

Church On the Rise

Why I am not a
“Purpose-Driven” Pastor

By Larry DeBruyn
Guarding His Flock Ministries
www.guardinghisflock.com

Dedication

This book is dedicated to the pastors, leaders, and members of churches everywhere who, like me, are uncomfortable with doing church according to a seeker-sensitive, user-friendly, and audience-driven paradigm of ministry. May this book help define why in good conscience, we do not agree with the means and methods that many evangelical churches employ in building and conducting their ministries.

“THE NEW SCHOOL PREACHER”

“This year, 1837, J. T. Mitchell was appointed to the Jacksonville station, and we had a blessed revival of religion in the station, and a number were added to the Church. At one of our quarterly meetings there was a minister who was what was called a New-School minister, and he was willing to work any where. When the mourners presented themselves at the altar of prayer, he would talk to them, and exhort them to “*change their purpose*,” and assured them that all who *changed their purpose* were undoubted Christians. I plainly saw he was doing mischief, and I went immediately after him [Cartwright counseled the mourners after him], and told them [the mourners] not to depend on a *change of purpose* in order to become a Christian, but to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ with a heart unto righteousness, and they should be saved. Thus I had to counteract the false sentiments inculcated by this New-School minister. It is very strange to me to think these educated and home-manufactured preachers do not understand the plain, Bible doctrine of the new birth better. They say man is a free agent in so far as to *change his purpose*, and in *changing his purpose* he is constituted a new creature. Thus he makes himself a Christian by his own act without the Spirit of God.”¹

¹ *Italics Mine*, Peter Cartwright, *Autobiography of Peter Cartwright: The Backwoods Preacher*, W.P. Strickland, Editor (Cincinnati, OH: Cranston and Curts, or New York, NY: Hunt and Eaton, 1856): 369.

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Preface

In November of 2006, while teaching at the Word of Life Bible Institute in the village of Tóalmás, Hungary, I suffered a major heart attack. Before going unconscious during my emergency ride to the nearest hospital in Budapest, several thoughts passed through my mind. One, I was dying in a far away country, and I was going to see Jesus. Amidst the excruciating pain, I called upon the Lord to take me. It turned out that my heart had to be defibrillated seven times during the hour and a half it took the E-Unit to get me to a hospital. Two, if I died I would not be able to tell my wife and sons that I loved them. Three, I would not have the opportunity to bid farewell to my brothers and sister, to my many friends, and to the beloved congregation that I have pastored in Indianapolis, Indiana, for twenty-one years. And four, I would not finish the book I was working on at the time.

After that day in early November, I was hospitalized a total of eight times, undergoing three heart catheterizations, and having an ICD and pacemaker installed under the skin beneath my left shoulder. During a “sickness sabbatical” from the church I was pastoring at that time, I determined to finish the book I was working on at the time of my heart attack. This is the book.

Admittedly, this writing provides no endorsement for the message and methods of ministry so prevalent among today’s evangelical churches, being especially critical of the new liturgy of worship that finds its centerpiece in contemporary Christian music (CCM). Unashamedly, I embrace and defend traditional evangelical worship, which includes among other elements, prayer, expository preaching of the Bible, and singing songs and choruses that glorify the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 2:42; Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16).

Some might ask why, after thirty-seven years of pastoral ministry, I wrote this book. I know that I am swimming against the current of ministry that prevails in Christendom today. I do not expect that this book will have any more significance than the small ripples created by throwing a stone from a sandy beach into Lake

Michigan, where I spent many delightful days of my youth. But I wrote this book to glorify God and honor His Word.

To explain my resistance to the modern ways of doing church, I wrote the book for members of the three churches I either ministered in or pastored for over forty years. I also wrote to encourage the members and pastors of smaller congregations worldwide—churches that for whatever reason will never become mega-churches—to stick with the Word, to “keep the most important thing the most important thing.”

The title of this book is *Church on the Rise*. The title is taken from Jesus’ *Parable of the Leaven* in Matthew 13:33. An explanation as to why this title was chosen can be found in Appendix One at the end of the book. The subtitle of the book is, “Why I Am Not a ‘Purpose-Driven’ Pastor.” I have researched and written this book to objectively explain to myself and others why I am discomfited by the philosophy of church ministry that is so pervasive in and among today’s evangelical churches.

I must also admit to having become disenchanted with the American evangelical movement. On this point, I assure my readers that I still believe . . . I repeat, I still believe the “Evangel,” the good news of justification by faith in Jesus’ substitutionary atonement for my sins and the Lord’s resurrection from the dead (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). However, in recent years I have become uncomfortable with much of what has gone on, and what goes on, in the name of evangelicalism. This volume explains the reasons for my discomfiture.

Allow me to draw attention to the book’s format. For the honor of God’s Word and convenience of the reader, I have included many Bible verses in the book’s text. For easy access to the reader, I have also placed endnotes with comments at the conclusion of each chapter rather than in mass at the end of the book. Should any readers be interested in the book’s documentation, this positioning should help to facilitate their inquiry. I have concluded the book by attaching three appendices that explain the title of the book and deal with trends evident in the evangelical movement; namely seductive dance and “feel good” music.

Some thanks are in order in the writing of this book. First, I want to thank the Lord for preserving my life so as to allow me to complete the task. I thank Margie, my beloved wife of forty-four years, for tolerating my preoccupation in writing the volume. I also want to thank my friend, Pastor Robert C. Gifford of Dale City, Virginia, for his input and encouragement. Proverbs 27:17 says, “Iron sharpeneth iron; so a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend.” Since the 1960s, my friend has “sharpened” and encouraged me. In her memory, I thank my Aunt Leona Hertel (1917-2009) for the editing skills she brought to bear upon the manuscript, as well as others who proof read parts of the manuscript and offered their encouragement and suggestions on how to improve the grammar, the clarity, and literary flow of the book. I am grateful to my cousin’s husband Bill Howison for designing the book’s cover. But in the end, I accept that I am responsible for the book’s contents and any misjudgments or errors it contains. For this writing I will account to Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 5:10).

Larry DeBruyn, October 2007, and February 2013

ONE

Introduction

God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in *His* Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world.¹

Hebrews 1:1-2

A mystical maze has settled on our land. Fuzzy thinking is the order of the day. The Good Ship Evangelicalism is sailing without rational rudders in the hazy sea of subjectivity.²

Dr. Norman L. Geisler

Mega-church Christianity is on the rise in America. Today such churches number more than 1,200 in the United States. That's over double the number that existed seven years ago, and well over one-half of these congregations are considered "evangelical." The recent rise of the mega-church can perhaps be attributed to the visibility and popularity of Rick Warren and his Purpose-Driven movement. Rick Warren is a Southern Baptist who leads the 30,000 member Saddleback Church in California. Because of Warren's laid-back personality, disarming disposition, leadership style, and success, thousands of pastors have been attracted to his Purpose-Driven strategy of doing church. Frequently Rick Warren has appeared on CNN's *Larry King Live*, and Fox News devoted an hour-long special about the man and his ministry. He has emerged to become known to many as America's pastor, and in that capacity, he has even counseled President George W. Bush. His influence is growing not only nationally, but internationally as well.

Ministry and Industry

Having sold over 26 million copies, Warren's book *The Purpose Driven Life* (PDL), a 40-day "how to" guide on spirituality, is the all-time best selling non-fiction book.³ Seven years before the

PDL, Rick Warren wrote *The Purpose Driven Church* (PDC), a manual intended to guide local churches through the changes necessary to affect numerical growth by applying what he calls the five “fundamental purposes” to church life: worship, fellowship, discipleship, ministry, and evangelism.⁴ Through his Internet website *Pastors.com*, Warren helps to manage the ministries of over 10,000 affiliated pastors and churches by offering advice, distributing sermons, and selling teaching materials. He has become the guru of growth for struggling congregations and their pastors. Additionally, Warren’s Purpose-Driven ministry hosts “how to” workshops for thousands of budding young pastors every year. Warren’s influence has eclipsed that of other evangelical mega-church pastors. Through his business savvy and acumen, the Purpose-Driven movement has risen to become a multi-million dollar business that is the envy of many corporate executives.

But on many counts, the Purpose-Driven methods contradict biblical principles of church ministry. As such, the church-growth movement illustrates much of what is, I believe, wrong within the evangelical movement. Secular management methods have usurped principles of biblical-spiritual leadership and have eclipsed the ministry of the Word. Therefore, I have chosen not to affiliate myself, or the congregation I pastor, with the Purpose-Driven movement. Additionally, for reasons to be explained in this book, I no longer identify with an evangelical movement that is being seduced by the worldly spirit of this age.

The “E-word”

American evangelicalism is in trouble. In a play on words, the headline of one major newspaper article read: “Evangelical: Can the ‘E-word’ be saved?”⁵ Today the movement consists of such a wide variety of professing Christians who espouse such a broad spectrum of beliefs, and who engage in such a wide variety of spiritual practices within and without the church, that the moniker is meaningless.

Some years ago James Montgomery Boice (1938-2000) made the following observation about the evangelical movement:

What has hit me like a thunderbolt . . . is the discovery that what I had been saying about liberal churches at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s now needs to be said about evangelicals too. A few years ago Martin Marty . . . said in an interview that in his judgment by the end of the [twentieth] century evangelicals would be “the most worldly people in America.”⁶

Apparently, the “E-word” cannot be saved because the evangelical movement is already lost.

Confession of an “Ex-evangelical”

Though for informational purposes I occasionally read *Christianity Today*, the flagship magazine of evangelicalism, sometime within the last several years I became discomfited by the label “evangelical,” and decided I no longer desired to be associated with the movement.

No longer did I identify with the pragmatism that pervades evangelicalism, pragmatism that as promoted by the Willow Creek and Saddleback models of ministry, sees pastors and congregations script their worship services according to a user-friendly, seeker-sensitive, and audience-driven paradigm of ministry. As the online Internet German magazine *Spiegel* states,

The megachurches mushrooming in the United States are mammoth feel-good temples providing entertainment for one and all.⁷

No longer could I agree with the self-appointed spokesmen of evangelicalism as, more often than not, I found myself disagreeing with both the tact and substance of what they said on my behalf in media interviews. Well-known evangelical leaders were not speaking for me. Recent moral scandals that have dishonored God’s Word, and discredited the movement, have only increased my discomfort with the “E-word.” There’s a disconnection between the public profession and private persona of too many evangelical leaders, religious and political. Mark Bailey,

the President of Dallas Theological Seminary, has reportedly stated that the name “evangelical” is taking a beating because “people who preach values in its name didn’t live up to their values in their actions and politics.”⁸

No longer did I identify with evangelical pastors and authors who employ emotive stories and “how to” lists to help comfort and guide their audiences and readers to achieve a well-adjusted life. As *Spiegel* notes again,

Megachurches sell the Christian faith as the (only) path to a better, happier life. And American suburbia is lapping up this new brand of spiritual comfort food.⁹

One popular pastor-theologian announced to his Sunday congregants, “The church should keep its nose out of politics and refrain from framing sexual questions in moral terms.”¹⁰ Maybe the church should keep its nose out of politics, but should the church quit “framing sexual questions in moral terms”? To their credit, a large number of people left Gregory Boyd’s church. More ominously however, the vast majority stayed. One can only wonder whether such moral regression, the inability “to discern between good and evil,” is attributable to the steady diet of spiritual comfort (junk?) food that has been fed to evangelicals over the last few decades. In words that may be appropriate to those caught up in this pervasive pop spirituality, the author of Hebrews chided,

For though by this time you ought to be teachers . . . you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes *only* of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil (Hebrews 5:12-14).

Fewer and fewer evangelicals, it seems, are able to discern between moral “good and evil.”

No longer could I identify with the new liturgy of worship that allots 40-45 minutes for upbeat music by worship teams consisting of lead singers, drums, guitars and electric organs, thereby preempting the expository preaching of the Bible. One Colorado reporter states:

Traditionalists may cringe, but contemporary worship proponents say it's about outreach. We live in a consumer culture, they say, and you have to give the people what they want.¹¹

In like manner, Bob Langlois of the Colorado Springs based company Audio Analysts says, “Christians, they want to have fun. And church is fun again.”¹²

No longer could I identify with church-growth gurus who, having set themselves up as experts, dispense their management savvy to transition what they consider to be struggling traditional churches into successful contemporary ones, and in the process, discredit, divide, and even destroy some smaller congregations.

No longer could I agree with the self-centered “positive and possibility” (P&P) messages in which pastors provide human-interest stories that pretend to guide people to success in this life while in view of the next life, ignore the existence of sin and the necessity of human repentance and divine forgiveness. As an internet magazine reported about one of Warren’s messages on whether people are talkers, feelers, doers, or thinkers,

[T]here’s more at stake here than didactic gimmickry. What’s really important is that the people feel understood . . . inside this cavernous temple with its wall-to-wall video screens, camera crews, live band and mixing console.¹³

Is the purpose of worship man-centered, that “people feel understood”? Does the Father no longer seek persons to worship Him “in spirit and truth” (John 4:23-24)?

No longer could I tolerate a “new legalism” in which pastors dispense to people their psychological advice and recovery

steps, but offer no declaration of the Gospel: that sin is “the” besetting human problem of our human condition (Mark 7:6-8, 14-23); that, as our penal substitute, Jesus died on the cross for our sins (1 John 2:2; 4:10; Romans 3:23-26); that Jesus was physically raised from the dead (1 Corinthians 15:1-57); that Jesus is the only way of salvation (John 14:6; Acts 4:12); that new life is imparted to the human heart through repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ (John 3:3-8; Acts 20:21); that, personally and physically, Jesus will come back to this earth to conclude human history (Acts 1:11); and that hell is a real place in the afterlife where all unbelievers are separated from God forever (Mark 9:42-50).

Popularity and Profits

In 1980, Jon Johnston wrote a book asking, *Will Evangelicalism Survive Its Own Popularity?*¹⁴ Apparently, that question has now been answered. Falling prey to its own success and wealth, and with no bedrock convictions like it used to possess, the evangelical movement appears to have lost its identity. Ministry has morphed into industry. Prophets are for profit, and maybe even like Balaam who “loved the wages of unrighteousness,” they are for hire (1 Peter 2:15). The profit motive can cause any of us in church leadership to wander “away from the faith” (1 Timothy 6:10). This may be happening to evangelicalism as its book publishers and music companies are profitable because their products are popular. Christian consumers are kings, and the world of evangelical publishers and churches offer them what they want.

A wide variety of leaders claim to have the answers for whatever seems to be ailing Christians and the church. Under the leadership of self-assured growth gurus, individuals and congregations flit from one spiritual fad to another—from traditional to contemporary to emergent spirituality—and masses follow. In a devotional titled “Riding the Bandwagon for Jesus,” W. Glyn Evans observed,

It is easy to follow a “bandwagon” for Jesus. He is often popular and widely acclaimed, and then I am strongly tempted to cash in on His popularity. Many

of our programs, our crusades, and our mission have a dash of Jesus about them, but they can also be ego trips or publicity splashes that promote me as a spiritual leader, a notable “man of God.” Jesus did not call me to be a leader; he called me to be a servant.¹⁵

To be candid, I believe that the evangelical church is too taken by fads. The evangelical community seems to get all excited over excitement, and when something becomes trendy, popular, and exciting, the first question that comes to mind is, “What’s wrong with it?” Christ’s call to self-denial and the Bible’s call to truth have never been popular with the hoi polloi; and no matter how the message is packaged, personalized, or privatized, biblical truth and spirituality will never be popular among the masses of post-moderns either. Healthy biblical teaching and living will only make sense to God’s elect (Ephesians 1:13-14).

Pollster George Barna recently discovered that although 38% of Americans consider themselves to be “evangelical,” only 9% of them actually agree with key evangelical beliefs, “whatever” those beliefs might be. In that nationwide survey of 4,014 adults conducted over a four-month period, it was discovered that “one out of every four self-identified evangelicals has not even accepted Christ as their savior.”¹⁶ This uncertainty of message is perpetuated by evangelical leaders and pastors who, in playing to the personalized and privatized spirituality of the post-modern mindset, deny biblical authority, downplay the importance of Bible doctrine, and question the definition and meaning of the Gospel.

Denying Biblical Authority

“Once upon a time” the Bible was central to the evangelical movement. But describing how biblical Christianity had once worked, influential young Pastor Rob Bell and his wife Kristen told *Christianity Today* how church suddenly turned “small” for them. Rob, who leads the Mars Hill Bible Church in Western Michigan, related how he and his wife began questioning their assumptions about the Bible. They told reporter Andy Crouch how they began “discovering the Bible as a human product” rather than

the product of divine fiat. “The Bible is still the center for us,” says Rob, “but it’s a different kind of center. We want to embrace mystery, rather than conquer it.”¹⁷ Obviously the oft repeated phrase “it is written,” as employed by Jesus and Paul in their debates and discussions, is of little consequence to the Bells who would rather “embrace mystery”—whatever that means—than the clear statements of God’s Word.

Downplaying Doctrine

“Once upon a time” Bible doctrine helped define the evangelical movement. But as Rick Warren *promotes* a pop spirituality that comforts and unites all people, he *demotes* the importance of Bible doctrine that might prove uncomfortable or divisive. In both of his purpose books, *The Purpose Driven Church* (PDC) and *The Purpose Driven Life* (PDL), he marginalizes, if not dismisses, the importance of doctrinal preaching and believing.¹⁸ He does so by asking questions and making assertions.

For example, in the PDL Warren guesses about what God will ask us at the judgment. He writes, “From the Bible we can surmise that God will ask us two questions”; the first question being, “*What did you do with my Son, Jesus Christ?*” and the second being, “*What did you do with what I gave you?*”¹⁹ The first question relates to a person’s salvation, while the second to his/her service. But then, Warren confidently asserts, “God won’t ask about your religious background or doctrinal views.”²⁰

Warren’s questions are right. For the stewardship of our lives, we will give an account to Jesus (2 Corinthians 5:10). But his assertions are mixed, one being right while the other is wrong. Religious backgrounds are not important. But doctrine does relate to Jesus’ person. He asked the disciples, “But who do you say that I am?” to which question Peter confessed, “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:15-16)? As the modern debate going on about His person and historicity indicates, doctrinal questions about Jesus arise.²¹

Why was He named Jesus (See Matthew 1:21.)? What does it mean that He is God’s Son (See Romans 1:4.)? Can a person become a Christian without believing Jesus was raised from the

dead (See Romans 10:9-10.)? The New Testament affirms that answers to these questions about Jesus, and more, are doctrinal! And if Jesus asked the disciples who they thought He was on earth, what assurance do we have that He won't ask us the same question before we go to heaven? In the end, how does Warren know what questions the Lord will, or will not, ask us?

It is true that the Christian faith is *more than* doctrinal knowledge, but assuredly as Paul's letters indicate, it is not *less than* doctrinal knowledge. The truth of Peter's confession is the foundation upon which the living Christ is building His church, of which He is the cornerstone and the Word of the apostles and prophets is the foundation (Ephesians 2:20; See 1 Peter 2:7.). The apostles' doctrine is the church's birthright (Acts 2:42). What a person believes is as important as whether a person believes.

Defining the Gospel

“Once upon a time” evangelicals knew what the gospel was. Yet emerging-church leader Brian McLaren has uttered this amazing statement. He said,

I don't think we've got the gospel right . . . What does it mean to be saved? . . . I don't think the liberals have it right. But I don't think we [evangelicals] have it right either. None of us has arrived at orthodoxy.²²

Is not Paul's simple declaration of the Gospel's substance orthodox and straight forward enough? (See 1 Corinthians 15:1-4. Compare Galatians 1:6-9.)? Depending upon how widespread such an opinion is among the “E-crowd,” Jeremiah's lament might be appropriate: “The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved” (Jeremiah 8:20).

A Good Word

The word “evangelical” is a good word, for it relates to the New Testament “evangel.” The evangel is good news in a bad news world. The gospel (the evangel or *euangelion*, which means beautiful

news) is the news that “denotes the good tidings of the Kingdom of God and of salvation through Christ, to be received by faith, on the basis of His expiatory death, His burial, resurrection, and ascension.”²³ At this juncture, a quotation from H.D. MacDonald is appropriate. He wrote:

The chief danger for the church is that it should have within it those who are not of the Gospel. This happens when the church becomes obsessed with niceness and numbers rather than with salvation and newness of life; when the church becomes a mere assemblage of once-born whose interest is in the humanitarian outflow of religion while being themselves without the experience of the church’s gospel. Such may indeed have a taste for higher things, but have no taste for the highest. They will consider Christianity to have good ideas, but they have no hold on divine truth. They will interpret Christianity as a way of life rather than the recasting of the soul and the church as a place to inspire unselfish deeds rather than the habitation of God.²⁴

If surveys, testimonies, and statements mean anything, we can only deduce that, from leaders to laity, evangelicalism appears to have increasing numbers of those within the movement who are not of the Gospel.

The face of evangelicalism has changed, but so too, I believe, has the movement’s heart. It is my view that in evangelicalism’s attempt to keep up with a debased and debasing culture, there will come a reckoning when the “relevant” church will be irrelevant to Christ. That will be a dangerous condition to be in, and for that matter, we may already be in that state as the ministry of the Word is under siege.

Because of the assumption that the consumer is king, church ministry is being manipulated through philosophies of human origin and design. Through marketing strategies and management savvy, promoters use entertaining gimmicks to attract audiences. All of this, and more, has replaced the exposition of the

Scriptures, of what stands “written.” In March 2007 a reporter wrote in *The Gazette* of Colorado Springs,

It’s been said that God speaks in floods, in burning bushes, in a still small voice. But those methods are soooo B.C. This is the 21st century, people, and these days it’s wall-to-wall digital sound that snags attention.²⁵

He then goes on to say, “Today’s contemporary worship is where spectacle meets spirituality—prayer at 110 decibels and 720 dots per inch.”²⁶

Corporate Marketing and Church Ministry

In the early 1990s church leadership was informed that the church needed to change or die. To get baby boomers and their parents to buy into change, one leader compared the traditional church to the contemporary church by referring to one auto maker’s advertisement—“This is not your father’s Oldsmobile.”²⁷ The implication being, that like Oldsmobile, the evangelical church had better get with the modern technologies, styles, and consumer wants of the new generation, or die. While a classic Olds was good enough for the 1950s, it was no longer good enough for the 1990s. But questions must be asked about Leith Anderson’s Olds analogy. Does it follow that what is right in the manufacture of cars is also right for the ministry of churches? Does it mean that because it’s true for industry it’s also true for ministry? Apparently, many churches and pastors think it is.

