

### *A Theology of Worship: Europe versus America?*

God is both transcendent and immanent, terms that describe a reality that is *sui generis* and ultimately unimaginable: totally above, apart from and beyond the natural universe, *and yet* infusing, energizing, stabilizing and upholding the whole created order. This is the formulation of classical Christian theology in its attempt to balance the poles of the scriptural representation of God. "Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain thee" (1 Kgs 8:27) must be set side by side with "In him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). At the same time, the central doctrine of Christian faith, which distinguishes it from its monotheistic sister-faiths, is the Incarnation: "God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself" (2 Cor. 5:19). It is supremely in the Gospels that we envisage this God, accessible and available to people in their brokenness and need, who, in the person of his Son, teaches, exorcizes, heals, commissions, forgives, fellowships and sacrifices himself for his people.

Transcendent, immanent, incarnate—it takes no prophetic insight to recognize which side of this triad the contemporary church in North

14. Thomas C. Oden, "On Not Whoring after the Spirit of the Age," in Os Guinness and John Seel (eds.), *No God but God* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), pp. 189-203; see esp. pp. 198-99.

America emphasizes. Says a modern Tocqueville about his experience in a seeker-sensitive American church:

What is obvious is the power of a religion whose secret is perhaps, simply, to get rid of the distance, the transcendence, and the remoteness of the divine that are at the heart of European theologies. A present God this time; a God who is there, behind the door or the curtain, and asks only to show himself; a God without mystery; a good-guy God; almost a human being, a good American, someone who loves you one by one, listens to you if you talk to him, answers if you ask him to—God the friend, who has your best interests at heart.<sup>15</sup>

Whether the difference derives from geography is debatable, although it is possible that Europeans, coming from societies with a more strongly-rooted consciousness of social rank, find it easier to lay hold of the concept of God's transcendence, whereas American egalitarianism tends to dissolve any sense of inalienable otherness in society, both human and divine. Be that as it may, there is nothing theologically amiss in believing that God hears our individual prayers and knows and even cares about our intimate individual struggles and needs. This is an indispensable aspect of the Christian understanding of God. But there *is* something gigantically wrong with and yet quintessentially North American in this portrait of a personalized and practical-minded God who is so immensely likeable that it's hard to understand why anyone wouldn't want his help in running their life. In the songs of recent years there is an easy directness in approaching God. Rick Warren comments on this approvingly, noting accurately that in many hymns we sing *about* God while in most modern worship songs we sing *to* God. I'm not sure this is a step forward if it presupposes a God so diminished that there's no longer anything to feel afraid of or be overwhelmed by. Of course, you wouldn't hear this from most pulpits, but isn't this diminished deity implicit in the manner with which we approach worship: in the casualness of dress, language and demeanor? There are many modern worship songs that speak about bowing the knee to God, but I've never seen it done in a contemporary service, perhaps because it smacks too much of liturgy, perhaps because it's not part of our "everyday" routine in relating to people. But God is not like anyone else we know—this is part, albeit a very small part, of what holiness means.

15. Bernard-Henri Lévy, "In the Footsteps of Tocqueville," *Atlantic Monthly* (May 2005), p. 76.

A thoughtful contemporary songwriter and author, Matt Redman, has recorded his own dissatisfaction with the superficiality of a great deal of what we are singing and saying nowadays. He comments:

I want more songs which paint a big picture of God... So many books of the Bible reveal his sovereignty, majesty, his awesomeness, his being all powerful and self-sufficient. Then you've got your songs and you're thinking, *Something is not matching up*. The God in these songs seems so worldly compared to the God in the Scripture. I'm not judging other songs, but just talking about my own songs. They are portraying God, but it seems we often shrink Him down too much...<sup>16</sup>

His new book about this sense of fear and awe in the presence of God carries the title *Facedown*.<sup>17</sup> Just so, the theophanies and Christophanies of Scripture are experiences of fear and awe, not of pleasure: Moses at the burning bush, Jacob at Bethel, Isaiah in the temple, Ezekiel by the River Chebar, Peter, James, and John on the Mount of Transfiguration, Paul on the road to Damascus, John on the island of Patmos. They were pillars of faith, yet for them the direct encounter with God was terrifying. To be sure, not every church service can or should be the occasion of such a momentous confrontation. God does not always approach us in this way, which is just as well, since we could hardly endure it. But it also seems to me irreverent that we should cruise in and worship this God of consuming holiness without even confessing our sins, as I have seen happen in the case of contemporary-format services. One major reason why most modern persons find it hard to relate to Luther, and why the Reformation seems to be so distant theologically from the modern church, whatever its worship format, lies in the Reformers' instinct, grounded in their reading of Scripture, of the absolute gulf separating a righteous God and a sinful humankind. It is also why they had far less trouble in appreciating the Old Testament than we do. (Of course, there is a feedback loop here, since they also read and studied the Old Testament far more than we do).

