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## Forks in the Road: Challenges and Rewards

Quentin Faulkner

*University of Nebraska - Lincoln*, [qfaulkner1@unl.edu](mailto:qfaulkner1@unl.edu)

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# PROFESSIONAL CONCERNS FORUM

## FORKS IN THE ROAD: CHALLENGES AND REWARDS

Quentin Faulkner, AAGO

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Using music as a focal point, although another of the arts might serve as well, I have discovered that the arts are a kind of camera obscura of society. Like that optical wonder, they reduce the whole of its identity—sanctions and values, sacred and secular beliefs and customs—to a faithful reflection in miniature, in living colors (Mantle Hood, *The Ethnomusicologist*. New York: McGraw-Hill [1982], p. xviii).

The author of this statement, Mantle Hood, is an ethnomusicologist, one who studies the music of cultures outside those in the western European tradition (his perspective is therefore a global one). If what he asserts is valid (and I believe it is), then his statement ought to be of considerable interest to present-day Christians. Although the music of Christian worship is not the focus of enormous attention in today's world (neither the arts nor Christian worship are among modern society's central concerns), the practice of the arts in the church (and especially the practice of music) is a faithful indicator of a church's "sanctions and values . . . beliefs and customs." With that idea in mind, the following excerpts from a recent article in *The Wall Street Journal* suggest that we are in the midst of a basic shift in some churches' understanding of themselves and their worship.

. . . Sunday morning at Shepherd of the Hills Church, hundreds . . . push through the doors expecting a program of Christmas carols and hymns. The choir is assembled on stage, and stately music by George Frederick Handel fills the sanctuary. But as soon as the congregation has been seated, the prelude stops and there is a new sound—unmistakably post-Elvis.

The Praise Boys, a band of five born-again Christians, quickly have heads nodding and toes tapping to the light-rock lyric "Jesus, We Remember It's Your Birthday!" They do some old favorites, too, like "Joy to the World," but with a decidedly new beat . . .

At first blush, Dr. [Jess C.] Moody, the church's 66-year-old pastor, doesn't seem the type to have initiated such change. He dresses in dark business suits and thinks of himself as a theological conservative . . . But get the man talking about music and he sounds downright radical.

"I think there is a revolution coming in the field of [religious] music," Dr. Moody says. Churches that "don't get on board" will be "vacated so fast."

Ever since its musical transformation, Shepherd of the Hills has watched its congregation grow younger. The average age of its members has fallen from 36 . . . to 27. The church took its boldest step two months ago when it moved into a modern, barnlike sanctuary . . . after selling its old building . . .

The interior of the old church was dominated by a \$1.5 million pipe organ. But when the

new building was designed, says music director Phil Barfoot, "there was a real conscious decision to do away with the pipe organ. The old one was sold, for ten cents on the dollar, to a Catholic parish."

The change has its partisans. Dave Hollingsworth, a lanky, long-haired 30-year-old, says a steady diet of nothing but traditional organ music "just gets real stale." Having instruments like a synthesizer and horns in church "opens you up to a lot more sounds," he says.

Troy Schmidt, 30, a program developer with the Disney Channel, says too many churches think solemn music is reverent. "I think, if it's quiet, it's boring." Charles Bradford, 77, a retired Lockheed Corp. quality-control manager, says of the Praise Boys: "I like the beat" (R. Gustav Niebuhr, "So It Isn't Rock of Ages, It Is Rock, and Many Love It," *The Wall Street Journal*, Thursday, December 19, 1991).

### TRADITIONAL WORSHIP

Until now, Christian worship (or the worship of any other religion, for that matter) has been understood primarily as a reaction to God's prior acting on behalf of humankind, in the world and in human lives. Worship is something that Christians owe a transcendent, omnipotent God—a payment for services already rendered, to put it crudely. The old Book of Common Prayer of the Church of England comes right to the point in the pref-

ace to the "Holy, Holy": "It is very meet, right and our bounden duty that we should at all times and in all places give thanks unto you, O Lord, holy Father, almighty, everlasting God . . ."

Understood in this way, worship is primarily giving, and only secondarily getting. It is, as the roots of the word imply, "worship": ascribing worth to God. When a Christian community (any Christian community; no sectarian distinctions here!) gathers to worship, it does so primarily to praise God for God's mighty acts: creation, recreation, salvation, sustenance. Knowing that they are children of God, and sons and daughters of God by adoption, worshipers gather to offer God thanks and praise, to celebrate God's gifts to them, and to affirm the truth of those gifts' existence. Then, as a result of being part of a celebrating community, worshipers get something: they are reminded of who they are, strengthened in their faith, uplifted, and inspired. That getting, though, is a by-product of a prior giving. It has always been crucial for Christians to understand what St. Francis says in his prayer for peace: "For it is in giving that we receive . . ."—or to put it more bluntly: "You only get out of it what you put into it." It is this attitude, this basic presupposition, that underlies all the traditional forms and orders of Christian worship.