So in accord with the Willow Creek and Saddleback models of ministry, the church got a face lift. Thousands of pastors and congregations followed the new principles and practices of doing church. Personally, I was never comfortable with those ministry models. Even the descriptive phrases—seeker-sensitive, user-friendly, and audience-driven—appeared at odds with the biblical model of ministry. After all, where in the New Testament do we find that the purpose of the church is to make unbelievers and believers feel spiritually comfortable? The ministry motive of

the prophets, John the Baptist, Jesus, and the apostles was never to make their hearers feel at ease.

But to return to the Olds analogy, we all know what happened to Oldsmobile, don't we? General Motors phased that automobile division out of production. Though the technology and style of the car changed, the quality did not remain the same. Foreign competition coupled with corporate mismanagement caused GM to discontinue production of Oldsmobile cars.

Might it be suggested that doctrinal shallowness and pastoral mismanagement could eventually "drive" evangelicalism out of business? As one observer notes about the state of evangelicalism in America,

Some believe that in our quest for numeric growth,
we have grown big but are shallow, producing an
American Christianity three thousand miles wide but
two inches deep.²⁸

While mega-church evangelicalism is currently riding a crest of popularity—business is good—one day it may be forced to pay the piper.

For lack of quality, could other religions and alternative spiritualities drive mega-church evangelicalism out of business? It happened in England. London is being Islamicized. On any given week, more people attend mosques than churches. Church buildings have been sold and turned into convenience stores, car washes, and restaurants. It's presumptuous for us to think that the same thing could not happen in America. It could, and although too little too late, this book is my protest against the cheapening of the Christian faith by a seeker-sensitive, user-friendly, and audience-driven philosophy of ministry that exchanges size and style for substance, thereby threatening the power of the unfettered Gospel to sustain the church.

The Smaller Church

There's nothing inherently wrong with being a small church. Small congregations were the rule of the apostolic era. In

church history small and independent congregations preserved the truth of the Gospel as they provided an alternative to more ecumenical bodies that had sacrificed truth for togetherness, growth, and size. Small and vital churches have been, and hopefully will remain, an important part of America's religious landscape. Such churches can be effective.

Obsessing over Success

To return to the automobile analogy, some churches are Cadillac congregations while others are like economy cars. I've always said that it doesn't matter how large the cars are that people drive, but only that they run well and get people where they need to go. The same goes for churches. The problem today is that Americans obsess around the goddess of success, and look down on small congregations. Unfortunately, when looking up at larger and apparently more successful churches, small congregations can develop an inferiority complex with its attendant self-doubts and fears. They can think they are ineffective. Many pastors and congregations find themselves being co-opted and outshined by larger ones in their neighborhood or region, especially as their members leave them for larger ministries that offer more services or attractions.

By way of analogy, the Wal-Mart way of doing church is driving a lot of "ma and pa" shops out of business. For the sake of growth, enormous pressure is brought to bear upon smaller congregations to follow the Willow Creek and Saddleback models of ministry. Sometimes the strategizing works for churches that dare to change, but more often it does not, with the fallout being that older and more traditionally-minded members leave, congregations split, and disillusioned and frustrated pastors resign.

In and according to the sovereign plan of God, there's nothing wrong with being small. Just as God uses all kinds of people in His ministry, so He uses all sizes of churches. God can use the mini-church as well as the mega-church. Size is indeterminate of success or effectiveness. Many missionaries and pastors are born, bred, and called into ministry in smaller churches.

Small churches can be ineffective, but if they are, it is not due to their size.

Heartfelt Thoughts

Perhaps as no other leader and organization, Rick Warren's Purpose-Driven philosophy seems to exert a monopolistic influence upon church ministry today. In the context of the greater evangelical movement, he's not only an icon of evangelical success whom many pastors seek to emulate, but he also espouses a philosophy of church ministry that represents what, I believe, is wrong with evangelicalism.

Although I agree with Pastor Warren's five purposes for a local church, and although I possess the same purpose of ministry that I had when I committed to the ministry thirty-seven years ago, I will not, for a number of reasons, align myself, or the church I pastor, with the Purpose-Driven movement. This book explains why I am reluctant to do so. But before explaining those reasons, I need to state some heartfelt observations about Rick Warren.

First of all, in the interviews I have observed on CNN and Fox, I have observed Pastor Rick Warren to be a very amiable fellow. In a media-driven age he possesses a persona, charisma, and confidence that attract people to him. Often he gives cool answers to hot questions. Most other pastors would not fare as well on the hot seat as he has. Sometimes his answers to the interviewer's trick questions are biblically direct and correct. But at other times, I find his answers indirect and incorrect.

Second, with his managerial acumen, Rick Warren leads a mega-church. I do not. Some might dismiss my reservations about Purpose-Driven by accusing that I am jealous of him. Admittedly, pastors can feel envy upon seeing the success of others, but such feelings are sin. Long ago I adapted the words of John the Baptist who, upon hearing that Jesus' disciples were baptizing more disciples than he was, said, "A man can receive nothing, unless it has been given him from heaven." Then the Baptist stated of his relation to Jesus' ministry, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:27, 30). I minister in the context of what heaven has given me. I must decrease as Jesus increases. Rick Warren is not my

competition (Philippians 1:15-18). I want to state that I harbor no jealous feelings toward Warren's apparent success, or, for that matter, the success of other pastors. Of the ministry in general, Paul counsels, "For we dare not . . . compare ourselves with some that commend themselves: but they measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise" (1 Corinthians 10:12, KJV). At 63 years of age, and after 38 years of teaching and pastoral experience, I am quite at peace with the position and place that God has assigned me in the work of His kingdom. In the end, the Lord will judge all pastors on account of their faithfulness to Him.

Third, I have read remarks about Rick Warren that are mean-spirited and attack him personally. I do not want my arguments against the Purpose-Driven philosophy of ministry to be construed in that way. My issues with him are not personal, but rather concern the philosophy of ministry he espouses, leads other pastors and churches to adopt, and why I don't embrace it.

Fourth, I accept that Purpose-Driven has morphed from a ministry into an industry, and because it has, Rick Warren may not be in control of everything people say or do under the Purpose-Driven banner. While some criticisms may be appropriate for the administrative procedures and personnel that have accumulated around or are associated with Pastor Warren, they might not be applicable to him.

And finally, the greater issue about a Purpose-Driven ministry regards how it compares to the model of spiritual leadership set forth in the Scriptures.²⁹ As will be documented by referring to many biblical passages, serious issues surround the user-friendly, seeker-sensitive, and audience-driven philosophy of ministry that is espoused within the mega-church movement. In that my conscience is captive to the Word, I cannot, and will not, "drive" the congregation I pastor in the Purpose-Driven direction.

Some might accuse pastors like me of being too married to the traditional way of ministry. "He needs to get with the times," critics might say. In light of this criticism, an interesting phenomenon is taking place within evangelicalism.

Trending toward Traditionalism

Ironically, increasing numbers of evangelicals have become disaffected with pop worship and are defecting from contemporary congregations to the churches of traditional Christendom—to the Roman Catholic, to the Eastern Orthodox, and to other more historic, confessional, and liturgical denominations. Can any move, I ask, be more “traditional” than that? There are those who have tried contemporary worship, have found it spiritually vacuous, and are leaving it to engage the smells and bells and the mystical and monkish practices of historic Christendom.

Apparently, I am not alone in my reservations concerning the contemporary way of doing church. What goes around comes around . . . I guess. In light of this dissatisfaction and shift from the contemporary to emergent spirituality, I am forced to grapple with the question, “What was wrong with the old evangelical way of worship—praying, congregational singing, Scripture reading, expository preaching, and observing the ordinances—in the first place?” Perhaps we should take to heart the advice of Jeremiah. He counseled, “Thus saith the Lord, Stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where *is* the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls” (Jeremiah 6:16, KJV).

I am not a prophet, nor am I the son of a prophet. But like a prophet, I carry within my heart “the burden for the Word of the Lord.” In my life I resigned a profession to pursue a calling. This book has grown out of a prophet-like burden for the Word of the Lord which I share with many other pastors. I am concerned that, as they substitute methods for the message, many of today’s church leaders may lose their passion for the Word. All pastors ought to consider the question posed by a veteran pastor to a young and untried minister, “Was you sent, or did you just ‘went?’”

Allow me to state something regarding the method I have employed in writing this book. Some readers might quickly dismiss my exposé saying, “Well that’s just his opinion.” To counter such an accusation, I have deliberately flooded the book with witnesses other than myself. The Apostle Paul states, “In the mouth of two or three witnesses shall every word be established” (2 Corinthians 13:1). Therefore, my arguments have been developed by quoting

and intertwining diverse sources—often neither evangelical nor Christian—to expose and refute the fraud of what is going on in the name of evangelicalism. But my quoting of such witnesses should not be taken to mean that I agree with and endorse all of what they have written. Rather, I simply find support from them with the particular point they are addressing. Yet amidst all these witnesses, I confess Scripture to be my final authority. As the prophet said, “To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, *it is* because *there is* no light in them” (Isaiah 8:20, KJV). For reason of Scripture’s authority, and as a convenience to the reader, many Bible quotations are reproduced in the text of the book. Given the aggregate witness of the Word and other sources, the issues addressed in this book go well beyond my opinion.

So for those of you who comprise the congregation I presently pastor, and to any other pastors, leaders, and members of Bible-believing churches who might be interested in, or have reservations about, the ministry trends set by the evangelical megachurch movement, read along while I share reasons as to why I do not identify with these developments.

The fundamentalist-modernist controversy erupted during the 1920s over some of the same issues current among evangelicals today. During that era, whole denominations became infiltrated, permeated, and finally dominated by a liberal hierarchy. Today the same thing appears to be happening to evangelicalism, the difference being that liberalism is establishing itself in evangelicalism through the dominance of various personalities, their publicists, and their publishers.

A pastor’s responsibility is to guide, graze, and guard his flock. But as Paul admonished Timothy, it must be done “with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses *and escape* from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will” (2 Timothy 2:25-26). In love I shall attempt to speak the truth about a “Church on the Rise,” about an evangelical movement that is being permeated by leaven.³⁰ This book will attempt to document that

evangelicals are selling-out, sabotaging, sacrificing, smothering, and subverting the Word of God.

Chapter One Endnotes

¹ Unless otherwise noted, biblical quotations are taken from the *New American Standard Bible*, Updated Edition (Anaheim, California: The Lockman Foundation, 1995). Used by permission.

² Norman L. Geisler, "Foreword," Arthur L. Johnson, *Faith Misguided, Exposing the Dangers of Mysticism* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1988): 9. Since Geisler noted the problem of subjectivism within evangelicalism twenty years ago, the problem has become more pronounced.

³ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2002).

⁴ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995). The book's subtitle, *Growth Without Compromising Your Message & Mission*, indicates that Warren possessed sensitivity to compromise. But the pronoun "your" leaves the door open for any meaning that might be assigned to one's message and mission.

⁵ Cathy Lynn Grossman, "Evangelical: Can the 'E-word' be saved?" *USA TODAY*, March 16, 2007. Online at www.usatoday.com/news/religion/2007-01-22-evangelicals-usat_x.htm

⁶ James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Volume 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2001): 243.

⁷ Susanne Weingarten, "The Recipe for Success at American Megachurches," *Spiegel Online International*, April 3, 2007. Online at www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,474999,00.html

⁸ Grossman, "Evangelical."

⁹ Weingarten, "Recipe for Success."

¹⁰ Ibid. Gregory A. Boyd is best known as a theologian who promotes open theism. See *God of the Possible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000). Apparently open theism has led him to open morality.

¹¹ Paul Asay, "Religion: Techno Churches," *The Colorado Springs Gazette*, March 14, 2007. Online at www.gazette.com/onset?id=20164&template=article.html

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Weingarten, "Recipe for Success."

¹⁴ Jon Johnston, *Will Evangelicalism Survive Its Own Popularity?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1980).

¹⁵ W. Glyn Evans, *Daily With the King*, August 15 (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1979): 159.

¹⁶ Grossman, "Evangelical."

¹⁷ Rob and Kristen Bell quoted by Andy Crouch, "The Emergent Mystique," *Christianity Today*, November 2004, 38.

¹⁸ In his chapter “Developing Mature Members” in *The Purpose Driven Church*, Rick Warren writes of “Maturity Myth #6: All you need is Bible Study to grow.” He deridingly calls churches that focus upon doctrine “classroom churches” that stress a “left brain oriented” teaching of Bible content and doctrine, “but give little, if any emphasis to believers’ emotional, experiential and relational development.” (340). In *The Purpose Driven Life*, Warren disparages Bible doctrine by stating, “Today many assume that spiritual maturity is measured by the amount of biblical information and doctrine you know.” (183). Again he writes, “The Bible is far more than a doctrinal guidebook.” (186).

¹⁹ Rick Warren, *Driven Life*, 34.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ One irony of the evangelical band wagon effect is that author Lee Strobel who, while giving rave kudos to Warren’s *The Purpose Driven Life* on the one hand, finds himself burdened to defend the person of Jesus on the other. See his informative books *The Case for Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), and more recently, *The Case for the Real Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007).

²² Brian McLaren quoted by Crouch, “Emergent Mystique,” 40.

²³ W.E. Vine, “GOSPEL,” *The Expanded Vine’s Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, John R. Kohlenberger III, Editor (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1984): 497.

²⁴ H.D. McDonald, *The Atonement of the Death of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1985): 16.

²⁵ Asay, “Religion: Techno Churches.”

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Leith Anderson, *Dying for Change, An Arresting Look at The New Realities Confronting Churches and Para-Church Ministries* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1990): 13. In making analogy between his and his father’s church, Anderson explained, “My father and I share many common bonds, but our churches are as different as our cars. Between then and now, both the world and the church have changed dramatically.” (14). One of the differences noted by the author regarded the place that the sermon occupied in the Sunday service. Of his father’s suburban church, Anderson notes, “Services lasted ninety minutes, and the sermon filled most of that time” (14). In comparison, the author noted that in his suburban church, “Sunday services last sixty minutes, including a twenty-seven-minute sermon.” (14).

²⁸ Dick Staub, *The Culturally Savvy Christian* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2007), excerpted by Russ Breimeier, “Lite of the World,” *Christianity Today*, May 2007. Online at www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2007/may/28.66.html

²⁹ With all the books out and theories of leadership today, the one I have found most helpful is J. Oswald Sanders, *Spiritual Leadership*, Second Revision (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1994) 166 pages + Study Questions and Index of Scripture.

³⁰ An explanation of why leaven represents the permeation of evil into the church, and not the influence of good in the world through the church, is the subject of Appendix One in this book.

TWO

Corporate Marketing and Evangelicalism

Selling-out the Word

Unlike so many, we do not peddle [“corrupt,” KJV] the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God. (NIV)

You see, we are not like those hucksters—and there are many of them—who preach just to make money. (NLT, Paraphrase)

The Apostle Paul, 2 Corinthians 2:17

Megachurches use innovative packaging to sell religion. It’s user-friendly, practical, authentic, and modern. The Christian is the customer. They have learned a thing or two from shopping malls and big business. They woo their target group with a heavy dose of entertainment, sophisticated technology, wall-to-wall ideas for success at home and at work, and a spring-in-your-stride message that everything’s good.¹

Susanne Weingarten

Nothing succeeds like success, and our culture celebrates, even worships, “success.” Presumably that is why Rick Warren occupies such an influential position within the evangelical movement today, and it explains how his Purpose-Driven philosophy of ministry has taken churches by storm. By any human or societal criteria, Warren appears to be a winner, and everybody loves a winner. As the media pumped Billy Graham as “America’s evangelist” in the previous generation, from *Larry King Live* to Fox News, the media promotes the likeable Warren as “America’s minister.”

Several years ago at the height of Michael Jordan’s basketball career, there were shoe commercials exhorting kids, “Be like Mike!” Now, at the height of the Purpose-Driven movement, pastors are exhorted, “Be like Rick!” or, local churches, “Be like Saddleback!” Rick Warren’s notoriety is not all his doing. In part,

he's a bigger-than-life media creation who has become somewhat of an icon for an evangelical sub-culture that obsesses over success and, as Warren's best-selling book *The Purpose Driven Life* is being translated into different languages, the obsession appears to be spreading to other countries and cultures as well.

The Small Church

The reality is that even if they wanted to, most pastors cannot be like Rick, and most churches cannot be like Saddleback. If they tried, outsiders would soon discover them to be inauthentic. God doesn't clone all pastors alike, or stamp every local church from one philosophical or managerial cookie cutter. Each pastor and church is unique, and no matter how small the church might be, by God's grace it can be dynamic in its own right.

Not all churches are constituted or destined to be large churches. Little churches face challenges and restrictions—location, deteriorating neighborhoods, transient members, limited financial resources, short-lived pastorates, immature membership—that large congregations and their leadership neither appreciate nor understand. Being what they are, many small congregations are not situated, positioned, or constituted to become Saddlebacks or Willow Creeks, and for them to think otherwise is not realistic. By divine design, these churches minister where they are, and by accepting their God-given status, they can be freed from the intrusion and illusion of the American “success syndrome.” And being freed from that pressure, mini-churches can find exhilaration of ministry in the place where the sovereign God has placed them, ministering to the precious souls within the neighborhood where they are stewards in the kingdom of heaven.

Pastoral Ego

After graduating from a seminary where one “success story” after another—of how to become the leader of a successful ministry—was paraded before the student body, I needed some time and spiritual maturity to adjust to the idea that, by worldly standards, I would never lead a large congregation and therefore, never be considered successful by others. At that level, pastoral ego

can prove difficult to deal with. In that context, I found Francis Schaeffer's words encouraging. He stated that in the work of God there are "no little people and no little places."² God only requires that His stewards be faithful, whether in large or small places (Matthew 25:14-30). As one pastor from a congregation located in a small, poor, and transient community mused,

The spiritual questions, as I see them, are "What is your sense of call? Can you be faithful yet not successful?"³

The answer to his last question is, "Yes!" According to worldly criteria of success, congregations and pastors can be faithful without being "successful." If Jesus' parables mean anything at all, they teach that the faithful are the successful.

I determined years ago that, just as there are many different sizes of automobiles, from luxury to compact, so there are different sizes of churches in different communities—inner city, suburban, small town, and rural. Whether large or small, luxury or compact, the only question becomes, are the churches, whatever or wherever they are, running well? In light of eternity, are churches being faithful to the Gospel message and assisting people to cultivate holiness in their lives?

Granted, little churches seem to have more spiritual problems than larger ones. But that's because in large ones it's easier to hide in a crowd. For better or for worse, peoples' problems tend to manifest themselves more openly in small congregations for the simple reason of intimacy—people know each other, warts and all!

Though it does not follow that mega-churches are necessarily bad churches, neither does it follow that mini-churches are failures. After all, most New Testament churches were small—the church at Rome being about 23 members (Romans 16:3-16). What is important is that the church is running well. The fact that a church is small does not mean it isn't vital. But as in Zechariah's time, we seem to live in a day when the evangelical world is

snubbing its nose at “small things” (Zechariah 4:10, KJV). One pastor of a small church in a small place remarked,

Not every pastor will receive a call to a growing, thriving, highly visible church. But Christ’s kingdom is still being served, by all types of clergy in all types of places.⁴

Amen!

Marketing Ministry

Amidst mementos, biblical inscriptions, and so forth in Rick Warren’s office, there reportedly hangs a sign with the following words:

What is our business?
Who is our customer?
What does the customer consider value?⁵

Owing to business and management savvy gleaned from seminars conducted by and personal consultations with the now deceased Peter Drucker, *Forbes* magazine once called Rick Warren’s first book, *The Purpose Driven Church*, “The best book on entrepreneurship, management, and leadership in print.”⁶ One aspect of Warren’s management technique has to do with the question, “Who is our customer,” or target?

From the first time I ever heard about “targeting” in the mid-1980s, I recoiled at the idea of aiming a ministry to grow a church by attracting a certain type customer, or homogenous group of people. I never accepted such profiling to be biblically correct.

To target one demographic group of a preferred social, economic, or age bracket, as opposed to all people, gives, I think, the wrong impression about the Gospel. Though I would never accuse Warren or other mega-church pastors of being anything other than embracing of all persons, the concept of the target audience appears elitist and discriminatory. God’s target includes people from every ethnic, national, and linguistic grouping, from every social, economic, and cultural background, and from every

age bracket, from the cradle to the grave. The Great Commission says, “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations” (Matthew 28:19). Churches ought to be inclusive, not exclusive.

John noted that heaven is populated with a redeemed multitude from “every nation and *all* tribes and peoples and tongues” (Revelation 7:9). To the church at Ephesus the Apostle Paul announced, “*There is* one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all” (Ephesians 4:4-6). The New Testament church was comprised of Spirit-baptized believers from all walks of life—from “the butcher to the baker to the candlestick maker.” Whether rich, poor, bond, free, male, female, young, old, Jews, or Gentiles, all were, upon conversion, made to drink of one Spirit thereby being united in one Body (1 Corinthians 12:13). Though heaven will be homogeneously comprised of God’s elect, the elect will be a heterogeneous group. And if that’s how it will be in heaven, why should the church target itself to be different on earth?