16. Danielle DuRant, "A Conversation with Matt Redman," *Just Thinking: The Triannual Communiqué of Ravi Zacharias International Ministries* (Fall 2004), p. 9.

17. Matt Redman, *Facedown* (Glendale, CA: Regal Books, 2004).

*Non Nobis, Domine*

Luther's understanding of God's absolute transcendence can also help us to approach the question of what we are doing in worship with a modicum of detachment, even humor. This is a God who doesn't need our worship; that he accepts it at all is the result of his grace. While we can and should come before him with an awareness of his goodness and glory and our own falling short, we shouldn't worry too much about getting everybody and everything right. There is a ludicrous disproportion between means and ends in our worship. The means we use are pitiful; no matter how upbeat and contemporary, or ancient and traditional, or color-coordinated or purpose-driven or liturgically correct, God is *not* impressed. He is not impressed because he is the source of all we are and do, but also and more importantly because he knows what *we* are really like inside. We do well to recall, as the Collect of Purity that begins the Anglican worship puts it, that we are coming before a God "to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid." It is a call for his Spirit to purify our motives, since, when we try, we only end up concentrating more and more upon ourselves in a futile, narcissistic cycle.

Meanwhile, the ends of worship are the praise of God and the declaration of his mighty acts. For this, the Scriptures are central: as Luther says, the guiding principle of our worship is "the word by which he has offered himself to our acceptance." Rick Warren says that every church claims it is doing worship in the most biblical way while the New Testament lays down no unalterable form of worship. That is true. But it does not excuse us from examining what we *are* doing in worship, especially what we are doing with the word that is, per Luther, "his glory and beauty." For Luther, Calvin, Bucer and all the Reformers, while worship could be organized in various ways, it had to make Scripture *central*. It is worth asking: Is the Scripture read from week to week in our worship services? How *much* Scripture is read? Is there a balance between Old Testament and New? Is there any system to the public reading and exposition of the Scriptures to ensure that we are setting forth "the whole counsel of God"? It was the Reformed conviction that God's word alone is worthy of our attention in worship that caused the Calvinist churches to restrict congregational singing almost entirely to the metrical psalms. It is also the reason why a *lectionary* is so useful, since it provides for a disciplined and balanced reading of

Scripture throughout the year. The alternative is to leave the calendar of reading and preaching to the discretion of the pastor or music director, with their inevitably personal preferences and prejudices, and the omission of a great deal of Scripture.

While a broader teleology of worship is something worthy of a separate essay, it can perhaps be sketched out in brief. First, our worship should be, as Rick Warren argues, a means of witness. The Scripture supports this point of view on Christian worship, although it is interesting that it connects it not with music but with the Eucharist and prophecy. Thus Paul affirms: “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you *proclaim* the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Cor. 11:26). Concerning the priorities that should hold during worship, Paul writes: “But if all prophesy and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, the secrets of his heart are disclosed; and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you” (1 Cor. 14:24). This is a theme that was underplayed by the Reformers, since they spoke out of a cultural context in which Christian identity was universally assumed; in the post-Christian societies of North America and Europe, Rick Warren’s emphasis on finding effective ways to communicate the gospel is absolutely vital and some of his suggestions in this regard are extremely helpful. But the Reformers also viewed “prophecy” or preaching and the other parts of a service of worship as aimed at edifying and educating the Church; and here the Rick Warren approach is far less satisfactory and points up the difficulty of achieving a balance between these two goals of witness *and* edification at the same time. Theoretically they are not at odds with one another but in my experience it is extremely rare to find them in harmony. When churches use their services of worship as a forum for evangelism, that is, when they adopt the “seeker-sensitive” model of a Saddleback or Willow Creek, the gospel is invariably dumbed down. I don’t see how it can be otherwise, and when Rick Warren remarks on the “simplicity” of Jesus’ teaching, I am not reassured. The results of such an approach can only be to dismiss vast tracts of Scripture as unsuitable for preaching or to sanitize them, because there is no way you can use a “simple” approach to preach on most of the Bible unless you are satisfied with a repertoire of platitudes.