#### THE CONSUMER MENTALITY

Having considered the traditional attitude toward Christian worship, let us now turn to the other pole: the society in which all Christian churches in the U.S. presently find themselves. If we want to understand any society's attitudes and ideals, one place where the modern mind can perceive them most clearly is in that society's popular heroes, those whose lives are celebrated in story, song, dance, and drama. During the Middle Ages, for example, the popular heroes were either saints, who exemplified what it meant to be Christian, or knights, who upheld the ideals of chivalry. This is not to say that everyone in the Middle Ages was a saint or a knight at heart, but rather that those were the ideals to which the majority of people subscribed; that was the way most people thought that life ideally ought to be lived.

Who are our present-day heroes? If you want to know the answer to that question, you need go no further than the *Parade* magazine section of your local Sunday newspaper. That publication reveals that our popular heroes are actors or sports figures, that is, entertainers. Our society is largely conditioned to receive passively what pleases and gratifies us, and to idolize those who perform this service for us. This is true in part because the mass media (radio, TV, films) have exerted great pressure on our society to be consumers: "getters" or "takers" instead of givers. The most blatant examples of this are the commercials that assert: "You owe it to yourself . . ." or "You're worth it!" Furthermore, our heroes are constantly parading before us blatantly selfish, consumerist sorts of behaviors: casual sex, marital infidelity, the use of drugs, and various sorts of conspicuous consumerism (cars, fashions, etc.).

#### TENSION BETWEEN THE TWO ATTITUDES

It is obvious that anyone who adopts the consumer worldview and life-style, is going to be left cold by religious observances that make demands instead of offering immediate

rewards. Let me hasten to qualify this statement by saying that we ought never to understand it in terms of absolutes, good or bad. In the first place, the enjoyment of the good things of this world ought not be considered a bad thing; only when we idolize them do they become pernicious. Furthermore, we need to recognize that some areas of our lives may be affected by a consumer mentality to a much greater degree than others; human beings can be very irrational animals! After the statement has been qualified, though, it bears repeating: *anyone who adopts the consumer worldview is going to be left cold by religious observances that make demands instead of offering immediate rewards.* Furthermore, it is obvious that worship practices designed for the consumer mentality are likely to differ radically from those of traditional Christian worship.

-Christians have traditionally developed types of worship that strive for the best (since only the best is good enough to return as a gift to a God who gives us everything); in doing this, it is inevitable that objective high standards have come to be established, valued, and adhered to.

-The consumer attitude is drawn toward a type of worship that pleases the consumer, that gratifies *me*, that make *me* feel good, that gives *me* a high. It celebrates a consumer's god who is friendly and undemanding, who exists largely to fulfill the demands and desires of those who worship.

#### EFFECTS ON CHURCH MUSIC

How does all of this affect church music? At present in the church, the tension between the traditional Christian attitude and the con-

sumer attitude is felt nowhere more strongly than in making music. True, that tension strongly influences all worship practices—but among those, music is both the most conspicuous and the most drastically affected. This tension has actually been evident for a good long while (at least a century or more), but is now becoming even more intense.

The traditional Christian view has given us a heritage of church music. J.S. Bach's organ music, for example, does not find its place in worship primarily because of its entertainment value. It is "the best," and those who perform it in worship are giving their best, not only in the music itself, but in the time and talent required to offer it. It is the same with the heritage of hymns (right up to Fred Pratt Green, Brian Wren, and Jaroslav Vajda) or with the choral music of the church (right up to Hindemith, Britten, and Pinkham). In supporting and promoting these kinds of music making, the Christian community at worship has given concrete expression to its intention to offer its best in worshiping God: not only the finest creations of talented theologians, poets, and musicians, but the effort and energy (both physical and mental) it takes to perform and to sing them, and to do those things well.