By apostolic order, the demographic grouping of the early church was heterogeneous, not homogenous. Churches may be ethnically homogenous (African-American, Caucasian, Korean, Chinese, etc.), but if they are homogenous by preference or restriction, if their attitude be “Us four and no more!” then such grouping is sin. Imagine if, in denial of the Abrahamic Covenant, the apostles had set the early church’s target audience to be strictly Jewish, and that the gospel should go only to Jerusalem and Judea, leaving out Samaria and “the remotest part of the earth” (Genesis 12:3; Acts 1:8; John 4:4; Ephesians 2:14-22). At the face of it, targeting a particular audience appears exclusory, and is therefore unbiblical, to say nothing about the fact that, given the instability of our society and culture, the target is always moving! The church is what it is for people who are what they are.

Big Business

Upon visiting Saddleback, one internet blogger provides the following impression:

I've been to Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, California. I can't deny that it's an impressive campus, but it reminds me of Jesus's [sic] adventures at the Temple. I'm struck with a "den of thieves" vibe whenever I see Bible study aids, donation requests and audio recordings of past lectures for sale. I'll wager even the moneychangers and merchants of sacrificial animals thought they were doing their part for Judaism, too. But commercialism is just that. Religion isn't supposed to be a business.⁷

Commendably, Warren practices inverse tithing. He keeps 10% and gives 90% of his immense profits to charitable organizations, whether they be his own or other causes. Admirably, he involves himself in social works to alleviate suffering and poverty, especially now in Rwanda (See James 2:15-16; 1 John 3:17; Deuteronomy 15:7; etc.).

Fire Marketing

But in accounting for Warren's meteoric rise in popularity, one must consider the role of pyro-marketing (*pyro* being the Greek word for "fire") in the phenomenal sales of *The Purpose Driven Life*.⁸ There are those who attribute the astounding sales of the book to the "fire marketing" technique devised by Greg Stielstra which he explains in his book, *PyroMarketing*.⁹ In general the theory goes something like this: Gather together the dry tinder, ignite it, fan the flame, watch the fire burn, and save some coals with which to ignite a future fire. In Warren's case, "fire marketing" played out like this: first, a network of 1000s of Purpose-Driven pastors and churches constituted the "dry tinder" that had been gathered together; second, to "ignite" the fire, Warren reportedly negotiated a significant discount from the publisher, Zondervan, for five-hundred thousand books that were "pre-sold" within the Purpose-Driven network; third, churches within the network "fanned the flame" by selling discounted copies of the book. In many instances, people bought multiple copies, gave them to friends and relatives, and, by word of mouth, recommended the book to others. Well-known evangelical leaders endorsed the book calling it "a classic on

the Christian life,” and stating it is “a masterpiece of wise counsel.”¹⁰ The book got hot, and became a national best-seller. For about three years it burned atop best-seller lists until the fire began to die out in the winter of 2004-2005 (the book dropped to number 54 on the *Amazon.com* bestseller list). But in March of 2005, an event took place that reignited the fire.

Rekindled

In March of 2005, Brian Nichols was on trial for rape in Atlanta. Somehow he overpowered a female guard, took her gun, killed a sheriff's deputy, and escaped, thereby setting off one of the biggest manhunts in recent history. The escaped prisoner eventually found Ashley Smith, a single mother, took her hostage, and hid from the police in her apartment. While in her apartment, Smith eventually evoked sympathy from Nichols by reading *The Purpose Driven Life* and the Bible to him. She convinced her captor that God still had a purpose for his life. But when the opportunity presented itself, Smith escaped. Afterwards, Nichols surrendered to law enforcement.

In the incident's aftermath, Ms. Smith received national media attention for the way in which she handled the life-threatening situation. Together with Rick Warren, Smith appeared on *Larry King Live* where before millions of viewers, she rehearsed the story of how she read Warren's book and the Bible to Nichols. The readings had seemingly softened the heart of the killer. Their curiosity piqued about the book's power to change a killer's life, millions of viewers purchased their copy. Within a few days, the book zoomed from 54th to 2nd on the *Amazon.com* bestseller list. The fire was rekindled as sales of *The Purpose Driven Life* jumped across evangelical boundaries to burn amongst the general population.

But what went unreported amidst the hoopla surrounding Nichols' killing of the sheriff's deputy, his escape, his taking Smith hostage, and his eventual surrender, was that not only did Smith read to him from *The Purpose Driven Life* and the Bible, but also gave him methamphetamine.¹¹ Apparently, Nichols had surrendered to law enforcement in a state of drug-induced euphoria. Today

Nichols is in prison. Reportedly, he has converted to Islam.¹² Of course, all of this was ignored by the Purpose-Driven camp and went unreported by the national media. *The Purpose Driven Life* continued to be credited for Nichols' surrender while the role the drug played in it was largely ignored and unreported.

To return to the pyro-marketing strategy, upon hearing that Zondervan was going to publish Stielstra's book, Rick Warren reportedly "pressured Zondervan to censor all references to his book [PDL], because he was concerned that it would make people think his phenomenal success was driven primarily by network marketing techniques."¹³ Pastor Warren stated,

The worldwide spread of the purpose-driven message had nothing to do with marketing or merchandising. Instead it was the result of God's supernatural and sovereign plan, which no one anticipated.¹⁴

Providence or Pyro-marketing?

Oh, really? Have the phenomenal sales of *The Purpose Driven Life* resulted from a fire-marketing strategy, or the sovereign working of God? Can anyone know for sure? Obviously, Rick Warren believes God sold his book (25 million copies). Greg Stielstra thinks his marketing strategy had much to do with the success of the book as well as the movie, *The Passion of the Christ* (900 million dollars in gross receipts in the first six weeks).¹⁵ Maybe the success is attributable to pyro-marketing, maybe to providence, or maybe to both. All the while, it is assumed that the phenomenal sale of the book is a movement of God. But how can we know that pyro-marketing did not originally ignite the book's sales, and later on, as the fire was dying out, the media coverage of the Nichols incident fanned the dying embers to become a national wildfire? In the end, neither Rick Warren nor Greg Stielstra knows the answer to the question. Only God knows.

In this scheme for creating best sellers and box-office smashes, factors are at work that blindside average pastors and Christians who do not understand what's really going on. We only

watch the fire burn. We only see the surface of the matter—the interviews, the advertising campaign, the talk-show comments, the media blitz, the rave reviews, etc. All the while, Christians are being manipulated by the marketers.

James Montgomery Boice (1938-2000) discerningly noted that,

The secular church is a church that is conformed to the world, as much of the contemporary church is. It is characterized by the world's wisdom, the world's theology, the world's agenda, and the world's methods. When the evangelical church becomes worldly, it may still be trying to do God's work, but it will be trying to do it in the world's way. It looks to the media and money rather than to God and his power to advance the gospel.¹⁶

There is a great danger for a ministry that morphs into an industry. When that happens, supposedly once Christian organizations orient themselves to the “bottom line.” That becoming the case, money possesses the power to corrupt ministry. By His example of throwing the money changers out of the temple and His warnings in the parables, Jesus warned of the corrosive and corrupting influence of wealth (Matthew 21:12; Luke 19:11-26). God's people should never become fortune seekers. The Bible warns, “For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows” (1 Timothy 6:10). In this verse Paul is not speaking about Wall Street. He is warning Christian leaders and teachers. He is warning all ministers that coveting money corrupts the ministry, and can cause us to err from the faith. Knowing that, Paul openly stated to the Corinthians,

Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God” (2 Corinthians 2:17, NIV).

The Wall Street Journal states that Rick Warren “has spawned an industry advising churches to become ‘purpose-driven.’”¹⁷ How many millions of dollars are we talking about? As one cynical blogger opines about clergy in general,

Rick Warren is no innovator. He’s just another pastor who treats Christianity like big business . . . and business is good.¹⁸

I for one do not care to contribute anything to the Purpose-Driven business and industry.

Transitioning a Local Church

How can a church be managed in its move from traditional to contemporary and Purpose-Driven? Though not officially affiliated with Purpose-Driven, but working according to the organization’s philosophy, the company Church Transitions Inc. instructs pastors on how to affect change from traditional to contemporary in their local churches. Some of the methods employed are underhanded. Others are highhanded.

A national newspaper reported that in one Church Transitions seminar, leaders and pastors were coached “to trust very few people with their plans.” Then they were warned, “All the forces of hell are going to come at you when you wake up that church.”¹⁹ Then in a seminar session called “Dealing with Opposition,” the leadership advised seminarians to,

. . . speak to critical members, [and] then help them leave if they don’t stop objecting. Then when those congregants join a new church . . . pastors should call their new minister and suggest that the congregants be barred from any leadership role.²⁰

The president of Church Transitions Inc., the Rev. Dan Southerland, remarked,

There are moments when you've got to play hardball. You cannot transition a church . . . and placate every whiny Christian along the way.²¹

“Bullies” in the Church

Thus, the methods of Church Transitions can be summarized: With the under hand, work clandestinely. “Don't tell the folks what the plan is for reason that ‘all hell might break loose.’” But what if the folks should discover and balk at the plan? Then with the high hand, disbar them from membership, and warn any church where the dissidents may subsequently attend that they are troublemakers, and unfit for leadership. Putting it into blunt vernacular, if people don't get with the program, kick them out and “black ball” them!

Though he reportedly does not agree with kicking disagreeable folks out, Rick Warren himself has written,

I'm saying some people are going to have to die or leave. Moses had to wander around the desert for 40 years while God killed off a million people before he let them go into the Promised Land. That may be brutally blunt, but it's true.²²

He has also said, “There is no growth without change and there is no change without loss and there is no loss without pain.”²³ Question: How do these tactics align with the standards of New Testament spiritual leadership? Answer: They don't.

As to underhandedness, such maneuvering is that of false teachers. Jude portrays false teachers as “certain men crept in unawares” (Jude 4; Compare 2 Peter 2:1). To the Ephesians Paul wrote of “the trickery of men” and the “craftiness [of their] deceitful scheming” (Ephesians 4:14). Of his ministry to the Corinthians Paul wrote,

[W]e have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception. . . . On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to

every man's conscience in the sight of God (2 Corinthians 4:2, NIV).

Pastoral leadership must be conducted with openness and integrity. What the people see is what they should get. Pastors should not harbor secret agendas. Ministry should be pursued with integrity, godly character, and candor. As with the false prophets in the Old Testament, God's people rightfully are alarmed at pastors and leaders who, figuratively speaking, "wear a rough garment to deceive" (Zechariah 13:4). Godly leadership should not be like that of "a wolf in sheep's clothing," that deceives, upsets, slaughters, and scatters a local flock (Acts 20:28-30).

As to highhandedness, the Apostle Peter admonished would-be church leaders,

Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight *thereof*, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; *Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock* (Emphasis mine, 1 Peter 5:2-3, KJV).

Pastors are not "lords of discipline." Leave that to the military academies. Church leaders who employ high-handed tactics in governing a local church are out of order. As Paul instructed Timothy,

And the Lord's bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses *and escape* from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will (2 Timothy 2:24-26).

Godly leaders do not quarrel with their people. Along with the preached Gospel, a submissive spirit within a congregation does wonders for the credibility of the Gospel and the life of a local

church, something to which visitors will be attracted (See Ephesians 5:21; Acts 2:47.).

Division in a local church is a reproach to that body, and should a church split, and knowledge of that split become public, it may take years under credible and gentle pastoral leadership for that congregation to recover. In fact, a church may never recover. To any pastor who might be toying with the idea of transitioning to becoming Purpose-Driven, I warn you: Your congregation may split, and if it does, your leadership will be discredited. You will be forced to leave, and you will leave a fractured, disillusioned, and ruined congregation in your wake. They will be sheep without a shepherd. Outsiders will look at the strife and justifiably conclude that the Son must not have been sent by the Father (See John 17:20-21.). The testimony of the Lord Jesus Christ will be vilified and nullified. It's just that serious. Having under-shepherded my present congregation for twenty-one years, and having led it through a couple of major transitions, believe me, I know. I've lived it.

Again, contrast the tactics advocated by Church Transitions Inc. with how Paul related to the Thessalonians. He reminded them,

But we were gentle among you, even as a nurse cherisheth her children: So being affectionately desirous of you, we were willing to have imparted unto you, not the gospel of God only, but also our own souls, because ye were dear unto us (1 Thessalonians 2:7-8, KJV).

When pastors treat their people in high-handed fashion, their loss of credibility is instant and total, and without credibility pastors can no longer function in the ministry. God has no place in the ministry for transition leaders like Diotrephes, who “love to be first among” the brethren, and who are so intolerant against any who might oppose them, that they “put *them* out of the church” (3 John 9, 10).

Musical Marketing

Following the “audience driven” philosophy of church growth, thousands of churches have copied the Saddleback and Willow Creek models of worship, especially with regards to music. During the last twenty-five years, such transitioning from traditional to contemporary worship engendered division in and among churches that became known as “the worship wars.” Nevertheless, under pressure to increase attendance, evangelical congregations sought to retain the youth and lure outsiders into church by employing a common cultural denominator in their public worship services. That common, but worldly, denominator was and is rock music, our culture’s dominant musical expression.

Nothing in recent church life seems to have divided Christians as their musical tastes and choices. At the face of it, and in the context of life together, the division caused by the invasion of rock music into the worship of local churches marks the assimilation of such music to be suspect because it is divisive to a local church that God is seeking to unite. This can be seen from the prayer of Christ and the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus prayed for unity, that “they may all be one; even as Thou, Father, *art* in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be in Us; that the world may believe that Thou didst send Me” (John 17:21). From Jesus’ prayer we see that the credibility of Christianity is at stake. Divisiveness and congregational infighting over music provide no positive testimony that the Father sent the Son. We also see that “bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander” grieve the Holy Spirit whose ministry is to create the unity for which Jesus prayed (Ephesians 4:30). In contrast, the flesh breeds “enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions disunity and strife” (Galatians 5:20). Nothing is more destructive to the life of a local congregation than a petulant individual demanding, “I want,” or a group that says, “We want, and if you don’t give us what we want, we’re leaving the church.”

Nevertheless, under pressure to increase attendance, evangelical congregations seek to lure and hook outsiders into church by employing music in their public worship services that is calculated to entertain and offer “feel” to the audience. The offered

musical attraction is our culture's dominant musical expression, rock-'n'-roll. In addition to other styles, Purpose-Driven philosophy recommends using this fleshly style of music to attract a crowd, even if it divides congregations. For reasons to be explained in chapter five, I choose not to drive the worship of my congregation in that musical direction.

Rick Warren's missionary goal is to connect with the disconnected. Biblically this can be done through personal/friendship evangelism (See John 4:1-42.). Christians are born to reproduce, and need to share the Gospel with the unsaved. But the church-growth movement has taken a ministry and turned it into an industry, especially in trying to reach disconnected "baby boomers" and their kids, the "baby-busters" and "echo-boomers."

As seen through the eyes of a "baby-buster," a religious life experience might go something like this:

Once upon a time, Grandma and Grandpa listened to preachers warn about "hell, fire and brimstone" (God's judgment and wrath) and exhort people unto holiness of life (legalism). Grandma and Grandpa loved me, and I loved them. But that was their religion. Grandpa and Grandma made my "baby-boomer" parents go to church when they were young. But when my parents went off to college in the 1970s, they lost their religious faith and wanted more freedom and less commitment in their lifestyle. They no longer felt connected with my grandparents' religious way of looking at life. Pursuing different careers, they had a lot of marital and personal needs that the church was not meeting. For a while they tried church to help them with their problems, but it didn't work. When I was eight, they quit going to church. A few years later when I was eleven, they got divorced for "irreconcilable differences." My mom and her new husband raised me and sent me off to college. My grandparents died. Every now and then I see my dad. I got married recently. But my wife and I decided we don't need organized religion in our lives. The church doesn't understand the problems of modern life. Traditional and organized religion

didn't help my parents, and I don't think it can help us either. So we've decided—my new wife and I—that we don't need church in our lives.

Seeker-Sensitive

Enter Rick Warren, and before him, at least in notoriety, Bill Hybels. Both men are products of Bob Schuller's Institute for Successful Church Leadership. Warren figured that baby boomers "might find God if they could sit in a theater-style auditorium and listen to live pop music and sermons that could help them with ennui [i.e., 'feelings of weariness and discontent resulting from satiety or lack of interest; boredom'] and personal problems."²⁴ So as not to drive the boomers and the busters away, Warren, Hybels, and thousands of other pastors cloned their ministries according to the user-friendly approach. In their efforts to connect with the disconnected, they dress casually and troll about with musical bait that they hope will hook and catch their target audience. Preaching to their audience's felt needs, the communicators tone down any judgment and holiness message (That's legalism!) so as not to offend anyone for fear that something might be said that could cause their target audience to leave and not return.

"There is none who seeks for God."

The assumption is that there are masses of persons out there who are seeking after God. Although they may be seeking "spirituality," such searching does not translate into seeking for the God of the Bible. Many seek after God, but they want God on their terms, not His. Fact of the matter is, by nature we sinful humans do not seek for God on God's terms. In quoting the Psalms, Paul wrote in Romans, "There is none who seeks for God." (Romans 3:11b; See Psalms 13:1-3; 53:1-3.) The seekers-after-God philosophy is a lot of smoke and mirrors. When given a choice between God and self, our depraved hearts will instinctively make the selfish choice. And if church is made user-friendly so as to feed the appetites of people's fleshly and self-indulgent nature, then the impression remains that the so-called seekers can come to God on their terms, not His. And this of course, is what the

Apostle means when he said that there are “none” who seek after God. People do not want to come to God on His terms. The seeker-sensitive model provides the illusion that people can come to God according to how they want to. The seeker-sensitive model may make us feel comfortable with God, but the greater question becomes, without repentance for sin and cultivating holiness of life on our part, does God feel comfortable with us? The Scriptures indicate that, absent the presence of repentance for sin and holy living, God does not.

The Scripture forthrightly states: “But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised” (1 Corinthians 2:14). If that is the case, then the only appeal of doing ministry according to the user-friendly, seeker-sensitive, and audience driven philosophy of doing church is to the flesh, to the sinful and anti-God disposition that resides in all of us. As the Apostle testified of the disposition of his nature as well as ours, “For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing” (Romans 7:18, KJV).

In the interest of growth, many evangelical congregations and pastors have not only sold-out the Word, but, in the interest of turning numbers, are also sabotaging the message.

Chapter Two Endnotes

¹ Susanne Weingarten, “The Recipe for Success at American Megachurches,” *Spiegel Online International*, April 3, 2007. Online at www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,474999,00.html

² Francis A. Schaeffer, *No Little People* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1974): 13-25.

³ David Coffin, “Church Growth Meets the Real World,” *ChristianityToday.com*. Online at www.ctlibrary.com/2735

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Matt Hutaff, “Rick Warren: Jesus Would Not Have Approved,” *The Simon*, July 11, 2006. Online at www.thesimon.com/magazine/articles/canon_fodder/01189_rick_warren_hypocrite.html

⁶ Jonathan Huston, “Violent Video Game Marketed Through Mega-Churches (Part 2),” *Talk To Action*. Online at www.talk2action.org/story/2006/6/1/82458/92817

⁷ Hutaff, “Jesus Would Not Have Approved.”

⁸ As an aside, with irony it can be noted that sales of *The Purpose Driven Life* can be attributed to “fire-marketing.” We can wonder what might be left of the American religious landscape when as the firestorm surrounding the book burns out, its readers don’t find real purpose in life. After experiencing several “spiritual awakenings,” New England finally became known as the “burned over district” in American church history. One struggles to find megachurches in that part of the country.

⁹ Greg Stielstra, *PyroMarketing, The Four-Step Strategy to Ignite Customer Evangelists and Keep Them for Life* (New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 2005). Illustrated by his marketing of *The Purpose Driven Life* and *The Passion of the Christ*, Greg Stielstra demonstrates the obsolescence and excessive cost of traditional marketing methods and how “PyroMarketing principles deliver powerful results over the long-term and for less money.” Stielstra’s method is built around how you build a campfire. “Gather the driest tinder. Touch it with the match. Fan the flames. Save the coals.” See review posted at *Powells.com*. Online at www.powells.com/biblio/1-0060776706-0. One can also visit Stielstra’s website to gain understanding of his marketing strategies, www.pyromarketing.typepad.com/my_weblog/

¹⁰ These endorsements by Bruce Wilkinson and Max Lucado appear on the back of the dust jacket. Lee Strobel added, “If you only read one book on what life is all about—make it this one. This book is life changing.” In Strobel’s optimism over the book’s life-changing power, one can only wonder what ever happened to the Bible, the Word of God (See Hebrews 4:12.).

¹¹ Referred to by many names such as “speed,” “meth,” and “chalk,” methamphetamine is a psycho stimulant drug that induces euphoria and excitement in the user.

¹² Gwendolyn Driscoll, “Rick Warren moving the message,” *The Orange County Register*, September 24, 2006. Online at www.ocregister.com/ocregister/news/local/article_1286106.php

¹³ Huston, “Violent Video Game Marketed.”

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Stielstra has promoted more than 750 books, including twenty #1 bestsellers and eight books that have sold more than a million copies. See review posted at *Powells.com*. Online at www.powells.com/biblio/1-0060776706-0

¹⁶ James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Volume 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2001): 242-243.

¹⁷ Suzanne Sataline, “A Popular Strategy for Church Growth Splits Congregants,” *The Wall Street Journal*, Tuesday, September 5, 2006, A1, 10. Online at www.post-gazette.com/pg/06248/719178-84.stm

¹⁸ Hutaff, “Jesus Would Not Have Approved.”

¹⁹ Sataline, “Popular Strategy.”

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² *Pastors.com*, Rick Warren’s MinistryToolBox, Issue #263, 6/14/2006, “What to do when your church hits a plateau.” Online at www.pastors.com/RWMT/default.asp?id=263&artid=4533&expand=1

²³ Sataline, “Popular Strategy.” In PDC, Warren states, “The church is a body not a business. . . . The task of church leadership is to discover and remove growth-restricting diseases and barriers so that natural, normal growth can occur.” See Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church, Growth Without Compromising Your Message & Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995): 16. Assuming the Purpose-Driven philosophy is the paradigm by which church health is to be measured, the only judgment that can be made of those who do not get with the program is that they are like a cancer in the body that must be removed.