On the other hand, those of us more deeply rooted in the Reformation tradition should acknowledge that we have been slow to take up the challenge of living in a post-Christian environment, in

which much of what we are saying is becoming unintelligible. I don't think that means that we have to simplify what is inherently complex, and it certainly doesn't mean abandoning the biblical themes and sturdy liturgical patterns that distinguish the classical Protestant faith, but it does mean greater flexibility in remolding the forms used to communicate it. We also need to acknowledge that we have been not only slow but lazy and unimaginative when it comes to fulfilling our evangelistic task.

The problems posed by the worship debate are real and go beyond the selection of one or another kind of music to deep fissures within the Protestant Christian community. To generalize enormously, one large section of that community lays its emphasis on evangelism, accessibility and "meeting felt needs," an approach that is generally combined with technically-proficient event-planning and a professionalized orientation toward ministry.<sup>18</sup> On the other side is a shrinking constituency insisting on preaching and teaching with theological depth, vigorous educational programs to foster biblical literacy within the laity and encourage lay initiative, a historically-informed aesthetic in music and the arts and a large measure of liturgical continuity. I write out of an urgent sense of the need to redress this imbalance. My purpose is not to decry the success of Saddleback but to critique it, and to suggest that there is a better way, a more ecumenical way, a way that would include learning from one another and from our common history and talking to one another about it. Our goal must be to submit ourselves to one another *sacrificially* for the sake of a higher unity in Christ.

Unfortunately, this is the point at which the Reformers fail us because they could not come to agreement themselves, certainly not on worship. The attempt led by Martin Bucer to bring together the Lutheran and Calvinist churches broke down on the issue of the theology of the Eucharist. It occurs to me that the debate over music and worship formats today is analogous to this sixteenth-century controversy. And

18. For a devastating critique of the professionalization of ministry, see David F. Wells, "The D-Min-Ization of the Ministry," in Guinness and Seel (eds.), *No God but God*, pp. 175-88. As Wells says: "Now the fulcrum around which the ministry turns is no longer God, but the church. Theology, whose habitat is now restricted to the academy by default, only touches the edges of church life. The life of the church actually provides a surrogate 'truth' for Christian thought. The skills and techniques requisite for the management of the church determine what theology should be studied, not the importance of the truth itself" (p. 187).

this is where Bucer's legacy needs to be revived. Reformed yet ecumenical, he betook himself to England where he spent his last productive years. Perhaps his greatest contribution to the English reformation was an essentially negative one, his stern advice not to import the communion controversy from the Continent. The English Reformers followed his advice and, while differences arose, the Anglicans managed to contain them and to maintain an inclusiveness and unity on this issue that eluded their Protestant brethren elsewhere. The policy that accounted for this success was one that became known as Comprehension, and it would perhaps serve us well to study it in order to overcome some of the ugly frictions that have resulted from the worship debate.

But it will take much more than study to surmount our divisions and our superficialities; it will take a rather different model of the church than the ones available right now. What might that model include? I would venture the following:

1. A commitment to communicate the gospel to contemporary cohorts without severing links with church history.
2. A serious dialogue about worship, doing the hard work of listening across several generations and spiritual subcultures in order to build a unity that comes from mutual respect and *bona fide* reciprocity.
3. A strong balance between innovative kinds of evangelism and theologically-enriched and ethically-challenging preaching and teaching.
4. Practical, sacrificial, non-condescending service to the varied needs of people inside and outside our church communities.

In my judgment as a layperson, to achieve something like this would demand a different kind of leadership than we have in many of our churches. We need leaders possessed of a teachable, charitable and humble spirit, not only toward people of their own spiritual and theological orientation (often difficult enough) but toward people from diverse traditions and backgrounds. And on top of that, a firm and repeated renunciation of the spiritual egotism and collective self-admiration that so easily infects us as Christians and as churches. It will take the convicting, liberating Spirit of God to help us face the odious

fact that we hunger and thirst for our own glory, individually and institutionally, as pastors and as people. Only by beginning with such a rigorous self-reckoning can we begin to enter into the delight of the Psalmist as he says: “Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name give glory.”