The consumer viewpoint, on the other hand, seeks what sounds good, what immediately gratifies, what makes me feel good, what gives me a high. It is normally uninterested in that which demands mental and physical attentiveness and energy. In our culture, that sort of music for worship will inevitably bear a marked resemblance to the musical fare served up in the mass media—radio, TV, films, and music videos—because

the music industry is very skilled at knowing and pleasing the tastes of its audiences, and at providing mindless entertainment that anesthetizes, that lulls people into an unreal world of artificial emotional highs and a false sense of security and well-being. Denominations that earlier in the 20th century have tended to reject such tactics are now coming to see them as the normative approach for evangelizing a society that is increasingly suspicious of or indifferent toward the church (any organized religion). Here, for example, is an excerpt from a recent issue of *Jubilate! A Newsletter for United Methodist Musicians* (Special Issue 1991):

Regarding baby boomers, according to *Discipleship Trends* newsletter, "The most commonly expressed need is for a warm, accepting fellowship that helps them feel needed and wanted. They look for a friendly, non-judgmental congregation that is open to new ideas and new people. Emphases on traditional denominational beliefs and practices or liturgically correct worship services are of secondary interest to them" ("Our Missing Generation," by Warren J. Hartman, *Discipleship Trends*, August 1987, Vol. 4, No. 4). It also states that the constant question among baby boomers is, "How can my faith help me get through the next week?" and "What does the Christian faith (or the church, or the Bible) say that will help me this week?" In the document, "Reaching the Baby Boomers," the section dealing with music and worship gives the following suggestions: "As this is a generation that grew up with radios in the car and in their room at home, provide quality music that the baby boomers can sing. Because of the demand for emotional expression, choose music that moves the soul. Variety in music will also be important. It is acceptable to use music from earlier centuries. It is acceptable and imperative that modern music

also be used . . . Because baby boomers grew up on rock and roll music, use gospel rock music that is related to the music of the 1950s and 1960s in its beat and tempo . . .”

Statements such as these make it clear that the chief difference between the consumer attitude and the traditional Christian attitude toward worship does not lie fundamentally in musical style or in the use of specific instruments (such as the organ). Although musical style is related at some level to the choice of one or the other attitude, nevertheless both viewpoints can and do experiment with and accept a variety of musical styles and instruments. In fact the difference does not lie in music at all; rather it proceeds from a fundamentally different conception of what worship is about (and worship is in turn a faithful reflection of the church's values).

Statements such as these also make it clear that, taken to extremes, the two attitudes (traditional and consumer) are, at their roots, incompatible. Therefore, to the degree that a church subscribes to a consumer mentality, traditional Christian music and ways of making music (especially demanding, unfamiliar music of the Christian heritage) are going to be incompatible with the style of worship that it develops to express its faith. There is plentiful evidence of this happening all around us. Within the last year I have received publicity about two events in the community in which I live:

—A large and striking poster arrived, announcing the coming of a traveling Christian musical production, *Celebration of Christmas*. The performers featured on the poster are recognized in Lutheran circles: they are

Christian entertainers, and the music they sing is indistinguishable (except in its text) from that of the mass media. I suspect that they would be the first to insist that what they do is primarily Christian entertainment and not worship; but the step from the stage to the chancel is a small one, and in many places it has already been taken. Consider this statement by the Rev. Walther P. Kallestad, pastor of the Lutheran Community Church of Joy in Glendale, Arizona:

The key to reaching our world with the “good news” of Jesus is entertainment evangelism . . .

. . . Christians should design Sunday nights for themselves and turn the morning over to evangelistic outreach. The reason most churches do not grow and, in fact, begin to decline is because they are unwilling to put the needs of the lost ahead of their own.

Sunday mornings they sing hymns only traditional Christians know. They use religious language that only Christians can understand . . . Churchy rites and rituals are practiced. Sure, much of our traditional heritage has meaning and value—but only to those who understand by having been indoctrinated to it.

If we are absolutely honest—what most churches do on Sunday morning is not working. We can give profound theological reasons why we “have to do” what we do. However, if what we are doing doesn't work, let the Spirit show us new and different ways to reach people with the “good news” of Jesus Christ.

Entertainment-oriented churches are growing . . . When people come to Community Church of Joy on Sunday morning, they have fun. We may have a stage band, comedians, clowns, dramas, mini-concerts and productions, high energy choreography, as well as many other entertainment forms . . .

. . . If Jesus were here today walking the face of the earth, he would without a doubt use the No. 1 medium of the day to tell his story. Jesus

would become all things to all people to save some. He would use entertainment (Walther P. Kallestad, “Entertainment Evangelism,” *The Lutheran*, May 23, 1990, p. 17).

—Postcards arrived announcing the formation of a new church, the Harvest Community Church, that met for the first time on October 27 of last year in a large, “upscale” downtown hotel. The first card featured the headline: “Music makes the difference!” and continued: “At Harvest Community Church we want to make our Sunday service appeal to you. That's why we have replaced the organ with an electric piano, guitars, and a drum machine. While we were at it, we exchanged the 18th-century-style music for some up-to-date beats that you can relate to . . . “You'll love the difference . . .” A subsequent postcard featured a smiling young woman in a party hat, surrounded by balloons and streamers, eyeing a pamphlet whose prominent title read: “You are a winner!”