²⁴ Ibid.

THREE

The Changing Message of Evangelicalism

Sabotaging the Word

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures . . .

The Apostle Paul, 1 Corinthians 15:3-4

The church has succumbed to the seductions of our therapeutic culture, and in that context it seems quite natural to favor the relational dimension over the moral dimension, mysticism over cognitive conviction, self-fulfillment over personal surrender, self-image over character, pluralistic religious equality over the uniqueness of the Christian faith.¹

Dr. David F. Wells

“The methods may change, but the message remains the same,” say those who employ the techniques of the modern church growth-movement. But there is every indication that, driven by the methods, the message *is* changing. H.D. McDonald noted that one great peril for Christianity is,

[T]hat the church should itself lose grip on the historic gospel and instead give its blessing to what it considers best in the spirit of the age. There are churches that have gone overboard in their efforts to be in sympathy with the pseudohumanism of their time and who tell men, even the poorest of prodigals and the blackest of scoundrels, that they are better than they are painted; that they have more of Christ in them than they know; that they can, if they will, with one stroke of a strong determination break through their hard shells and release in themselves

the slumbering divinity and so give expression to their true humanness.²

For reason of a God-centered message being sabotaged, the evangelical church is in peril.

A Man-Centered Ministry

On the face of it, there's something wrong with the church-growth model of doing church according to the user-friendly, seeker-sensitive, and audience-driven way. The three slogans imply that the church's worship should be centered upon man, and not God. The audience drives the church to make it feel comfortable and meet its needs.

A Man-Centered Message

As one follows upon the heels of the other, we would expect that a man-centered ministry would breed a man-centered message. Indeed, that is the case, for as Dr. Al Mohler stated on his web-site, "The idea that preaching should be addressed to the self-perceived 'needs' of the congregation is now well ingrained in the larger evangelical culture."³ This perception exists because of the influence of the Willow Creek and Saddleback models of church growth, both of which have been influenced by Robert Schuller's Institute for Successful Church Leadership.

However, Mohler exposes the flaw of "needs-oriented" preaching. Approvingly, he quotes another minister's insightful comment. That minister remarked,

Now, if you're a pastor in Honduras, it might be okay to define your ministry as meeting needs, because more people in Honduras have interesting biblical needs—food, clothing, housing. But most people in the churches I know get those needs met without prayer. So they've moved on to "needs" like orgasm, a satisfying career, an enjoyable love life, a positive outlook on life, and stuff the Bible has absolutely no interest in.⁴

Yet a plethora of preachers, authors, and seminar-leaders continue to parade about offering solutions for solving this or that psychological or life problem. The Bible provides this warning: “This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of their own selves . . .” (1 Timothy 3:1-2a, KJV). Does God call the church and its ministry to affirm the rampant narcissism in our culture? Should pastors ignore the whole counsel of God and package messages into 10-15 minute pep talks in which they attempt to stroke the folks and meet the audience’s “felt needs”?

The universal need of people is to enter into a *relationship with God* by repenting of their sin(s), by trusting that Jesus died for their sins, by believing that Jesus Christ was raised from the dead, and then to cultivate *fellowship with God* by living a lifestyle of holiness and righteousness, thereby providing a positive witness to the unbelieving world around them. Preaching ought to concern spiritual needs that are constant among and common to all humanity, not the changing moods and needs which, at any moment, might reside in a few souls comprising a smaller part of the greater audience.

About the changed message of evangelicalism, James Montgomery Boice (1938-2000) noted a decade ago,

Like the liberals before us, evangelicals use the Bible’s words but give them new meaning, pouring bad secular content into spiritual terminology. Sin becomes dysfunctional behavior. Salvation becomes self-esteem or wholeness. Jesus becomes more of an example for right living than a Savior from sin. Again people are told how to have happy marriages and raise nice children but not how to get right with the offended God. . . . Far be it from us to preach a gospel that would expose people’s sin, make them uncomfortable, and drive them to the Savior.⁵

Market-Driven Messages

But because of the ascendance and dominance of the user-friendly, seeker-sensitive, and audience-driven philosophy of

ministry, many pastors preach scripted messages that they hope will make people happy on Sunday and provide something useful for them on Monday. Paul warned Timothy of a time when Christians,

. . . will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And they shall turn away *their* ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables” (2 Timothy 4:3-4, KJV).

Preaching to felt needs impresses me as scratching “itching ears.” It’s telling people something that is hoped will make them feel good. Having said that, in today’s evangelical church it’s not the message that controls the methods, but the methods that drive the message. The message is controlled by the positivity and possibility (P&P) formula that has become central to preaching. P&P preaching is sabotaging the Word.

Positivity and Possibility Preaching

For example, take the biblical teaching regarding sin and repentance, issues that in their desire to be seeker-sensitive and user-friendly, many of today’s pastors refuse to address. Given “the pop spirituality” that dominates American religion these days, the doctrine of repentance has become outdated among many professing evangelicals. This obsolescence is facilitated by the P&P preaching that goes on in churches, and self-help counseling that is passed out through various Christian media.

Smug Self-righteousness

The irony of the P&P message is that while evangelicalism is quite ready to scold the secular culture about its need to repent, the church itself is reluctant to face its need to do the same. Causes like abortion, the Ten Commandments, prayer in the public schools, Christmas crèches, and so on are protested and litigated, something that individuals have the right to do under rights granted to United States citizens by the constitution. But within the church it’s all about feeling positive about oneself, and any message

about the need for personal repentance does not mix well with that psychological agenda. Yet we should ask, because we are not introspective about our own sins, do we possess the right to confront society for its sins? (See Matthew 7:3-5.) Because they are not repentant about their sins, when Christians confront society about its sins they impress the society as being priggishly self-righteous.

A Majority of Hundreds, a Minority of One

Three years had passed since Ahab defeated Aram. Yet the enemy remained entrenched at Ramoth Gilead. So to drive the enemy from that location, Jehoshaphat, the king of Judah, entered into alliance with Ahab, the king of Israel. Concerned about his safety and future, Jehoshaphat asked Ahab if there was a prophet who might predict how the battle would go. The king of Israel organized a gathering of prophets, and on behalf of Jehoshaphat asked them, “Shall I go against Ramoth-gilead to battle or shall I refrain?” They unanimously answered, “Go up, for the Lord will give *it* into the hand of the king” (1 Kings 22:6). Four-hundred prophets, a *majority of many*, predicted success and victory for the Israelite allies in their military campaign against the Aramaeans.

But suspecting prophetic collusion for reason of their unified and optimistic message, Jehoshaphat asked Ahab, “Is there not yet a prophet of the Lord here that we may inquire of him?” Then records Scripture,

[T]he king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat, “There is yet one man by whom we may inquire of the Lord, but I hate him, because he does not prophesy good concerning me, but evil. *He is* Micaiah son of Imlah” (1 Kings 22:6-8).

The king called for Micaiah to give his prophecy about how the battle would fare. Micaiah, a *minority of one*, predicted defeat and death.

To the extent that Christians will only tolerate P&P messages, they ought to ask themselves how much they are like

Ahab, who would listen only to the hundreds of prophets that predicted success-‘n’-life, but hated the one who always told him the truth. But fulfilling Micaiah’s prediction, Ahab died in battle.

The New Message

Though repentance is a prominent biblical teaching, many pastors, for reason of trying to be user-friendly (which I understand to be their attempt to be “nice and inoffensive”), choose to ignore it. An interview of one mega-church pastor went as follows:

REPORTER: You get criticized a lot for your relentless positivity. Why?

JOEL OSTEEN: I think maybe it’s because it’s not old school. People are used to being beaten down. They’re used to [churches] condemning people to make them feel so bad so that they’ll repent, so they’ll know that they’re sinners, but I think there’s a different approach.⁶

Of Pastor Warren the *Orange County Register* likewise notes,

Warren is also regarded as a savvy interpreter of his culture and generation. He is famous (some say infamous) for retiring the fire-and-brimstone formality of his Southern Baptist forefathers. In its place, he pioneered a sunny, laid-back, Southern Californian “relatability,” transforming church from an old-fashioned penance into a contemporary celebration.⁷

But what may be observed of Osteen and Warren is also true of the thousands of pastors who envy their success and follow their example. The methods have changed, but so has the message. It’s no longer the Gospel according to Paul, but a P&P message according to Bob, Bill, Rick, Joel, and before them, Norm.

Cutting the Gospel’s Nerve

According to the user-friendly philosophy, the most abhorrent thing a pastor could do is make members of the

audience feel uncomfortable about their sins and the necessity of repentance. Of this omission, Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., writes,

For the Christian church (even in its recently popular seeker services) to ignore, euphemize, or otherwise mute the lethal reality of sin is to cut the nerve of the gospel. For the sober truth is that without full disclosure on sin, the gospel of grace becomes impertinent, unnecessary, and finally uninteresting.⁸

If neglect of preaching about sin and repentance does not indicate a sabotaging of the evangelical message, then frankly, I don't know what does. Such preaching predominates because the new methods of doing church dictate it. As the user-friendly methods and music prescribe what the mood and contents of the message ought to be, perhaps the cardinal and only command for preachers today is "Thou shalt not be negative." With their messages, as with their music, many churches are about the business of peddling "feel" to their audiences. But the New Testament exposes peddling "feel" to be the method of false teachers who "entice by fleshly desires, by sensuality" (2 Peter 2:18).

Moralistic-Therapeutic Deism

In such an environment, Warren and many other pastors believe they preach an uncompromised Gospel. But notwithstanding their denial, user-friendly P&P preaching has watered down the message. As Gene Veith points out, American evangelical religion has been tamed by a "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism" that passes itself off as Christian, but in reality "consists of pop psychology, self-help platitudes, and the power of positive thinking." According to Veith, Moralistic Therapeutic Deists believe in a generic creator God (i.e., mention of the Lord Jesus Christ is conspicuously absent) who: *one*, wants people to be nice and fair to each other, especially to those of other religions; *two*, wants us to feel good about ourselves; *three*, remains distant from the ordinary conduct of life except when He is needed to solve a life problem; and *four*, will allow anyone, if they are good enough,

to go to heaven when they die.⁹ The P&P message agrees with and promotes the themes of “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.”

The overriding question becomes, how has this message come to occupy such a prominent place in today’s evangelical church? Spiritually, part of the answer lies in the appeal of such a message to fleshly and unregenerate hearts (1 Corinthians 2:11-14). Economically, the message is popular and profitable for Christian publishers. And historically, part of the answer exists in the connection between Norman Vincent Peale and New Thought; then Peale’s influence upon Robert H. Schuller; and finally, Schuller’s impact upon Bill Hybels, Rick Warren, and 1000s of other pastors through his Institute for Successful Church Leadership.¹⁰ In accounting for the current popularity of the P&P message, the similarity between Peale and Joel Osteen also ought to be noted.

Christ and Culture

The values and mores of any given culture threaten the Gospel’s purity. The biblical message of redemption is trans-cultural. As heaven will show, the Gospel is for people “from every tribe and tongue and people and nation” (Revelation 5:9). The Gospel is what it is for people who are what they are and where they are. This is as true for Americans as it is for persons from other of the world’s cultures, whether those cultures be Jewish, Arab, Indian, European, African, or whatever. In other words, in order to make the message palatable for people, those who minister the gospel possess no authority to tweak the Word according to what a particular culture or audience might dictate.

For example, the early church declared Jesus is Lord (Romans 10:9). But amidst an ancient world that may be compared to the syncretism and pluralism of the Hindu religion, there literally were and are millions of gods. To accommodate that religious culture and affect conversions, it might be suggested that Hindus simply add Jesus to the repertoire of gods already extant in their religion. But such a transaction is not what the Old Testament prophets, Jesus, or the New Testament apostles envisioned. In the Old Testament, the seduction of Israel was not to replace the

worship of Jehovah with Baal, but simply to add the Canaanite god to the worship of Jehovah. Obviously, the Gospel does not require people to add Jesus to their religion, but to replace their religion with Jesus. The Gospel is not my religion plus Jesus, but rather the Lord Jesus minus my religion!

Furthermore, like the offer to Hindus, the Gospel is offered to Americans independent from, and often in opposition to, the mores and values of our culture. If the Gospel is to remain the Gospel, it demands that believers forsake the values of their culture that oppose the Gospel and place their trust in Jesus. If the lordship of Jesus Christ means anything at all, this must be the case. If the Gospel is not allowed freedom of speech, and is modified and tamed in whatever way the culture or audience might dictate, then Christianity is reduced to “folk religion.”

The Good Ole American Way

Historically, American culture has been one of rugged individualism, self-reliance, and personal initiative, and as such, poses perhaps the greatest challenge to the Gospel’s message of grace, the unmerited favor of God toward man in Christ. Typical is the American saying that most of us know—“God helps those who help themselves.” America is a land of opportunity, and we are a practical people who throughout this nation’s history have helped ourselves and others. Though currently the welfare state challenges this cultural value, Americans historically have been a “can do” people. But this cultural way makes Americans especially vulnerable to self-help religion. In part, this may explain why formulaic and self-help preaching has become so dominant among the “E-crowd.” It represents an accommodation of the Gospel to American culture and our engrained way of thinking about life.

New Thought

During the 1800s, the New Thought movement grew into prominence in America as it offered an intellectual, spiritual, and even mystical alternative to orthodox Christianity. Though similar to New Age religion, New Thought preceded the introduction of that spirituality to American culture by a couple of centuries. In

general, New Thought states, “Change your thinking and you can change your life.” To “new-thoughters,” the game of life is mentalist—it’s primarily played out in the brain. According to ANTN (Affiliated New Thought Network), New Thought is,

. . . a modern spiritual philosophy stressing the power of right thinking in a person’s life, the idea that our thoughts and attitudes affect our experience and that God (or whatever other name a person might have for a Higher Power) is within the individual.¹¹

Another source states:

The central teaching of New Thought is that thought evolves and unfolds, and thinking creates one’s experience of the world. The movement places great emphasis in positive thinking, affirmations, meditation, and prayer.¹²

As New Thought advocates will argue, the principles and practices of it have been around for 1000s of years. New thought was just “new” to America.

Among a host of other teachers, historical and contemporary, New Thought became prominent in America during the 1800s as evidenced in the transcendentalism of Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) and the Christian Science of Mary Baker Glover Patterson Eddy (1821-1910). One popular and contemporary exponent of a new-thought-like message is Dr. Wayne W. Dyer whose weekly TV program is broadcast on the Public Broadcasting System (PBS). The title and description of Dyer’s new book (*Change Your Thoughts—Change Your Life: Living the Wisdom of Tao*), resembles much of what is preached in the name of Christianity today.

Mind Games

Any understanding of the Gospel’s state in contemporary America must, I believe, begin with a historical consideration of the

message, both its substance and influence, of Norman Vincent Peale (1898-1993). As a mainline and liberal Protestant, he initially tapped into New Thought philosophy, incorporated it into his life and ministry (both preaching and writing, i.e., *The Power of Positive Thinking*, *Guideposts* magazine, etc.), and influenced the beliefs of millions of Americans during the last half of the 20th century. In 1956, Peale wrote in the *Christian Herald*:

I had long observed the practice of such religious groups as Christian Science, Unity, and Metaphysical organizations. I observed that they all outlined in a simple one-two-three form, the ‘how’ of the spiritual life.¹³

In “one-two-three” fashion, Peale became the great exponent of what one historian described as, “. . . a composite of Science of Mind, metaphysics, medical and psychological practice, old fashioned Methodist evangelism, and Dutch Reformed Calvinism.”¹⁴ Today’s formulaic method of preaching finds precedent in Peale being seduced by, and then utilizing, the New Thought message and approach to life.

Peale’s Forbidden Source

But Peale also derived material he published from an occult source. After extensive study and analysis, two authors, one a former Peale protégé and the other a Unitarian minister, arrived at this conclusion.¹⁵ Without crediting his “source,” the two researchers contend that Peale extensively borrowed, and even at points plagiarized, material from an “‘obscure teacher of occult science’ named Florence Scovel Shinn” (1871-1940), whose writings have been reprinted and marketed because of the popularity of New Age religion.¹⁶ Before he died, Dr. Peale, in a forward written in one of his books, admitted to her influence upon him and confessed he had “long used” her occult teachings.¹⁷ Shinn lived in New York, just blocks away from the church Peale pastored, the Marble Collegiate Church.¹⁸ Authors Exoo and Tweed observed that whatever “the embarrassments” caused by

Peale's plagiarism, "it pales against the discomfiture that millions of mainline Christians, purporting to stand on orthodoxy and Scripture alone, have thus unwittingly embraced the Occult."¹⁹

In the Old Testament the children of Israel were to have nothing to do with the hidden knowledge, persons, or sources of the occult, with what God called an "abomination" (Deuteronomy 18:9-12). The early church revival at Ephesus saw the believers bring their expensive occult "books together and [burn] them in the sight of everyone" (Acts 19:19). Yet contrary to God's prohibition, and the early church's example, here we have one of the most influential Protestant ministers of 20th century America quoting, and incidentally without giving due credit, occult books that God's law bans and would have been burned in the early church! This recent revelation about Peale's "hidden source" illustrates how Satan infiltrates the church as he "disguises himself as an angel of light" (2 Corinthians 11:13).

It was a minor transition from Peale's "power of positive thinking" to Schuller's "power of possibility thinking." In her biography of Peale, *God's Salesman*, Carol George wrote that he knew what turned people off. "He knew that to talk about sin, suffering, and guilt was not going to produce the attendance numbers he wanted."²⁰ Peale's liberal bent caused many conservative preachers of his era to say of him, "While Paul is appealing, Peale is appalling."

Connect the Dots: Peale, Schuller, Hybels and Warren

Norman Vincent Peale's influence upon liberal Protestantism in the last century is now being felt in evangelicalism via the influence of his soul mate, Robert H. Schuller, and Schuller's Institute for Successful Church Leadership.

In his book *Mountains Into Goldmines*, Professor Dennis Voskuil documented the link—personal, ideological, and historical—between Norman Vincent Peale and Robert H. Schuller.²¹ Voskuil noted that Schuller "patterned the essential elements of his message after those of Peale" and that "Schuller's possibility thinking closely resembles Peale's positive thinking."²² Voskuil also stated that Schuller asked Peale to "endorse and

preface” some of his early books.²³ Both men used a similar approach to ministry in that like Shinn, they filled their books and preaching with “aphorisms, anecdotes, personal testimonies, and ‘how to’ lists.”²⁴

As to the unbiblical and unorthodox message of both men, and their influence upon American evangelicalism, D.A. Carson observes, “Playing fast and loose with the Bible needed a liberal audience in the days of Norman Vincent Peale, but now, as the case of Robert Schuller indicates, professed conservatives eat it up.”²⁵ The influence of Schuller upon evangelicalism should not be underestimated, for as Voskuil noted decades ago, “Schuller’s positive brand of evangelicalism seems indeed to have become a new orthodoxy.”²⁶

The similarity between the message of Peale and another popular American preacher, Joel Osteen, should also be mentioned. Though seemingly independent of and unconnected to Schuller, on CBS’ *The Early Show*, Osteen did admit to the similarity between his and Peale’s message. Interviewer Harry Smith compared Osteen’s preaching to Peale’s, a comparison with which Osteen provided the following concurrence:

It’s amazing. I was preaching two or three years when someone gave me one of his books. I was going to say, “He thinks like me. I think like him.” It seems like it’s the same base there. God is on our side and if you think right, I believe, like Norman Vincent Peale did, that your life follows your thoughts. You get up negative, oppressive, your day will go that way.²⁷

Thirty-five thousand persons attend Lakewood Church, now the largest church in America, which meets at the former Compaq Center in Houston, Texas. Osteen’s book, *Your Best Life Now: 7 Steps To Living At Your Full Potential*, remains a Christian bestseller. A new title, *Become a Better You*, is scheduled for release in October, 2007, and promises to be another bestseller. Several million view his weekly *Lakewood Church* television broadcast. All of this

currently makes Osteen's positive thinking message one of the most heard and influential in America.

Consistent with the preaching mood set by Peale and Schuller, *The Wall Street Journal* reported that Rick Warren's "sermons rarely linger on self-denial and fighting sin, instead focusing on healing modern American angst, such as troubled marriages and stress."²⁸

I frequently receive reports from people from congregations where the user-friendly philosophy has been, or is being, implemented, that pastors no longer preach the Bible. With Bible in hand, they preach about the Bible, all the while disconnecting themselves and their audiences from the parts of Scripture that might prove controversial or offensive. Their communication is more conspicuous for what *is not* preached than for what *is* preached.

Now-a-days pastors no longer seem to be passionate for, driven by, and burdened for "the word of the Lord" (Malachi 1:1; Zechariah 12:1). In a *Wall Street Journal* article, Pastor Bob DeWaay evaluated that the modern way of doing church is "gutting" Christianity. The Bible's theme is about redemption and atonement, not finding meaning and solving problems."²⁹ How much of this style of preaching is traceable to the Peale-Schuller connection, and Schuller's influence, through Bill Hybels and Rick Warren, upon evangelicalism today? An overwhelming amount, I fear. Because of their commitment to the Word of God, Bible believers have rightfully, and in good conscience, chosen to leave such churches where the whole counsel of God is not honored, or preached, any longer.

But returning to Bill Hybels and Rick Warren—both of whom either were or are influenced by Schuller's Institute for Successful Church Leadership—Hybels credits Schuller with being the main influence upon his ministry, acknowledged his indebtedness to Schuller on an *Hour of Power* telecast, promotes Schuller in various ads in *Christianity Today*, and has frequently spoken at meetings organized by Schuller. No doubt Hybels derived his thinking about church growth (seeker-sensitive, user-

friendly, and audience-driven) under Schuller's tutelage. But the connection between Schuller and Warren is more subtle.

During his last year at Southwestern Baptist Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, Rick Warren and his wife took a trip to Southern California to visit Schuller and the Crystal Cathedral. After overcoming their initial skepticism about his church growth philosophy, the couple came away impressed by Schuller's ministry and his methods of starting and building a church.³⁰

Though initially enamored with Schuller's methods, Warren has lately tried to separate himself from Schuller's message. According to Richard Abanes, in 1998, Warren distanced himself from Schuller for reason of Schuller's syncretism (i.e., All religions contain spiritual truth.), pluralism (i.e., There are many paths that lead to the same God.), and inter-spirituality (i.e., The Mormon Stephen Covey spoke at the Crystal Cathedral).³¹

Deeds versus Doctrine

But like Robert Schuller who in 1982, called for a new reformation centering on psychological self-esteem,³² twenty-five years later Rick Warren is also calling for a new reformation. He stated,

The first Reformation was about belief. This one needs to be about behavior. We need a reformation not of creeds but deeds.³³

Coordinate with deemphasizing creeds, Warren in *The Purpose Driven Life* also diminishes the importance of Bible doctrine (i.e., teaching) in the Christian life. He writes: "Today many assume that spiritual maturity is measured by the amount of biblical information and doctrine you know."³⁴

Rick Warren's emphasis upon trying to help less fortunate people, especially in Africa, is right, if such good works are regulated by the truth of God's Word. He is right in advocating that Christians ought to be about the business of doing acts of kindness and mercy for those who are less fortunate in life. But I would remind us that, though such an emphasis may be new to

him, and other self-centered baby boomers, it is not new to the historic fundamental and evangelical church in America. During the early 1900s, fundamental Christians, those about whom Rick Warren has made disparaging remarks, began a rescue mission movement that continues to operate in most all major American cities. The last century saw the formation of organizations like *World Vision* under the leadership of Bob Pierce. Presently, in continuity with the historic evangelical movement, Franklin Graham leads *Samaritan's Purse*. I cite these examples, and a host of others could be mentioned, to show that while perhaps new to the "me" generation of baby boomers, the adorning of the Gospel with good works is not a new emphasis to either the fundamentalist or evangelical movements. As a whole, Christian believers are, as history testifies and studies indicate, a philanthropic and serving people.

Rick Warren's assertion that right beliefs can never compensate for wrong behavior is correct. James teaches that "faith without works is dead" (James 2:20, 26; Compare Matthew 23:3). In their ministries, many pastors encounter "do-nothing" church members who sit, soak, sour and complain, and others who only desire to argue over some fine point of biblical interpretation or theology, but whose lives are deficient of the most basic spiritual graces. Even we pastors can become like that if we do not properly watch over and attend to our souls. We are to serve with a godly spirit. But good works cannot compensate for wrong beliefs. Activity does not excuse heresy.

Contrary to the mood of contemporary evangelicalism, doctrinal teaching lies at the heart of the Christian mission. In the Great Commission Jesus said, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations [by] teaching them to observe all that I commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20). Amidst the pop spirituality of today's religious culture, it's not that evangelical Christians know too much doctrine, but rather that they know too little. Without teaching doctrine, Christians will not know what they believe and why they believe it. We wonder why it is that the behavior of those inside the church differs so little from those outside the church. The similarity may be accounted for reason that professing Christians

behave the way they behave because they believe the way they believe, or vice versa.

The Deeds of the Dead

Deeds are no substitute for faith. Paul wrote that deeds are faith's fruit (Ephesians 2:10). James says that faith without works is dead (James 2:20, 26). But might the reverse be true? Can works without faith be dead? Jesus stated to the church at Sardis,

I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead. Wake up, and strengthen the things that remain, which were about to die; for I have not found your deeds completed in the sight of My God (Revelation 3:1; See 3:15.).

Physical deeds can never compensate or cover-up for spiritual deficiencies. Though spiritually dead, nominal Christians can do good works.

Christianity Lite

In the 1970s I regularly heard the pejorative remark, "Doctrine divides." It was usually uttered by unstudied Christians who cared little about the propositions of the faith stated in the New Testament. Because love was bantered about, and "kumbaya" togetherness was emphasized, the "doctrine divides" remark implied that Christians who possessed firm convictions about Bible doctrine were somehow divisive, and therefore, unloving. In this climate, Christians became less doctrinaire for fear of being perceived as unloving. Coupled with the rise of the experience oriented Charismatic movement and the advent of the seeker-sensitive and user-friendly approach of doing church, expository preaching and doctrinal teaching fell upon hard times in local evangelical congregations. Sadly, most Christians now view doctrinal teaching to be irrelevant to their lives, and consequently, those within the evangelical movement have grown to know less and less about what they believe and why they believe it. The Purpose-Driven philosophy of ministry continues to diminish the

importance of Bible doctrine and teaching. For example, when writing about a person's meaning, significance, and mission in life, Rick Warren states, "When the disciples wanted to talk about prophecy, Jesus quickly switched the conversation to evangelism. He wanted them to concentrate on their mission in the world."³⁵

"Pooh-poohing" Prophecy

In his pooh-poohing of biblical prophecy based upon Jesus' response to the disciples' question about restoring the kingdom (Acts 1:8), Warren buttresses his argument by referring to two texts in Jesus' prophetic sermon (i.e., Matthew 24:14 and 24:36). Yet by quoting verses from the Olivet Discourse to support his argument that prophecy is irrelevant to mission, Warren disconnects himself from interpretive reality.

The Olivet Discourse was also given by Jesus to answer the disciples' questions about prophetic matters, about the signs of His coming and the end of the age (Matthew 24:3). But Jesus didn't just dismiss their question and move on to the subject of evangelism. In point of fact, Matthew records that Jesus spent two whole chapters answering their questions! In the whole Olivet Discourse there is only one verse that might be construed as evangelistic, the verse stating that, "this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a witness to all the nations" (Matthew 24:14). So the question becomes, if prophecy is so unimportant to Christian living, then why did Jesus give such a lengthy answer to what Warren classifies as an irrelevant subject?

True, the study of prophecy should never be an end in and of itself, but knowledge of it has caused many to place their trust in Jesus as they see the trouble our world is in. The study and preaching of prophecy is evangelistic! It is comforting to know that God is in control, and that He will end history according to His decreed will. Furthermore, those who genuinely watch for Jesus are those who truly work for Him (Matthew 25:1-30). Knowledge of my accountability to Jesus, that I would be judged by Him for the stewardship of my life, caused me to leave the teaching profession thirty-seven years ago, enroll in seminary, and pastor—through both good and difficult times—three different churches (2

Corinthians 5:10-11). The fact of the matter is, people don't like the study of prophecy because they don't like the thought of their final accountability to God, that, face to face, they will be judged by Jesus on the basis of their faithfulness to Him in this life.

I find it interesting that the Purpose-Driven philosophy would deemphasize doctrine at a time in American church history when indicators suggest that the average evangelical is illiterate about what they believe and why they believe it.

Beware of the Wolves

In such a frame of mind, Christians are ripe for every spiritual deception that comes along, from cults to New Age beliefs to contemplative mysticism. Fact of the matter is, when the church is ignorant, the wolves will smell a kill and arise to "draw away the disciples after them" (Acts 20:29-31).

Teaching is inherent to the Great Commission, and serves as a safeguard against the wolves (Matthew 28:19-20). Doctrine helps to make disciples. The early church focused on teaching. As Acts records, "And they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (Acts 2:42; See 4:1; 5:25, 42.). The Apostle Paul devoted a significant portion of his missionary ventures to teaching Christian truths to others (Acts 15:35; 18:11; 20:20; 28:31). Paul's epistles possess in them a great deal of doctrine, a setting forth of the great truths of the Christian faith. Romans, the Magna Charta of Christianity, possesses eleven chapters devoted to doctrine while less than five chapters are devoted to the practical application of his teaching.

A New Legalism

I am reminded that the Gospel is Good News, not good advice. The Gospel of grace means that God in His power does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. For reason of the cultural context in which we live, this news might be considered un-American, but nevertheless, it is New Testament truth that differs from Joel Osteen's invitation to "Discover the Champion in You."³⁶ God does not save champions (1 Corinthians 1:26-29).

God saves sinners. Frankly, I tire of the pervasive “new legalistic” message of P&P preachers who dispense their psychological solutions and steps-to-recovery programs in the same way as teachers of human potential (i.e., Tony Robbins, Wayne Dyer, etc.). No “champion resides within us,” ready to inspire and lead us to success. Having ministered to hundreds of terminally ill people during 30 plus years of local church ministry, I cannot imagine myself counseling dying persons that in the face of death, they need to “discover the champion” within. The discovering-the-champion-within formula will not work in the face of death, and, I suspect, though it might provide the illusion of doing so, neither does it really work in life. A champion does not lie within the human heart (See Romans 7:14-25). Rather, we need the Champion from without, and from above!

The Method of Paul

In contrast to the audience driven paradigm of P&P preaching, the Apostle Paul wrote of the manner of his preaching, that while courteous, it was in truth unequivocal, uncompromised, and unflattering. In his preaching and letters, Paul never tried to please men, for in warning the Galatians not to defect from the Gospel, he asked, “For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? . . . If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ” (Galatians 1:10). The context implies Paul did not find that the Gospel pleased people. To the Corinthians he wrote,

[W]e do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God (2 Corinthians 4:2).

To the Ephesians he said, “For I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God” (Acts 20:27, NIV). To the Thessalonians he wrote, “For we never came with flattering speech . . . nor did we seek glory from men, either from you or from

others” (1 Thessalonians 2:5-6a). Obviously Paul’s preaching was not controlled by his audience, but by God.

The Message of Paul

As to the message of his preaching, Paul wrote,

But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness; But unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God” (1 Corinthians 1:23-24).

Think about Paul’s message. Did he preach so as to be inoffensive to the Jews? Did he simply schmooze with the folks? Or did his message have the cutting edge of truth about it? (See Hebrews 4:12.). Would Paul, or for that matter Jesus, John the Baptist, or the rest of the prophets and apostles, who constantly called people to repent of their sins and turn to God, be invited to preach their offensive message in the audience-driven atmospheres of the Crystal Cathedral, Willow Creek, Saddleback, or Lakewood churches? Given the mood set by the user-friendly philosophy, I think it would be like trying to plug a square peg in a round hole. Sin and repentance don’t fit the positivity and possibility message paradigm. Given what the target audience had become conditioned to, any prophetic message would be out of sync with the audience’s felt needs. In contrast to the P&P preachers of today, the biblical prophets preached what the people needed to hear, not what they wanted to hear.

Another Gospel

Again, the gospel is Good News, not good advice. Being Americanized and of a “self-help” variety, the incessant droning of P&P messages is both “another gospel” and a “new legalism.” The apostle Paul warned. “But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed” (Galatians 1:8). In all his preaching, Paul was neither a people-pleaser nor audience-driven.

His only desire was to please and glorify God (See Galatians 1:10.). In light of the Crystal Cathedral, Willow Creek, and Saddleback prescription for and influence upon preaching, ask dear reader, how much preaching today is about schmoozing with the folks, pleasing the people, self-fulfillment, and not about self-denial and serving Christ?

A Famine in the Land

Allow a possible reason to be interjected as to why people are no longer attracted to church, and why churches are forced to employ music with a beat to give the impression that they are alive. Perhaps people don't attend church because, like Israel of old, there's a famine in the church. Like ancient Israel, local churches may be in decline because they are under God's judgment. As Amos the prophet told his generation,

“Behold, days are coming,” declares the Lord God,
“When I will send a famine on the land, Not a
famine for bread or a thirst for water, But rather for
hearing the words of the Lord” (Amos 8:11).

If this be the case, then the answer to the malaise confronting many churches does not lie in new methods and contemporary music, but rather in a return to the expository preaching of God's Word!

Sabotaging the Word of God

In this regard, Jesus' Parable of the Sower becomes relevant (Jesus' parable: Matthew 13:3-9; Jesus' explanation: 13:18-23). In this parable the “seed” represents the word of the kingdom that “the evil one” ever attempts to sabotage. Those churches that attempt to seeker-sensitize the truth of God are playing right into Satan's strategy. Preaching regarding sin is not optional, but essential, if the gospel is going to take root in people's lives and save their souls in time and for eternity (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). However, there are other ominous forebodings that like music, the

new preaching paradigm is sacrificing the Gospel. To quote McDonald again,

A gospel robbed of its rapport with man's real need as a sinner and a redemption that has no relation to the divine holiness are not the power of God for man's salvation. Truly to speak to the time is to proclaim to it the apostolic gospel that is for all times. It is not shoring up that a man needs but cleaning out; not just nudges of encouragement to strive harder but a divine word to relieve his guilt. It is not pep talks he needs but a new life; not stimulus but salvation. The one thing that the human heart most sorely requires is the thing the church is commissioned to give: the gospel of a radical redemption. When once a church dilutes that gospel, it cannot grow, neither does it live.³⁷

The current mode of P&P preaching demeans the importance of God's propositional revelation thereby voiding the impact that the Word of God might have in people's lives. To induce a communal experience of "felt spirituality," churches devote 40-45 minutes to singing songs with a beat while they limit preaching to about 10-15 minutes on P&P themes. This new liturgy plays directly into the devil's strategy of sabotaging the Word. Not only does such an approach to worship negate the word, but the imbalance between singing and expository preaching quenches the work of the Holy Spirit. The little time given to expository preaching evidences that congregations despise "prophetic utterances" (1 Thessalonians 5:19-20).

Conclusion

Preaching is not a mild-mannered man telling a mild-mannered congregation to be "more-mild." That's the height of irrelevancy. P&P preaching is so earthbound that it never orients people's souls toward heaven and eternity. In light of the present distress the church in America finds herself in, P&P preaching and the excessive time devoted to drumming music reminds me of

Nero's "fiddling while Rome burns," of the false prophets saying, "Peace, peace; when *there is* no peace" (Jeremiah 6:14; 8:11, KJV).

When I look at the gimmicks used by churches, I can only wonder how the apostle Paul and the early church got along without praise bands, worship teams, liturgical dance, drama, and "Christianity-lite" messages. I have personally been involved in many facets of evangelistic and church planting ministry in Eastern Europe since 1990. I beheld meetings during which there was no music at all—just the preached Word of the Gospel. I saw hearts broken into contrition by the simple preaching of sin, the heralding of the love of God, and the necessary "repentance toward God, and . . . of faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 20:21).

The Gospel does not need gimmicks. Methods should never manipulate the message. In and of itself, the Gospel "is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes" (Romans 1:16). Not only do gimmicks *distract* people from the message, they also *subtract* from the message as they *obstruct* the Holy Spirit's work of convicting "the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment" (John 16:8). Preaching ought to concern the spiritual needs common to humanity, not the fluctuating psychological or emotional needs of the moment. Gimmicks are not needed for reason that God has ordained foolish things like preaching to accomplish His work on earth, "That no flesh should glory in his presence" (1 Corinthians 1:29).

Worldly-wise P&P preaching is sabotaging the Word. But among evangelicals, an emerging pluralistic and syncretic view of different religions is also sacrificing the Word.

Chapter Three Endnotes

¹ David F. Wells, *God in the Wasteland, The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994): 136.

² H.D. McDonald, *The Atonement of the Death of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1985): 16.

³ Al Mohler, "The Problem of Preaching to Felt Needs." Online at www.albertmohler.com/

⁴ Ibid. Mohler quotes William H. Willimon.

⁵ James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Volume 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2001): 243.

⁶ Carolyn Kliener Butler, “Sermon With a Smile,” *U.S. News & World Report*, October 3, 2005, 57.

⁷ Qwendolyn Driscoll, “Rick Warren Goes Global,” *The Orange County Register*, Sunday, August 27, 2006. Online at www.ocregister.com/ocregister/homepage/abox/article_1256351.php

Of his visit to Saddleback and interview of a “bohemian” looking couple who had just been baptized, but had formerly been devoted to Wicca, Jeffrey Sheler reports their testimony: “Being in Wicca helped bring us to this place [i.e., being baptized] in our lives. The goddess actually brought us closer to Christ.” As Sheler observes, Saddleback’s seeker-sensitive system had apparently worked for the couple.

But Sheler muses, “Had they been hit up front with the more exclusivist doctrines of classic Christianity, it is doubtful they would have begun the journey of faith. I wondered if they would feel deceived when they learned the rest of the story.” See Jeffrey L. Sheler, *Believers, A Journey Into Evangelical America* (New York, NY: Viking Penguin Group, 2006): 133-136. If it were preached to them, how much of “the rest of the story” would offend “the rest” of the seeker-sensitive crowd?

⁸ Cornelius Plantinga Jr., quoted by James I. Packer, “Doing It My Way: Are We Born Rebels?” *This We Believe*, John N. Akers, John H. Armstrong, and John D. Woodbridge, General Editors (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2000): 44.

⁹ Gene Edward Veith, “A Nation of Deists,” *World*, June 25, 2005, 28.

¹⁰ Norman Vincent Peale adapted his message from New Thought philosophy and occultist Florence Scovel Shinn. See George D. Exoo and John Gregory Tweed, “Peale’s Secret Source,” *Lutheran Quarterly: A Journal for the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, Vol. IX, No. 2, Summer 1995, Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin. See also “Norman Vincent Peale Accused of Plagiarism,” *The Indianapolis Star*, August 3, 1995, C2. Robert Schuller’s “possibility thinking” was adapted from Peale’s “positive thinking.” See Dennis Voskuil, *Mountains Into Goldmines, Robert Schuller and the Gospel of Success* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983) 72, 124-128.

¹¹ “The Philosophy of New Thought,” *Affiliated New thought Network*, 2006. Online at www.newthought.org/new_thought.html

¹² *Wikipedia*, “New Thought,” Online at en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Thought

¹³ Voskuil, *Mountains Into Goldmines*, 172, Footnote 21.

¹⁴ Richard Pierard quoted by George Mair, *A Life With Purpose* (New York, NY: The Berkley Publishing Group, 2005): 96-97.

¹⁵ Exoo and Tweed, “Secret Source,” 151-175.

¹⁶ “Norman Vincent Peale Accused of Plagiarism,” *The Indianapolis Star*, August 3, 1995, C2.

¹⁷ Florence Scovel Shinn, *The Writings of Florence Scovel Shinn* (New York, NY: Fireside, A Division of Simon and Schuster, 1989). This book contains four of Shinn’s writings, including “The Game of Life.” Of that book, Norman Vincent Peale wrote this endorsement that appears on the back cover: “*The Game of Life* is filled with wisdom and creative insights. That its teachings will work I know to be a fact, for I’ve long used them myself.” Peale’s endorsement is available online at www.amazon.com/gp/reader/0875166105/ref=sib_dp_pt/103-2701950-7412657#reader-link

¹⁸ As advertised on a website bearing her name, Florence Scovel Shinn (1871-1940) was an artist and metaphysical teacher who wrote many self-help books. The website states: “In her books she shows that we can enjoy a winning streak of health, prosperity, and happiness. She shares real-life stories with us from her many clients to illustrate how positive attitudes and affirmations invariably succeed in making one a ‘winner’ in life—able to control life’s conditions and release abundance through a knowledge of spiritual law.” Online at www.florescovelshinn.wwwhubs.com/

¹⁹ Exoo and Tweed, “Secret Source,” 151.

²⁰ Cited by Mair, *Life With Purpose*, 98.

²¹ Voskuil, *Mountains Into Goldmines*, 72, 124-128.

²² Ibid. 128.

²³ Ibid. 72. One of Schuller’s early books testifies to his relationship with Peale. In his “Acknowledgments,” Schuller cited his indebtedness to Peale. He wrote: “I am most grateful to . . . ministers Norman Vincent Peale and Raymond J. Lindquist, who have done far more for me than they will ever know.” In the “Introduction” that followed, Peale commended Schuller’s book: “I feel certain that any person who will read this book and act upon it will be able to achieve anything he or she wants.” Peale also mentioned his ten year personal acquaintance with Schuller. See Robert H. Schuller, *Move Ahead With Possibility Thinking* (Carmel, NY: Guideposts Associates, Inc., 1967).

²⁴ Voskuil, *Mountains Into Goldmines*, 128.

²⁵ D.A. Carson quoting George A. Lindbeck, *The Gaggling of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: ZondervanPublishingHouse, 1996): 480.

²⁶ Voskuil, Voskuil, *Mountains Into Goldmines*, 131.

²⁷ “Osteen: God Is On Your Side,” *The Early Show*, CBS Broadcasting Inc., October 21, 2005. Transcript available online at www.cbsnews.com/stories/2005/10/21/earlyshow/leisure/books/main961627.shtml

²⁸ Suzanne Sataline, “A Popular Strategy for Church Growth Splits Congregants,” *The Wall Street Journal*, Tuesday, September 5, 2006,

A1, 10. Online at www.wsj.com/article_email/SB115741786888753373-1MyQjAxMDE2NTA3NTQwMTU3Wj.html

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Tim Stafford, “A Regular Purpose-Driven Guy,” *Christianity Today*, November 18, 2002. Online at www.ctlibrary.com/ct/2002/november18/1.42.html

³¹ Richard Abanes, *Rick Warren and the Purpose that Drives Him* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2005): 99-106. Nevertheless, as Abanes’ book bears out, in the early days of Saddleback Rick Warren and his wife were involved at Schuller’s Institute for Successful Church Leadership, where he first gleaned methods of church management which he later refined under the tutelage of Peter Drucker. Though perhaps not personal in the beginning, the connection between Schuller and Warren (between their methods and their message) is there—all subsequent denials by the Warren camp notwithstanding. See Mair, *Life With Purpose*, and Warren Smith, *Deceived On Purpose, The New Age Implications of the Purpose-Driven Church* (Magalia, California: Mountain Stream Press, 2004).

³² Robert H. Schuller, *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1982).

³³ Trennis Henderson, “Rick Warren challenges Baptists to launch ‘new reformation,’” *Baptist Congress Today*, July 30, 2005. Online at www.bwanet.org/Congress/congresstoday31b.htm

³⁴ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2002): 183.