No one's crystal ball is at this point equipped to reveal what the outcome of these changes or the tensions they have created will be. It seems likely, however, that they will elicit at least two radically different responses in the future:

#### CHURCHES MUST CHOOSE

As each local church attempts to exercise its ministry to the present age, at least two forces or constituencies will be at work shaping the directions that ministry will take. One constituency, sensing that the church's present worship life is inadequate to support its continued existence or growth, will press to evangelize new members by accommodat-

ing worship practices to the consumer mentality. A second constituency will take seriously Marshall McLuhan's dictum, "The medium is the message." Having concluded that the consumer mentality is inherently at odds with the fundamental intent of the Christian gospel—the way of discipline, the way of the cross—this second constituency will seek to strengthen ties in some way with traditional attitudes and practices of Christian worship. The pressures these two forces exert will call for choices in direction: a decision to minister to people "where they are" (i.e., some sort of accommodation to the consumer mentality); a decision to live out the way of the cross in a fundamentally secular, anti-Christian society (i.e., a more rigorous pursuit of the intent of traditional Christian worship); or (most difficult of all) an attempt to straddle these two divergent paths in the hope of finding some way to reconcile them.

Each of the choices just named offers its own rewards and challenges. The church that adopts a consumer-oriented approach to ministry will reap immediate rewards. It will begin to display all the outward signs of success: it will seem more vibrant and vital, more spiritually alive; it will grow, and its financial situation will improve markedly. Its challenges are less immediately obvious. Since reflective people (especially people who are theologically aware) are normally repelled by the most blatant excesses of the consumer attitude, the consumer-oriented church may experience a "brain drain," an exodus of people (including talented, committed musicians) who might have offered it theological (and musical) stability. Furthermore, the "consumer-dragon's" appetite for

novelty is insatiable, and an exponentially escalating demand for novelty breeds not only an unhealthy competitiveness among churches, but the kind of burnout that leads to a cynical attitude about religion in general.

The church that holds ever more tenaciously to the tradition of Christian worship will immediately experience its greatest challenge: survival. Over the long term, though, those traditionally oriented churches that make it will have a constant struggle against developing such a strong sense of being "in the world but not of the world" that they become insular and (even worse) self-righteous. The potential rewards lie in a lively awareness of the communion of saints and in a secure sense of direction and purpose grounded in an unshakable heritage. Sensitive church musicians are likely to find a sympathetic hearing in traditionally oriented churches, and therefore some traditional church music making will surely survive, if on a smaller scale than previously.

The church that seeks to harmonize the two directions has perhaps the greatest challenge of all: finding ways to reconcile two totally alien world views without eviscerating the less immediately enticing of the two. It seems inevitable that such a church will need to show great concern for "packaging its product," so that worship practices are retained not merely for traditional or sentimental reasons, but because they still have potential as bearers of the gospel. This means that the notions of "quality" and "the best" have to be given new form and content. There are clear challenges for church music in this process: discovering what has musical substance as

well as theological durability, coupled with enough immediate appeal to be accessible to a circle wider than that of the cognoscenti. Churches that are successful in forging this middle way will reap a reward commensurate with their challenge: they will become the evangelists of the modern age.

#### MUSICIANS MUST CHOOSE

For musicians who maintain any allegiance to traditional Christian worship (for emotional or intellectual reasons, or for both), these new developments are a mixed blessing. On the positive side, feelings and inclinations that have long been latent will tend to come into sharper focus, and old, vague dissatisfactions will be compelled into resolution by action. On the negative side, some church musicians may find themselves caught in the middle. Specifically, they may find that the churches they have served faithfully for many years (and to which they may have considerable emotional ties) are moving in new directions. If that happens, they may be thrown into a period of great turmoil in their lives. The church around them will begin to display all the outward signs of success, but many of their inner assumptions about worship will be violated, and many of the musical values that they have cultivated and held dear will be ignored or rejected.

Some church musicians may conclude that the changes in worship are all for the better, are imperative, or at least are inevitable. They will find it within themselves to suppress or dismiss former preferences, assumptions, and practices, and find new allegiances that will allow them to be caught up in and to rejoice in the new growth and vitality they experience around them. Other musicians may come to the conclusion that God does not call them to be successful, God calls them only to be faithful; or, more precisely, that they are called to define their success in terms of their faithfulness. These musicians will discover the inevitable cost of radical faithfulness: the way of the cross, of discipleship, of discipline. Finally, some musicians may decide that they have a duty not only to the faith of their forebears, but also to the call to minister to the present world in which they live. These people must face the possibility that the present age will judge their ministry inconsequential, and that their efforts will bear no fruit. Yet having chosen the greater challenge, they have grounds to hope for a commensurate reward.