³⁵ Ibid. 285.

³⁶ “Discover the Champion in You,” *Joel Osteen Ministries*. See www.joelosteen.lakewood.cc/site/PageServer?pagename=JOM_homepage

³⁷ McDonald, *The Atonement*, 16.

FOUR

The Compromised Message of Evangelicalism

Sacrificing the Word

Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.

The Apostle Peter, Acts 4:12 (KJV)

First-century Christians were often persecuted and executed not because they worshipped Jesus—in a polytheistic society, what is one more God?—but because of the higher claim of the gospel that only in Christ is the One, True God to be worshipped. Because the prosperity and welfare of the empire were believed to depend upon religious forces, the Christian's exclusive allegiance to Jesus as God was naturally viewed as detrimental to the rest of society. From that perspective, Christians were bad citizens of the empire . . .¹

Dr. Karen H. Jobes

While browsing through the religious section of a mainline bookstore, my eyes fell across a book titled, *When Religion Becomes Evil*. Captivated, I checked out the book's contents. Though educated at a Southern Baptist seminary, the author sets forth five warning signs of religion becoming evil, the first of which is, "Absolute Truth Claims."² "9-11" facilitated a mega-shift in how many Americans view religion. With their own eyes, they saw what fanatic religious zealots did to the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York. As a result, and without discrimination, Charles Kimball lumps all "absolutists" together calling them a danger to society, whether they are Muslim terrorists of Al Qaeda, or fundamentalists of the Christian Right.

In view of his assertion that absolutism is inherently evil, how does the author, versed in, but perplexed by, Christian doctrine, handle Jesus' absolute claim to be "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). The author acknowledges the authority of Jesus' claim, but spins it by stating that though it is binding upon

those within the Christian community, it possesses no authority for those outside the Christian faith. In other words, members of a community of faith are entitled to believe their absolutist convictions as long as they do not attempt to impose them upon those outside their group. While absolutes can be authoritative within some communities, they are not for the whole of humanity. This way of thinking about truth is common to the mindset of postmodernism, and increasingly, such a mindset—we'll call it "spiritual correctness"—will, like political correctness, demand that all Americans conform their religious beliefs and spirituality to it.

Spiritual Correctness

Spiritual correctness asks that Christians see Jesus as "*a way* to God for them," but not "*the way* to God for all people." As it grows more secular, American religious thinking will correspondingly conform itself to the twins of pluralism (i.e., There are many paths to the same God.) and syncretism (i.e., There is truth in all religions.). To the irreligious as well as to adherents of other religions, "Jesus-only-ism" will smack of close-mindedness, arrogance, and intolerance. In such a charged social atmosphere, it will become increasingly unpopular to stand up for Jesus in the public square. Even if they are non-violent, Christian believers holding to Jesus-only salvation will be marginalized and belittled for reason of their "spiritual incorrectness." As the author of *When Religion Becomes Evil* has done, government policies and laws might even lump fundamental Christians together with Islamic terrorists. For what is viewed to be the corporate good of American society—that people of all religious faiths need to be at peace with and live in harmony together—the pressure upon the church and Christians to conform to a pluralistic and syncretic worldview will be immense.

In this context the question arises, is Jesus' name the Name above all names? Will professing Christians who maintain the truth claims of Jesus finally cave in to a spiritual correctness that will scorn them and label them as narrow minded bigots of the absolute? One liberal clergyman evidenced such a view when he said,

I am always fearful when we in the Christian community move beyond the rightful claim that Jesus is decisive for us, to the presupposition that non-Christians . . . are outside God's plan of salvation. That smacks of a kind of non-Jesus like arrogance.³

Even now, some prominent Christian leaders and pastors seem to be feeling the pressure and appear to be buying into a non-absolutist, inter-religious, syncretic, and pluralistic worldview. Given the “positivity and possibility” messages dominating American churches these days, it's but a small step from not wanting to offend people inside the professing church to not wanting to offend those outside the Christian faith.

Heaven and Hell

The more Christians view their faith and the spiritual plight of humanity through the lens of their emotions, the more inclusive and universal will become their perception of who will, or will not, be accepted by God when they die. Not only is the debate framed around *the determination*, or basis upon which God accepts people, but also around *the destination*, or end, of those whom God does not accept. In short, the discussion focuses upon the basis upon which a person gets to heaven, and for those who don't make it, what hell will be like. For reason of pluralism and syncretism, evangelicals are debating how people get to heaven, and if perchance they don't, what hell will be like.⁴ These debates are controlled by the assumptions that all truth is God's truth, and different religions are but different paths that lead their devotees to the same God.

Is Jesus the absolute and the only way to get to heaven? Is there really such a place as hell? And if there is, what is it like, and who will go there? Will sincere believers from other faith traditions be granted exemption from hell and go to heaven when they die? What about innocent babies, or young persons, when they die? Admittedly, these questions, as well as others, are heart rending. It shall not be the purpose of this chapter to address the implications of and answers to these questions. Others have already done so.

This chapter purposes rather to focus on the defection of the evangelical movement from the traditional understanding of the way to get to heaven, and to a lesser degree, what hell will be like.

The Destination of Hell: What is it?

Over one-half century of positive and possibility (P&P) preaching has rendered the mention of hell to be inappropriate in the church's public worship. The doctrine of hell is neither seeker-sensitive nor user-friendly. The *traditional* doctrine of hell holds that unbelievers will experience conscious physical and spiritual torment in separation from God forever. But, it is being asked, how can a loving God send anyone to a place of physical, mental, and spiritual torment for eternity? Alternative definitions of hell are therefore, being offered. These unorthodox alternatives include first, by subtracting physical torment from the definition, that hell is primarily *psychological*. Unbelievers will suffer mental, rather than physical, torment. As such, hell becomes a state of mind. Second, others speak of hell as *relational*. Unbelievers will lose loving communion with God forever. Hell is the loss of God's presence. Third, evangelicals define immortality as *conditional*. Because of their being saved, believers are given immortality at the time of their resurrection. Meanwhile at their resurrection, the unsaved receive no such gift and are put to, what is thought to be, a merciful second death. Their souls simply cease to exist. And four, stemming from a conditional perspective, some advocate the *annihilation* view that, upon their physical death and without any resurrection, unbelievers cease to exist. At the end of this life, their souls, along with their bodies, die forever.

The thought of endless punishment is abhorrent, which is why the Apostle Paul wrote to the church at Rome,

I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart.
For I could wish that I myself were accursed,
separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my
kinsmen according to the flesh . . ." (Romans 9:2-3).

But Bible believers must hold to the traditional doctrine of hell for the simple reason that Jesus believed in hell and taught that the place involves physical and spiritual torment (Matthew 5:22, 29-30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15, 33; Mark 9:41-49; Luke 12:5; 16:19-31). It appears Jesus was the original “hell-fire and brimstone” preacher, and as one has written, “Until someone better than Jesus returns from death with an assurance that hell is all a hoax, the church would fail to be loving if we didn’t talk about it as a reality.”⁵

Pluralism

Nevertheless, evangelical scholars are redefining hell into irrelevance as it has become unmentionable in the context of the non-threatening and user-friendly P&P message. D.A. Carson associates the current debate over hell to an invasion of pluralistic thinking into evangelicalism. He writes:

Despite the sincerity of their motives, one wonders more than a little to what extent the growing popularity of various forms of annihilationism and conditional immortality are a reflection of this age of pluralism. It is getting harder and harder to be faithful to the “hard lines” of Scripture. And in this way, evangelicalism itself may contribute to the gagging of God by silencing the severity of his warnings and by minimizing the awfulness of the punishment that justly awaits those untouched by his redeeming grace.⁶

At the heart of pluralism lies thinking typified by Pastor Rob Bell of Grand Rapids, Michigan, who reportedly stated,

One of the lies is that truth only resides in this particular community or that particular thought system. I affirm the truth anywhere in any religious system, in any worldview. If it’s true, it belongs to God.⁷

Then comments the reporter,

While calling Christ's way "the best possible way to live," Bell says Jesus did not claim one religion is better than another when He said He was "the way, the truth and the life." Rather, states Bell, "his way is the way to the depth of reality".⁸

What, it can be asked, is "the depth of reality"? By His claim to be "the way, and the truth, and the life," Jesus was not pointing the way to a reality on earth, but the way to eternity in heaven, the way to come to the Father (John 14:6).

In contrast to pluralism, Jude appealed to believers during the apostolic era to, "contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3). In the New Testament the word for faith (Greek, πίστις) can refer to either *the dependence of trust* (believing on the Lord Jesus Christ), or *the deposit of truth* (the Christian Gospel and the doctrines that surround it). The latter is the sense of Jude's appeal. Christians are to contend for "the faith," the Gospel message and truth deposited in the apostolic writings.⁹ As Paul referred to the astonishment of early Christians regarding his conversion, "they kept hearing, 'He who once persecuted us is now preaching *the faith* which he once tried to destroy'" (Emphasis mine, Galatians 1:22-23). Obviously, "the faith" Paul preached was the Gospel, which is the sense in which Jude speaks of the faith.

The parameters of the Gospel that Paul preached and Jude wrote about are definite, not indefinite; absolute, not relative; fixed, not in flux; and closed, not open. Because "the faith" was delivered to the saints "once" (Greek, ἄπαξ), it will not change or continue to be delivered. Christians are to contend for the Gospel message (excruciating exertion is implied) because, "certain persons have crept in unnoticed [we'll call them 'creepers'], those who were long beforehand marked out for this condemnation, ungodly persons who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ" (Jude 4).

Thus, the Gospel confronts the pluralistic and post-modern mindset. Post-modern evangelicals speculate that the door for discovering salvation truth is still open, while the New Testament declares that it's shut. Rob Bell speaks of the faith as if

God is somehow continuing to deliver it, that it possesses no fixed boundaries, and that it can be repainted in whatever color might be pleasing to us. Are there no fixed boundaries for what Christians can believe and still be considered Christian? In the thinking of those like Bell, is there no such thing as a deposit of divine truth in Scripture (See 1 Timothy 3:9; 4:1, 6; 2 Timothy 4:7.)? For those of a post-modern bent of mind, everything, it seems, is up for grabs. Christianity is still an emerging religion.

The Determination of Heaven: Who will go there?

The rule of thumb for P&P preachers is that in ministering to felt needs, they must be genteel and not hurt the feelings of their audience. They fail to accept the biblical fact that there are occasions when God is not nice. In the name of being nice, they, like Pavlov's dog, have conditioned themselves to accommodate their message to any audience. While they may say they believe in hell, they believe that very few, if any, persons are actually going there.

Consider this dialog that took place between Larry King and mega-church pastor Joel Osteen.

KING: What if you're Jewish or Muslim, you don't accept Christ at all?

OSTEEN: You know, I'm very careful about saying who would and wouldn't go to heaven. I don't know

KING: If you believe you have to believe in Christ? They're wrong, aren't they?

OSTEEN: Well, I don't know if I believe they're wrong. I believe here's what the Bible teaches and from the Christian faith this is what I believe. But I just think that only God will judge a person's heart. I spent a lot of time in India with my father. I don't know all about their religion. But I know they love God. And I don't know. I've seen their sincerity. So I don't know. I know for me, and what the Bible teaches, I want to have a relationship with Jesus.¹⁰

Note that like the author of *When Religion Becomes Evil*, Joel Osteen disengages himself from the absolutist claims of Jesus by saying that while in his Christian context those claims are right, it does not follow that they are right for, and demanded of, the devout of other faiths. Unlike John MacArthur and Al Mohler, who King has hit with the same question when they were guests on his program, Osteen avoided absolutism like the plague. To say that there is a hell and that persons of other faiths will not go to heaven runs counter to the positive thinking so deeply engrained in Osteen's preaching psyche.

Robert Schuller's "possibility" bent may explain why he has adopted a syncretic and pluralistic view of other religions (i.e., Christians, Jews, and Muslims all worship the same God.), and has advocated inter-spirituality (i.e., Schuller allowed Stephen Covey, a Mormon, to speak at the Crystal Cathedral). According to Schuller's mindset, and those of his ilk, there seemingly is no end to the "possibilities" which exist not only for Christians, but also for believers of other faiths, possibilities that include the prospect of going to heaven even if they do not believe in Jesus. Asserting the absolute Christ and the final destination of hell for those who reject Him ends all other possibilities. Given Schuller's predisposition to "possibility thinking," his preaching psyche will not allow for the finality of Jesus Christ and the existence of hell. According to such a predisposition, there are "other names" under heaven given among men by which the devout of other faiths can be saved (Acts 4:12). As they are fixated upon their desire to be positive, the only intellectual absolute for such preachers is that there are no absolutes, but only possibilities.

Syncretic Inter-Spirituality

Competition from, and cooperation with, other religions has always threatened the purity of the faith of Old and New Testament saints. Ecumenists of the modern era have attempted to lessen the tension and friction between different religious faiths by searching for any similarities that might exist between them. R.C. Sproul defined syncretism as, "the process by which aspects of one religion are assimilated into, or blended with, another religion."¹¹

Typical of a syncretic bent among Christians is to say that Christians and Muslims worship the same God. Of course, the obvious problem is that orthodox Christians have for 2000 years confessed Jesus to be God, while Muslims only recognize him as “a great” prophet, but not “the greatest” prophet who they believe was Muhammad. If Jesus is God, as the Scriptures declare Him to be (John 1:1; 5:18; 10:30-33; Philippians 2:6; Colossians 1:13-17; Hebrews 1:3; 1 John 5:20), and Muslims only acknowledge Jesus to be a lesser prophet than Mohammed, then the only conclusion that can be drawn from this impasse is that Christians and Muslims do not worship the same God. As first understood by the New Testament writers, and then later framed by The Nicene Creed (A. D. 381), Christians confess:

[I believe] in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten son of God, Begotten of his Father before all worlds; God of God, Light of Light, Very God of very God, Begotten not made, Being of one substance with the Father; By whom all things were made . . .¹²

In good conscience, and without major concession, no Muslim could sign on to this statement about Jesus Christ. Jesus and Allah cannot be syncretized. If syncretizing is engaged between two religions, Sproul warns it will lead “to fundamental changes in both religions.”¹³

Yet on Larry King Live during the time given for viewers to phone and ask him questions, Rick Warren commented:

And by the way, there’s truth in every religion. Christians believe that there’s truth in every religion. But we just believe that there’s one savior. We believe we can learn truth—I’ve learned a lot of truth from different religions because they all have a portion of the truth. I just believe there is one savior, Jesus Christ.¹⁴

What is readily observable from Warren's comment is that though believing there is but one savior, Jesus Christ, he views that various other religions possess truths from which Christians can learn and profit. But the Bible does not agree with his statement that "there's truth in every religion."

Baal Worship in Ancient Israel

This "truth-in-all-religions" mindset resembles the manner in which Israel flirted with Baal worship, and then incorporated it into her religious life. Like Warren, the ancient Hebrew people were syncretistic. The landscape of the nation became dominated by the "high places" that played an important role in the popular religion of that time. The rites practiced at the high places, and the cultic objects found there, are typically Canaanite: ritual prostitution (1 Kings 14:23-24; Ezekiel 16:16), child sacrifice (Jeremiah 7:31; 19:5; 32:35; Ezekiel 16:20), sacrifices and the burning of incense (1 Kings 22:43; 2 Kings 12:3), the stone pillar symbolizing Baal, and the wooden pole symbolizing the goddess Asherah (1 Kings 14:23; 2 Kings 17:10).

Elijah and Ecumenism

It was not that the Hebrews thought that Baal worship would replace Yahweh worship, but rather, that they could glean truths from it and supplement the worship of Yahweh with the best that Baal offered. That the god at Shechem was alternately known as Baal berith ("covenant of Baal," Judges 8:33; 9:4) and El berith ("covenant of God," Judges 9:46) indicates that Israel attempted to syncretize Baalism with Jehovah worship. As Jacob comments, "Thus by giving to Yahweh the title of Baal, the ancient Israelites saw not only a way of expressing the realities of sovereignty and of covenant, but an opportunity of integrating into the cult of Yahweh the positive values of the great Semitic deity."¹⁵ Another indication that Israel attempted to incorporate Baalism with Yahweh worship was how parents attached Baal's name to that of their children. Saul, Jonathan and David had sons named Esh-baal (1 Chronicles 8:33), Merib-baal (1 Chronicles 8:34) and Beeliada (1 Chronicles 14:7). Yet one has to be horrified at the

thought that the Israelites believed the worship of Baal possessed anything that could supplement the worship of Yahweh. Therefore, it was Baal worship that Elijah (“my God is Jehovah”) confronted on Mt. Carmel.

On this mount overlooking the Mediterranean Sea, and after the prophets of Baal had their chance to call down fire from their supposed god, the narrative states: “And Elijah came near to all the people and said, ‘How long *will* you hesitate between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him’” (1 Kings 18:21). The word “hesitate” (Hebrew, *hsp*, *pasah*) is variously translated “halt” (KJV), “straddle” (NAB), “waver” (NIV, NLT) and “falter” (NKJV) and “limping” (NRSV). One can deduce that Elijah is chiding the people for their religious syncretism and sophistry, not unlike that manifested among today’s evangelicals who want to extract what, in their limited and humanistic view, they feel are the best tenants of other religions and incorporate them into their belief system.

In his discussion of syncretism, Sproul concludes:

Every generation of Christians faces the temptation of syncretism. In our desire to be ‘with it’ or contemporary in our practices and beliefs, we yield to the temptation of being conformed to the patterns of this world. We accept pagan practices and ideas and seek to ‘baptize them.’ Even when we confront and engage alien religions and philosophies we have a tendency to be influenced by them. Every foreign element that creeps into Christian faith and practice is an element that weakens the purity of faith.¹⁶

The Pastor-Apostle John wrote to his flock,

[W]e are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life. Little children, guard yourselves from idols” (1 John 5:20-21).

Christians understand that Jesus is God, and therefore worship Him (John 20:28). Like the ancient prophet Elijah, the Apostles’

teaching neither approved of nor incorporated a syncretic approach to religion.

Regarding the New Testament's view of syncretism, Robert Speer stated decades ago,

There is . . . not the shadow of a trace of any warrant in the New Testament for religious syncretism, for a fellowship of faiths, for parliaments or conferences of religions where the differentia are waived and unity is sought in a common theistic or spiritual or ethical denominator. The New Testament knows only two categories. Christianity by itself alone, and all else by itself.¹⁷

And yet, among many other evangelicals, Joel Osteen, Rob Bell, and Rick Warren are on public record as stating that “there’s truth in every religion.” While the “truth-in-all-religions” idea possesses an air of intellectual sophistry and open-mindedness that might temporarily appease and ease tensions between Christians and the devout of other faiths, it is not a way of thinking about other religions that Moses, Elijah, other prophets, Jesus, and His apostles would endorse.

Crossover Spirituality

About *The Purpose Driven Life*, Rick Warren stated on CNN’s Larry King Live, “This book has enormous crossover, and everybody’s reading it.” After that statement, the following Q&A took place:

KING: Does that mean that a Jew, a Muslim, an agnostic, an atheist could benefit from this book?

WARREN: If that’s the question, sure. Anybody can benefit from it. In fact, the other day I heard about a story of a lady who was at a Little League game. She was Jewish and the lady sitting next to her was a Muslim. The Jewish lady was reading “Purpose Driven Life,” and the other lady next to her said, “What are you reading?” She said, “I’m reading ‘The Purpose Driven Life.’” She said, “I’d like to read it,

too.” She said, “Well, take mine, I’ll get another copy.” And I thought, OK, here’s a Christian pastor writing a book that a Jewish lady is passing on to a Muslim lady.¹⁸

At the outset, let it be said that there’s nothing wrong with Jews and Muslims reading *The Purpose Driven Life*. What is concerning though, is that certain parts of the book might give a wrong impression about Christianity to Jews, Muslims, agnostics, or atheists, that Christianity is merely good advice, not Good News. Here’s what I mean.

In his chapter “Becoming Best Friends with God,” and taking his cue from the mystic Brother Lawrence (c. 1614-1691), whose thoughts comprise the book *The Practice of the Presence of God* which another monk compiled after Lawrence’s death, Warren recommends that, “Practicing the presence of God is a skill, a habit you can develop.”¹⁹ Then after using the example of musicians who practice often to get good at what they do, he recommends that, “you must force yourself to think about God at different times in your day. You must train your mind to remember God.”²⁰

Inter-Spirituality

Such a “practicing of the presence of God” can easily blend with the Islamic model of spirituality which requires Muslims to think about Allah at the times they kneel to pray in the direction of Mecca. Muslims would consider these prayer exercises practicing the presence of God. But beyond Islam, through alms, devotions, lighting candles, meditations and so forth, people from all different religions, from the pantheistic to the monotheistic, discipline themselves to “practice the presence” of God, whoever the divinity—he, she or it—might be. Presumably, that’s why believers go to a temple, synagogue, mosque, church, or retreat into solitude to meditate. In the 1950s even New Age guru Joel Goldsmith wrote a book titled, *Practicing the Presence*.²¹ Rick Warren is not the only one to recommend practicing God’s presence.

About this whole business of practicing the divine presence, a couple of questions arise. Must the children of God,

who are “partakers of *the* divine nature,” force themselves to think about God? (See 2 Peter 1:4). Or, given their new nature and being “in Christ” after conversion, should thinking about God become instinctive to them? According to the New Testament, the divine presence is imparted to us at conversion as the Spirit of Christ comes to reside in us (Ephesians 1:13-14). New Covenant believers don’t “practice” the presence of God. They are alive and live in it! For reason of the indwelling Spirit of Christ, God is present in believers wherever they happen to be (See John 4:21-24.). Christians are the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19). New Covenant believers are alive with God’s dynamic presence in them.

Accordingly, Warren agreeably states: “Because God is with you all the time, no place is any closer to God than the place where you are right now.”²² Yet troublesome to me, and others, is his quotation of the *New Century Version* (NCV) paraphrase of Ephesians 4:6b as a proof text. It reads: “*He rules everything and is everywhere and is in everything.*”²³ Before addressing the error implicit in the NCV rendering of the verse, and Warren’s citation of it, a fundamental point of theology needs to be clarified.

Pantheism and Panentheism

We should note that God is not everything. To believe that God is everything is *pantheism*. God is not the mosquito that bites me on a camping trip. Neither is God in everything, which is *panentheism*. God is not in the big landscape rock that decorates my neighbor’s front yard. To believe that God is everything, or in everything, contradicts the biblical theology that God is holy and personal.²⁴ God is a person who is transcendent above, and separate from, His creation. For Christians to remain Christian, it must never be said of them that, “they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.” (Romans 1:25; See verses 18-25.). It is pagan thinking to believe that God is His creation or that God permeates His creation. No! God is separate from His creation, and His creation is separate from Him (Genesis 1:1-31).

Theological Error

Rick Warren's quotation of the *New Century Version* of Ephesians 4:6b contains serious theological error. The NCV quotation is a poor choice. Therefore, his surrounding commentary on generic spirituality is misleading. From Warren's citation of the verse, crossover spiritualists may justifiably deduce that because God is *in everything* (panentheism), he is thereby present *in everyone*. I know Warren does not state that God's indwelling is universal amongst all humanity, but that is what a crossover reader might infer from the NCV paraphrase of Ephesians 4:6b. On this point the question becomes, is God immanent in everything, which implies He is present in everyone? If so, this is an eastern religious and New Age mystical assumption that is so much the vogue of pop spirituality in America today.

Some Christians are concerned about the NCV version of Ephesians 4:6 which Warren quotes and employs to discuss "practicing the presence of God." The controversy caused spiritual counterfeits author Richard Abanes to defend Rick Warren's use of that NCV text as a basis for practicing the presence of God. Abanes explained that all Warren meant to teach was the immanence of God, that God is present "not only above and beyond the universe, but also throughout it (His omnipresence)."²⁵

To accept Abanes' apologetic that Warren is not a pantheist, several issues need to be resolved. First, the NCV translation of Ephesians 4:6 directly states that God is "*in everything*." That may not be what Warren believes, or meant to communicate, but that is what that version states. Though the version may not directly infer a pantheistic way of viewing God, at minimal, it gives a pantheistic impression of God. Though Abanes disclaims that Rick Warren is a pantheist, and did not mean to promote such a concept of God, Warren chose to quote a modern paraphrase that infers such a view of God.

Second, in the context of Ephesians 4, Paul did not affirm the immanence and omnipresence of God in the universe. What he did state is truth regarding the church universal, the Body of Christ (vv. 1-16). In Ephesians chapter 4, Paul sets forth teaching that being a UNITY (vv. 1-6) and consisting of a DIVERSITY (vv. 7-

13a), the church ought to grow together into MATURITY (vv. 13b-16). The basis for such UNITY amidst DIVERSITY is that throughout the church universal there is “One God and Father of all, who *is* above all, and through all, and in you all” (v. 6b, KJV). Being in the Father and Son, and united by the Spirit, the Body of Christ is permeated by the “one God and Father of all, who *is* above all, and through all, and in you all” (Ephesians 4:6b, NKJV; Compare John 17:20-23.). In this majestic statement, Paul affirms God’s presence in and lordship over the church. Though God is present in the farthest and darkest recesses of the universe (Psalm 139:7), Paul was not stating that in this context. He is teaching that while God is universally present throughout the cosmos, He is particularly present in and throughout the believing and regenerate church.

Third, if by his NCV citation of Ephesians 4:6b we assume that Warren meant to teach that the immanence/omnipresence of God is the basis upon which persons are to practice God’s presence, Warren’s invitation to practice God’s presence is inter-religious. Because God is everywhere, all persons, no matter what their religion, are invited to practice God’s presence. By quoting the NCV, Warren provides a basis for ecumenical spirituality, a practicing of the presence of a generic God by all persons, no matter what their religious persuasion might be. Because God is everywhere, everyone can practice the divine presence.

But the basis upon which Christians are conscious of God’s presence is not that of *divine immanence*, but *divine indwelling* which the Bible states is not common to everyone everywhere. Jesus told his disciples that “the world cannot receive” the Holy Spirit “because it does not behold Him or know Him.” He then issues a qualifier to the disciples saying, “*but* you know Him because He abides with you” (John 14:17). And Jesus further states to the disciples that for reason of the coming Spirit baptism (Acts 2; 1 Corinthians 12:13), the Holy Spirit “will be in you” (John 14:17b).

Richard Abanes’ apologetic on behalf of Rick Warren does not adequately answer concerns regarding the accusation of pantheism. Warren’s NCV citation of Ephesians 4:6b was a

terrible choice. Further, it is theologically misleading, and leaves the door open for ecumenical spirituality. It would have been better if both Abanes and Warren would have admitted that the NCV is a bad paraphrase, and that the author had inconsiderately quoted it. But for whatever the reason, they did not. To the point that God resides in everything, Warren's quotation of Ephesians 4:6b is unqualified and therefore misleading. It does not follow that what is true of the church (the called out ones) is necessarily true of all God's creatures and creation.

Saints and "Ain'ts"

Though all human beings possess a life-force, a soul, which marks them out to be bearers of the divine image, their soul is without God in the world. Clearly Jesus did not view that God resided in all persons (John 8:44). Neither did Paul. The apostle stated, "But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him" (Romans 8:9b). Spiritually, Paul divided the world of people into two groups. He said there is one group called "saints," those within whom the Spirit of Christ dwells; and he implied there is another group we'll call "ain'ts," those within whom the Spirit of Christ does not dwell. Now the condition by which the Spirit of Christ enters and lives within a person is faith in Jesus (Ephesians 1:13), and at that juncture it becomes impossible to see how the Spirit of Christ can dwell in Jews or Muslims who deny that Jesus is God, gave His life as the atonement for their sins, and was raised from the dead. According to the New Age spiritual paradigm, some sort of "Christ-spirit" (logos) is common to and dwells within all humanity. However, that is not the teaching of New Testament Christianity.

One blogger insightfully evaluated the spirituality Warren communicated in his earlier book, *The Purpose Driven Church*. He notes that *Forbes* called it, "The best book on entrepreneurship, management, and leadership in print." But then he goes on to say, "Oh, by the way, it's got some new age spirituality mixed in with the management and marketing theories, too."²⁶ Of *The Purpose Driven Life*, it could also be said, "Oh, by the way, it's got some new age spirituality mixed in."²⁷

Based upon Warren's unqualified words, crossover readers might be led to assume that God lives within them when in fact, He does not. Only Christian believers have the right to personalize these words of Jesus: "I am with you always, even to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:20). Only believers can affirm Christ's spiritual presence, "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Colossians 1:27). Excepting the benefits of common grace that all unbelievers receive from Him, God is nevertheless no personal companion with or comfort to unbelievers. He is neither "with" them nor "in" them. We move on to another issue raised by Warren's advocacy of purpose driven music.

Rick Warren's charges that adherence to and advocacy of traditional music is cultural elitism. At *Pastors.com* he states, "To insist that all 'good' music was written in Europe 200 years ago is cultural elitism."²⁸ This charge and its possible implication for the Christian message ask for comment.

Elitist Music, Elitist Message?

If the traditional music of the church can be viewed as culturally elitist, then can the message of Christianity be thought of in the same way? You see, there's danger in thinking the way Warren thinks about music. Assuming for a moment that traditional Christian music is culturally elitist (I do not think it is), I ask, what if an assessment like Warren's becomes the paradigm for evaluating not only Christian music, but also the Christian message? If one will charge traditional Christian music as being culturally elitist, then corollary thinking might view the Christian message the same way. In the face of the world's many religions, is it elitist to think that Jesus is the only way to be saved? Transfer of such thinking from the music to the message would validate the acceptance of pluralism, the idea that in comparing various religions of the world, no one of them is superior to the others, or possesses a corner on the truth. Because they are products of and represent different cultures, all faiths are therefore equally valid.

This accusation has been, and continues to be, made against Christianity by ecumenical spiritualists all the time—that it's elitist to think Jesus is the only way to be saved. This of course,

contradicts Jesus' own testimony and the apostolic witness to Him (See John 14:6; Acts 4:12; 1 Timothy 2:5.). Further, if the early church had adopted the pluralistic way of looking at Jesus, then that church would have extinguished the Christian faith. Though Rick Warren has not directly affirmed this to be the case, that is where consistency of thinking between the music and the message could lead.

Ecumenical Spirituality

But perhaps such shading of the message has, to some degree or another, already begun to lead Warren in this direction. There is indication that from the Christian perspective, Warren's message was not exactly "kosher" before a Jewish audience. For example, follow this report of Warren's address to Jewish rabbis and later at a Los Angeles area synagogue.

Like a Fish Dinner

After lauding Warren's management savvy and evangelical zeal, one Jewish journalist remarked of his address to the rabbis,

Good for him and his flock—and not so bad for us either. His teachings apply to 95 percent of all people, regardless of religious belief. As he put it to a group of rabbis at a conference last year—using a metaphor that might be described as a Paulian slip: "Eat the fish and throw away the bones".²⁹

Now in his speaking to Jewish rabbis, I'm not certain what Warren meant when he told them to eat one thing and throw away the other. In the context of both the subject and the audience he addressed, it might be assumed that he was telling the rabbis to accept the part of his message they liked, the management savvy and generic psychological/spiritual advice, but throw away what they didn't like, namely, anything that might impress or offend them as being too evangelical, like a "Jesus message." While Warren did not directly say so, his choice of words give the impression that the message ought to be separated from his methods, with the former being inappropriate for Jews, and

therefore, to be discarded like “bones” after a fish dinner. That is the implication of what he said in the context of the audience to which he said it.

Having observed him preach to a Friday night synagogue audience, the same Jewish journalist and editor remarked that in addition to Warren’s obvious management skills, “The other secret to his success is his passion for God and Jesus” though noted the reporter, “Warren managed to speak for the entire evening without once mentioning Jesus—a testament to his savvy message-tailoring.”³⁰ Warren also reportedly told Rabbi Ron Wolfson who leads the Synagogue 3000 program, an effort to revitalize places of Jewish worship, that,

[H]is interest is in helping all houses of worship, not in converting Jews. He said there are more than enough Christian souls to deal with for starters.³¹

One can only wonder how someone can possess a “passion for the Christ” and yet not mention Jesus’ name. As it was his practice to first go to the synagogue upon arriving in a new town, was it Paul’s design not to offend his audience by omitting any mention of the Lord’s name? Hardly! The record shows that in the synagogue Paul did preach Jesus Christ, and for doing so, he met resistance, and was sometimes expelled and run out of town! (Acts 13:14-41, 44-46; 14:1-7; 17:1-34; etc.). Comparing his overall reception to that of the apostle, one English clergyman lamented, “Everywhere Paul preached, it caused riots. Everywhere I preach all they want to do is drink tea!” Warren is no Peter who told the Jewish Pentecost crowd, “And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

Conclusion

In their acceptance of pluralism and that “ism’s” implication for watering down the doctrine of hell and the exclusivity of salvation by faith alone through Christ alone, evangelicalism is sacrificing the Word. In some quarters, the

evangelical movement has redefined what it means to be lost forever (hell) even as the movement's church leaders and preachers cultivate an inter-spirituality that no longer takes it serious that Jesus is the only way of salvation. Such evangelicals forget that "the temple of God" has no agreement with idols (2 Corinthians 6:16; Read 6:14-18.). Unlike Jesus, the apostles, and the prophets, evangelicalism no longer plays hardball with its religious competitors as the "hard lines" of Scripture are being erased. Seemingly, evangelicals are more intent that the world views them as being nice and open minded than they are in holding to and declaring the truth. The Word is being sacrificed upon the idolatrous "high places" of inter-spirituality.

And not only is the Word being sacrificed, but it is also being suffocated by contemporary Christian music (CCM) that, with its focus upon the ecstasy of the moment, promotes and compliments mystical spirituality.

Chapter Four Endnotes

¹ Karen H. Jobes, *1 Peter* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2005): 162.

² Charles Kimball, *When Religion Becomes Evil* (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins Publishers, 2002): 39-70.

³ United Methodist Bishop C. Joseph Sprague, quoted by Joseph M. Stowell, *The Trouble With Jesus* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2003): 16.

⁴ See *More Than One Way? Four Views of Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips, Editors (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995) and *Four Views on Hell*, William Crockett, General Editor (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996).

⁵ Cedric Pulford, "Unless Jesus Says Otherwise Hell Exists Asserts Evangelical Report" *Christianity Today*, April 1, 2000. Online at www.ctlibrary.com/ct/2000/aprilweb-only/23.0b.html

⁶ D.A. Carson, *The Gagging of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996): 536.

⁷ Quoted by Charles Honey, "Repainting Faith," *The Grand Rapids Press*, July 30, 2005, D3.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ See Richard J. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983): 32-33.

¹⁰ CNN *Larry King Live*, “Interview With Joel Osteen,” June 20, 2005. Transcript available online at www.transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0506/20/lkl.01.html

¹¹ R.C. Sproul, *Essential Truths of the Christian Faith* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1992): 155.

¹² “The Nicene Creed” in Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, Volume 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1990 Reprint of 1931 Edition): 27-28.

¹³ Sproul, *Essential Truths*, 155.

¹⁴ CNN *Larry King Live*, “Interview With Rick Warren,” November 22, 2004. Transcript available online at www.transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0411/22/lkl.01.html

¹⁵ Edmond Jacob, *Theology of the Old Testament* (New York, NY: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1958): 57.

¹⁶ R.C. Sproul, *Essential Truths*, 156.

¹⁷ Robert E. Speer, *The Finality of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1968): 76-77.

¹⁸ CNN.com, “Author: Everything on this Earth has a purpose,” Wednesday March 6, 2005. Transcript available online at www.cnn.com/2005/SHOWBIZ/books/03/15/cnna.warren/index.html

¹⁹ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002): 89.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ The book’s bibliography is: Joel S. Goldsmith, *Practicing the Presence: The Inspirational Guide to Regaining Meaning and a Sense of Purpose in Your Life* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1958).

²² Warren, *Driven Life*, 88.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ The worldview that can be inferred from Warren’s citation of the NCV paraphrase of Ephesians 4:6b is panentheism. This worldview holds that while God is present in the material universe, he is separate from it much as a human soul is differentiated from the human body. Materially, God is immanent in creation while at the same time he is spiritually transcendent above it. Such a worldview is not what Paul either teaches or infers. What is true of the spiritual Body of Christ (i.e., the church and its members), that God thoroughly resides in them together wherever they might be in the world, is not true of his material creation.

²⁵ Richard Abanes, *Rick Warren and the Purpose that Drives Him* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2005): 95.

²⁶ Emphasis mine, Jonathan Huston, “Violent Video Game Marketed Through Mega-Churches (Part 2),” *Talk To Action*. Available online at www.talk2action.org/story/2006/6/1/82458/92817

²⁷ See Warren Smith's identification of Rick Warren's New Age thinking in *Deceived On Purpose, The New Age Implications of the Purpose Driven Church* (Magalia, California, 2004). In his chapter "Spiritual But Not Religious," Marshall Davis agrees with Warren Smith's assertion that Rick Warren advocates a form of New Age spirituality. See *More Than a Purpose* (Enumclaw, WA: Wine Press Publishing, 2006): 141-171.

²⁸ *Pastors.com*, Ministry Tool Box, Issue #190, 1/19/2005, Rick Warren, "Match the music to the people you want to reach: Three thoughts about music in worship." Available online at www.pastors.com/RWMT/?id=190&artid=2924&expand=1

²⁹ Rob Eshman, "Jesus' Man Has a Plan," June 6, 2006, *JewishJournal.com*. Available online at www.jewishjournal.com/home/preview.php?id=16029

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

FIVE

Contemporary Music and Evangelicalism

Suffocating the Word

Behold, the days come, saith the Lord God, that I will send a famine in the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord.

The Prophet Amos, Amos 8:11

If we know what lies behind a particular medium, are able to point out how it works and why it sways people the way it does, then we can lessen its power over us.¹

Dr. Arthur W. Hunt, III

“Feel the music,” runs an advertisement for the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra. Subject to the individual impulses, tastes, and delights of composers and consumers, there is much about music that is creative, experiential, and ethereal. But as every genre from love songs to military marches indicate, music possesses a mysterious, if not occult, power to sway the soul.² Music produces feelings and affects moods, explaining why one English rock group calls itself the “Moody Blues.” However, the question for Christian believers becomes, do their musical preferences, acquisitions, and experiences contradict or compliment the Holy Spirit’s work, as He bears witness to the Word of God in their souls (See Galatians 5:16-25; Ephesians 5:18-19; 2 Peter 1:21-22.)?

Or do musical experiences become sensual ends in themselves?

The Greatest Religious Authority

One liberal religion columnist observed, “Church folks fight endlessly over which has the greatest authority: Scripture, tradition, or reason. The answer, of course, is ‘none of the above.’”

The authority closest to our hearts is music.”³ Unfortunately, and though I disagree with him on almost all other issues, on this one, I think the author is right.

Because of its trans-cultural appeal, rock music has become the dominant musical expression of the world in general and western civilization in particular. Upon the hearts of people everywhere, rock music possesses and exercises a powerful influence.

Not only has rock music become the world’s most dominant music, but it has also been incorporated in the worship and praise services of a majority of churches, from evangelical to liberal. Given the sensate and impressionistic culture in which we live, and as churches that follow the Willow Creek or Saddleback models of ministry know, Christians are drawn to church more for tunes than the Truth, more for songs than the Scripture, and more for music than the Message.

With such influence, one is left groping for answers to questions like: Why does music possess such a mesmerizing grip upon the hearts of people? Across the entire spectrum of belief, from evangelical to liberal, why have so many local congregations chosen to employ drumming music in their “worship celebrations”?

Good Question

A recent *World* magazine article “Holy Hip-hop,” contains the descriptive subtitle, “Calvinism meets thumping baselines in a new breed of Christian rap.” At a Saturday night meeting in which Calvinist pastor and theologian John Piper introduced rapper Curtis “Voice” Allen, Piper warned the largely white audience that the music would, “‘thump’ a bit more than typical Bethlehem fare.” This caution, along with subsequent performances by “Voice” at two Sunday morning services, ignited controversy in Reformed circles about the appropriateness of employing rap, a musical expression that derives from rock-‘n’-roll, in worship. Even Curtis expresses reservations about the place of rap in worship. One song from his album *Crucible*, in which he teams up with fellow Reformed rappers from the group *Christcentric*, contains a song

titled “Contribution.” The lyrics question the acceptability of hip-hop’s “contribution” in the worship of God. In part they ask: “So God do you accept my contribution? Does hip-hop not get props with your son? . . . Lord let me know, is the flow inherently evil?”⁴

Good questions—and they ought to be asked about all genres of music employed to worship Almighty God, not just hip-hop. Does God accept the “contribution” of traditional music? Does He accept untraditional songs, tunes that contemporary worshippers commonly refer to as their “sacrifice of praise”? Can the flow of some musical choices be inherently evil? Of his critics who protest the use of hip-hop, “Voice” opines, “They were so emphatic and so sure about something that Scripture really doesn’t clearly define. There’s no verse saying this particular music is good or bad.”⁵ Oh, really? As this study will show, Scripture does speak to the issue of music.

An Answer

We live in a sensate culture that confuses emotional catharsis with genuine spiritual experience, and when corporately engaged in at worship services or rock concerts, the beckoning rhythm and beat of rock music can provide moments of cathartic ecstasy that lift people out of themselves. From a historical, biblical, and theological perspective, this chapter *will address* issues regarding contemporary Christian music in general, and *will demonstrate*, to one degree or another, that rock music induces moments of cathartic ecstasy that may be classified as spiritual-mystical experiences, *will rebut* with biblical evidence the oft repeated ruse that the Bible says nothing about music, and *will argue* that individuals and congregations are not therefore free to determine the rightness or wrongness of music according to their personal, subjective, and collective opinions and tastes.

My Position

As the subject of church music is addressed, let it be stated at the outset that I am not against the composition and singing of new Christian songs. At one time or another, every song was a “new” song. I do not subscribe to the theory that all good hymns

were written exclusively during the 18th through the early 20th centuries. Just because a hymn is traditional does not mean it is good. For example, I have a problem with the hymn “He Lives,” a song about the resurrection of Jesus. The last refrain asks and answers, “You ask me how I know He lives? He lives within my heart!” I like to point out to people that the resurrected Jesus Christ lives whether I experience His presence in my heart or not. Existentially Jesus lives within believers (Colossians 1:27). But for that life to be possible, Jesus must also live historically and eternally without us (1 Corinthians 15:1-59). Nevertheless, great hymns through which the Holy Spirit will witness to the Person and Work of Jesus in the believer’s heart are being written today (John 15:26). Among others, Stuart Townend’s “How Deep the Father’s Love for Us” comes to mind.⁶

In the local church I pastor we often begin our worship by singing a praise chorus or two. I say this because what I am about to state regarding contemporary Christian music (CCM) might be construed to mean that I’m a “died-in-the-wool” traditionalist who is against all new songs when, in both theory and practice, I am not. At the time of their composition, all songs were new and “untraditional.” From the perspective of Christianity’s beginnings, even the piano and organ are of recent origin. But whether traditional or contemporary, each piece of music, and its instrumentation, ought to be evaluated upon its own merit. With this stated, I proceed to state my reservations regarding the church growth movement’s use of rock music to attract people and build attendance.

But any answer regarding the appropriateness of employing rock music to worship God must begin with a consideration of the music’s history and character.

Spiritual

Although rock music developed in blues bars in New Orleans during the 1940s and early 1950s into the sensuous, rebellious, and mystical medium it is today, history informs us that it originated in of all places, African-American churches! The history goes something like this: “‘Rocking’ was a term used by

African Americans for *the rapture they experienced* at certain religious events, and *the term also referred to the powerful rhythm found in the music that accompanied that religious experience.*” The Internet article goes on to explain that early recordings of these church services indicate “rocking” was part of the religious experience of that culture and in those congregations where “*the ecstatic congregant was overwhelmed by the rhythm of the music and the presence of the Holy Spirit.*”⁷ Indeed, the medium’s ability to induce spiritual experiences may account for one genre of rock being called “soul.”⁸

Sensual

Yet all the while the powerful rhythms were being employed among these churches for the purpose of inducing experiences presumed to be movements of the Holy Ghost, secular musicians hijacked the music and developed it in night clubs. The result was that “rocking” came to be understood as referring to “either dancing or sex, or both.”⁹ In his landmark cultural study on the state of higher education in the 1980s, *The Closing of the American Mind*, Professor Allan Bloom stated that, “rock music has one appeal only, a barbaric appeal, to sexual desire . . . sexual desire undeveloped and untutored.”¹⁰

In the middle 1950s, enter Elvis Presley, “who freely borrowed (or stole) from black musical traditions in both content and style.”¹¹ Presley’s Memphis music was rooted in the context of his Assembly of God background, his style mimicking and being supplemented by what he saw and heard while attending services at nearby African-American churches.¹² According to one observer, Presley’s style grew to be like that of “a ‘Pentecostal enthusiast bursting with the spirit . . . trembling in ecstasy and speaking in tongues.’”¹³

Seditious

Many attribute rock’s rise and appeal during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, for reason that the music not only stimulated a pubescent desire for sex among youths, but also incited them to rebel against the moral and parental restraints which inhibited that drive. “From its beginnings,” reads an article from the Internet

encyclopedia *Wikipedia*, “rock and roll has been associated with youth, rebellion, and anti-establishment.”¹⁴ Of the music James Miller states: “Embedded in an ostensibly defiant pattern of gestures, the music and its idols offered a focus for fantasies of youthful revolt and sexual mastery—a ritual representation of potentially unruly impulses.”¹⁵ According to Gene Veith, rock music “promotes moral permissiveness and has an edge of rebellion against authority.”¹⁶ Take rock music, combine it with a rebellious spirit, a counterculture ideology, an uninhibited and promiscuous sex drive, and mix them together with the alcohol and drugs that enhance the sensuality of the music, and what do you get? You get *Woodstock*, the cultural landmark of the Baby Boomer Generation.¹⁷ These are the incontrovertible facts about the rise of rock music. It is what it is.

The Jesus Movement

The Jesus Movement on the West Coast during the 1960s saw many counter-culture individuals (i.e., “hippies”) convert to Christianity. Chuck Smith, the well-known leader of the Calvary Chapel movement, sought for creative ways to do “cutting edge” outreach to the hippie culture. In that process, “Smith and his disciples sowed seeds that in time helped transform evangelical worship and churches nationwide.”¹⁸ Larry Eskridge, of the Institute for the Study of American Evangelicals, states that “Calvary Chapel’s influence on mainstream evangelicalism has been massive. It was among the first proponents of contemporary worship and early on developed a seeker-sensitive church atmosphere.”¹⁹ Expository Bible teaching combined with an alternative worship style attracted thousands to Calvary Chapel. Some of the music of the movement—I think of Larry Norman’s folk songs—was born out of genuine love for Jesus and the Word. But down through the years, what began as a ministry morphed into an industry.

Imitating its secular predecessor, Christian soft or hard rock musicians attempt to put a spiritual spin upon what essentially is a sensual and seditious musical expression. Customer expectation causes the CCM industry to keep pushing the envelope. New songs

are constantly being composed, produced, and marketed, as Christian rock bands perform their “gigs” in some churches and at Christian rock festivals. Millions, if not billions, of dollars are involved in a music industry that attempts to mimic its secular counterpart by catering to the fleshly tastes and demands of the Christian youth subculture. In the name of outreach and evangelization, the industry excuses the whole business of Christian rock. But the problem with Christian rock is that the market is Christian. For the most part, Christian youth purchase and listen to the music. Secular youth remain untouched by Christian rock because their bands provide more of the music they want, and play it better.

As one music shop owner lamented over Christian rock’s inability to “crossover” and to claim a share of the secular market: “They’re too holy for the world and too worldly for the church.”²⁰ At this point James’ rebuke seems appropriate. “You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (James 4:4).

It’s About Us!

By Rick Warren’s admission, Saddleback Church is known as, “The flock that likes to rock!” On his *Pastors.com* website he addressed the controversial subject of church music as he shares “three thoughts about music in worship,” which are: “Music is powerful”; “You can’t please everyone”; and, “It’s the message, not the music.”²¹

In this website article, Warren admits to having made two mistakes in the early days of Saddleback. First, he underestimated music’s power, and second, he failed to recognize that one musical style would please everybody. On the latter mistake he relates that at its beginning the church engaged musical styles ranging from “Bach to rock.”²² About that experiment, he relates, “We wanted to make everyone happy, so we used classical, country, jazz, rock, reggae, easy listening, and even rap. The crowd never knew what was coming next.” Then he asks, “Do you know who we pleased? Nobody! Do you know who we frustrated? Everybody!”²³ Note

how his statement focuses upon what kind of music the people want. It betrays thinking that in the confines of user-friendly churches the music is about us—about the music the people want and demand—and not about God.

Doublespeak

One observation needs to be made concerning Rick Warren's statement about trying to please the folks. He often engages in what T.A. McMahon calls *doublespeak*.²⁴ In *The Purpose Driven Life* Warren rightly says, "It [worship] isn't for our benefit! We worship for God's benefit. When we worship, our goal is to bring pleasure to God, not ourselves."²⁵ But Warren's "it's-not-about-us" statement is pseudo-deferential. By trying to accommodate the music to the tastes of the audience, the implicit message is, "It is about us." In one breath one cannot superficially say, "It's not about us," and then do a one-eighty turnabout and say that worship music is about pleasing peoples' tastes and preferences. Scripture states that, "A double-minded man *is* unstable in all his ways" (James 1:8, KJV). It is obvious that the music of seeker-sensitive and market-driven churches is "about us." One must ever please the customer, or face the prospect of declining sales and going out of business.

Rick Muchow says of Saddleback services, "At Saddleback our decibel level ranges from 98 to 108 decibels (every three decibels doubles the volume level). Saddleback seekers don't just want to hear the music—they want to feel the music."²⁶ Again, Muchow's statement about wanting to "feel" reveals much about the intent of Saddleback's music. The decibel level is about the sensory impact of the music upon the listeners, an intent that is man, not God-centered. Following the Saddleback model, thousands of churches provide the experience of upbeat music with a loud drumming beat. But not only do contemporary congregants want to feel their worship, they also want to see it.

The new worship paradigm not only seeks to attract customers with live bands consisting of drums, guitars, keyboards and lead singers, but also through drama, liturgical dance, multimedia presentations, lighting variations, comedy, entertaining

talks, and so on (See 2 Timothy 4:3.). Recently, I viewed one church that held a “Retro Sunday” in which members donned their 1960s style polyester clothing, and were entertained by an Elvis impersonator—attired in a black wig, dark sunglasses, white shoes, white cape, and a white and gold-sequined jump suit with a v-neck plunging to the middle of his chest—who mimicked Elvis as he sang the great Christian hymn, “How Great Thou Art.” The audience raucously applauded the performance.²⁷ Willow Creek Community Church featured a pure jazz style “worship” prelude that was performed by the piano man of Chicago, Gene Garcia, and accompanied by guitarist Dave Garza and the Willow Creek band. As usual, the audience applauded the performance.²⁸ Upon observing these audience-driven performances, one can only wonder, what’s coming next?

David’s New Song

Groping to find biblical support for his thinking that the church can employ any type of music to worship God, Rick Warren cites Psalm 40:3 where David related that, “He [the Lord] put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God” (NCV).²⁹ To Warren, David’s “new song” equates to rock music, or any other innovative musical style that becomes popular in the culture, and subsequently is adopted by the church. But does this reference to David’s “new song” support a congregation’s use of any new music to worship God?

The adjective “new” (Hebrew, *vdj*, *chadash*) can also mean “fresh.” As a verb it can mean “renewed” (1 Samuel 11:14; Psalm 51:10; 103:5). Of the new song sung by David, Willem VanGemeren comments,

[T]he song was not necessarily a new composition. The newness lies in the event of salvation history. The recent victory is one additional chapter in a long series of God’s involvements with his people. An older [traditional?] hymn of praise could well have been used . . .³⁰

By his mention of the “new song”—we’ll call it a grace song because God put a fresh spirit in his heart to sing—David meant to state that his recent deliverance from a life-threatening situation provided him with a renewed and fresh perspective of God’s providential care for him. After the time during which his trial distracted him from singing, God rekindled David’s desire and renewed his spirit to sing and testify about the Lord’s deliverance. David’s “new song” does not equate to rock music, or any other innovative music that the culture might invent, and the church might then adopt, to worship God.³¹ The song David sang was not new. Rather, the spirit with which David sang was renewed.

Around Sound

Advocates of rock worship ascribe neutrality to its sound that the music does not possess. Rick Warren has stated,

There is no such thing as “Christian” music; there are only Christian lyrics. It is the words that make a song sacred, not the tune. There are no spiritual tunes. If I played a song for you without words, you’d have no way of knowing if it were a ‘Christian’ song.³²

Try telling that to the biblical prophet Amos.

In Amos’ day as in ours, the music of ancient Israel signaled the nation’s decadence, especially amongst the upper class. Ignoring the plight of the less fortunate as they partied in gluttony and drunkenness, these people lived in denial of God’s coming judgment upon them (Amos 6:1-7). One means through which they luxuriated themselves was music.

Of apostate Samaria, Amos described musicians, “Who improvise [or chant] to the sound of the harp, *And* like David have composed songs for themselves . . .” (Amos 6:5). Amos’ indictment of the music was fourfold.

First, the apostates composed new songs. The verb “who improvise” (Hebrew, *!yfrph*, *hapartim*) is rare. The KJV translates it “chant.” Other versions translate it as “strum” (NIV); “sing idly” (NKJV); or “sing idle songs” (NRSV, ASV). The noun form of the

word can refer to fallen or scattered grapes (Leviticus 19:10).³³ Like wasted fruit, the idea of scattered, repeated, chanted, improvised, and indiscriminate musical lyrics is suggested. To manufacture “feel good” party experiences like the pagan Canaanites around them, the Samaritans combined their innovative music (v. 5) with feasting (v. 4), drinking (v. 6a), and perfuming (v. 6b). In doing so, they distracted themselves from considering the divine wrath that Amos announced was going to come upon them (vv. 3, 6b-7). Like the Samaritans, does the contemporary church’s manufacturing of a feel-good and party-like atmosphere distract people from considering the subject of God’s wrath and judgment?

Second, the Samaritans invented new instruments. The word “harp” (Hebrew, *lbn*, nebel) derives from a root meaning “fool” or “senseless.” Translated by other versions as “viol” (KJV) or “stringed instruments” (NKJV), “harp” (NASB) can also, in its noun form, refer to skin storage bottles indicating that the musical improvisation may also have involved drumming.³⁴ If the word refers to a musical instrument, then it refers to “a portable harp, lute, or guitar (with a bulging resonance-body at lower end)”³⁵ The bass guitar, it seems, is not a new invention! Old Testament scholar David Hubbard observed that the instruments “(lit., ‘implements of song’) were probably stringed and percussive instruments that could be developed in almost endless varieties . . . to accompany riotous singing.”³⁶ As Laetsch commented of the apostates, “The better such noisemakers suited the intention of their inventors, to affect the nerves, create excitement, stir up passions, the higher was the inventor honored.”³⁷ In this vein, one can note the esteem with which the contemporary church holds its innovative musicians and performers.

Recently *The Christian Science Monitor* ran an article titled, “From US Churches that are Growing, A Sound of Drums.” According to the Hartford Institute for Religion Research, growing churches employ the use of drums and electric guitars. People, so the article states, love to hear “top-notch singers, horns, and drums at Sunday services.”³⁸ Is not our day similar to that of Amos’?

The Sons of Korah, the ancient Hebrew Temple singers, longed for God. They sang, “As the deer pants for the water

brooks, So my soul pants for Thee, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God . . .” (Psalm 42:1-2a). Deep within the heart of man is a spiritual emptiness that only God can fill. In light of the longing for God residing in believers, A.W. Tozer (1897-1963) noted that carnal worship distracts Christians from their desire for God, and gave this caution: “We’re so determined we want to be happy” he said, “that if we can’t be happy by the Holy Ghost we’ll drum up our happiness. Religious ‘Rock and Rollers’! We’re going to get happy somehow [even] if we’ve got to beat it up with a tom-tom.”³⁹

Third, not unlike rock music, the Samaritan’s decadent songs emphasized sound above content. Improvised new lyrics served new sounds. Literally, the Samaritans invented songs “upon” (Hebrew, **ל**, al) the “mouth” (Hebrew, **פ**, peh) of their new stringed instruments (harp, guitar, drums, lyre, etc.). Like much contemporary music, the sounds drove the songs. Commentator E.B. Pusey (1800-1882) noted that the Samaritans’ musical style, “probably [described] a hurried flow of unmeaning, unconsidered words, in which the rhythm of words and music was everything, [and] the sense, nothing.”⁴⁰ He further characterized their music as, “artificial, effeminate music . . . frittering the melody, and displacing the power and majesty of divine harmony by tricks of art, and giddy, thoughtless, heartless, soulless versifying . . .”⁴¹ Pusey, who wrote about the time of the Civil War, might well have been describing the music (including rap) that a majority of today’s churches incorporate into their worship!

And fourth, the Samaritans’ music was self-centered. Like their gluttony, the “new” music was not for God’s glory, but for their selfish indulgence and entertainment (“It’s about us!”). Conning themselves into thinking that like David’s, their music was for God, the Samaritans really were improvising music “for themselves” (Hebrew, **ל**, lahes). Decadent church music finds artists composing and audiences participating in music *for themselves*.

About much contemporary music Professor Michael Hamilton notes, “One cannot sing praise songs without noticing how first person pronouns tend to eclipse every other subject.”⁴² But in the praise songs of heaven, the first person will not be the

pronoun of choice (See Revelation 4:8, 11; 5:9; 15:3-4.). In heaven people will neither sing for themselves or about themselves. Unlike the Samaritans of Amos' day, and many churches of our day, the heavenly multitude sings to God ("It's about Him!").

To justify their invention and improvisation, the musicians and their audiences invoked the name of David to claim that their musical celebrations were for God's glory. About the Samaritans' music, John Gill (1697-1771) commented that, "these men invented new [songs] to indulge their carnal mirth and jollity, in which they thought themselves to be justified by the example of David."⁴³

David and Martin Luther

As the Samaritans' used David's name to certify their music, contemporaries invoke the name of Martin Luther to justify their rock worship songs. To make his hymns palatable to reserved and/or reluctant participants, contemporaries argue that Luther used the popular tunes of his culture (i.e., bar room music), and that we are therefore justified in using the rock music of ours. As someone once observed, "Lesser men try to justify their frivolities by comparison with greater men." But Amos did not allow apostate Israel to get away with such a ruse.

Dr. Paul S. Jones, whose professional knowledge qualifies him to do so, discusses why contemporary Christian music does not equate to Luther's hymnody. ⁴⁴ In summary, Jones argues that modern CCM cannot be compared to Luther's hymns for four reasons.

First, the words of *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God* were not adapted to a tavern hymn. Luther himself composed both the lyrics and the music. Second, 20th century pop music did not exist in Luther's day. There is no cultural equivalency between the music of our era and his. Therefore, it is an anachronism to compare modern CCM to Luther's hymnody. Apples are not being matched to apples. Third, Luther never justified using the culture's music with the begging question, "Why should the devil have all the best tunes?" In fact, Luther never asked that question. It's not extant anywhere in his published works. And fourth, sacred words are

incompatible with the sensual and rebellious musical medium we know to be rock. Like oil and water, they do not mix. Jones determines that from “easy-listening” to the “heavy-metal” varieties, rock is inappropriate for worship because, “The music’s destructive and purposely anti-God, anti-authoritarian nature remains undiminished even if it is played by well-meaning Christians.” Then the author asks, “Does music of rebellion fit the worship of our majestic God?”⁴⁵ The answer is obvious. It does not.

Down through the years, I have noticed that beginning with the “baby boomers,” and continuing with their children (the “baby busters and “echo-boomers”), growing indifference and antagonism toward the authority of the local church. I will grant that carnal people can give cause for disillusionment by doing things that turn-off young people from the local church. Where we sinners are involved, things can become unbecoming of Christ’s character. But Jesus died for all redeemed sinners who comprise the true church. Yet since the late 1950s and 1960s to the present day, one must wonder just how much negativity on the part of the youth culture toward the authority of the “traditional” church has been stimulated by, and is traceable to, the seditious and rebellious impulses inherent within rock music.

Though music can and does engender experiences, true spiritual feelings do not reside in any music *per se*. In our hymns and songs, we ought to be concerned not about what might please the audience (Because it’s about God.), but rather about what pleases God (Because it’s not about us.), and to that awesome end, any music will not do. Certain types of music can artificially induce and control human emotions thereby causing worshippers to focus upon themselves (We like the music because it makes us feel good.). But as the attention of worshippers focuses upon themselves and how they feel in a particular moment of ecstasy, such feelings can distract people from worshipping God.

Godly music draws people’s attention off of themselves and turns their hearts toward God, and the wondrous redemption wrought in, by, and through the Lord Jesus Christ. As they turn believers’ minds and hearts toward Jesus Christ, godly songs can

relieve and deliver believers from the carnal self-centeredness, fleshly appetites, and sinful emotions that can so easily vex our souls.

“Debased music” wrote E. B. Pusey in 1860, “is a mark of a nation’s decay, and promotes it.”⁴⁶ And what was true for those who lived in Samaria yesterday can be true of those who live in the church today. As it turns our minds and hearts away from God and unto ourselves, debased music not only marks the decadence of the church’s worship, but also promotes it.

Regarding comments like Rick Warren’s and other CCM advocates—that tunes are essentially impartial—Dr. Arthur Hunt writes, “Those who like to defend all forms of contemporary Christian music under a banner that ‘all music is neutral’ either have their heads in the sand or know nothing about the histories and values that surround music forms.”⁴⁷ Unlike Rick Warren, Amos did not have his head in the sand, or believe music was impartial, and neither should we. Like morality, music is not neutral.

Sights and Sounds

Warren states that there is “no such thing as ‘Christian music.’ There are only Christian lyrics.”⁴⁸ I disagree. Unlike the other four senses, Warren assigns moral neutrality to hearing, neutrality that for reason of the total depravity of human nature, hearing does not possess. Jeremiah’s indictment of the human heart stands: “The heart is more deceitful than all else / And is desperately sick; / Who can understand it?” (Jeremiah 17:9). And if the heart of man is deceitful, then it also stands that the hearing of man can be deceived.

As there are lyrics which are not Christian, so there are sounds that are not Christian, and it is arbitrary of Warren to assert otherwise. As there are sights (i.e., pornography, violence, etc.) that are immoral, so there are sounds diametrically opposed to Christian truth, morals, and values. Sound compliments sight, and vice versa. Like the other four senses (sight, touch, feel, and smell), hearing is not immune to fleshly and sinful desires. If the doctrine of radical

(meaning “core”) depravity of human nature means anything at all, it means that hearing is no less vulnerable to corruption than sight.

As facilitated by accompanying music, theatre goers may voyeuristically tear-up in sympathy with the characters as they observe heart-rending scenes. Movie directors are careful to select music appropriate to such scenes because the sounds must complement the sights and the message of the movie. Any director will tell us that a particular scene, an emotive one in a tender and wholesome love story for example, demands complementary music. The sound of the music will make or break the scene. And if music is not neutral in the movies, then neither is it in worship. Certain sounds of music do not complement Christian truth, and are therefore incompatible with Christian worship. I argue that, to be effective, the Christian Word needs a complementary musical witness.

In this vein, can we really think that heavy metal “rock” is a neutral musical medium? Is acid rock, a genre of 1970s rock often written and performed under the influence of LSD, neutral? Or, are the thumping, wailing, and screeching sounds of it anti-Christian? Can rap music, a medium given over to a thumping sexual beat accompanied by inane lyrics strung together without connection to civil or logical discourse, host meaningful Christian thought? I point to these examples to demonstrate that there are sounds of music that are flagrantly unchristian and that Warren’s categorical statement that *only unchristian lyrics make for unchristian music* is objectionable. Just as there are lyrics which are not Christian, so also there are musical sounds that are not Christian. Marshall McLuhan stated, “The medium is the message.”

What will be the Music of Heaven?

At this juncture, allow the interjection of some questions. Dear reader, do you sincerely think that a sensual and seditious medium like rock will be employed to worship God in heaven? Can we really think that heaven might be compared to attending a rock concert at a darkened arena or stadium, where with flashing strobe lights, rising smoke, and florescent instruments, skin-tight-costumed performers jump and stomp around the stage all the

while swaying their pelvises at the audience and screaming their godless lyrics into microphones? Will heavy metal, acid rock, shock rock, country, jazz, reggae, rap, the variety and beat goes on, be used to worship God in heaven? Is music really neutral? If your heartfelt answer is, “Yes,” then I might suggest you read Paul’s words in Philippians where he wrote of those who are the “enemies of the cross of Christ, whose end is destruction, whose god is *their* appetite, and *whose* glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things” (Philippians 3:18-19).

But if your answer is, “No,” and like so many in Christendom today your preferred medium of worship is rock music, or a facsimile thereto, then I have a question for you. Why should we use a genre of music to worship God on earth that will not be employed to worship God in heaven? Do you really think that for one moment the holy and righteous God will tolerate the music of sensuality and sedition in His presence? Can a musical sound so associated with and tainted by sexual immorality, drug use, rebellion, false religion, and violence, be used to praise and worship God? Do you really think, as Rick Warren does, that before God any ole’ music will do? Or, are there sounds that are utterly unfit for heaven? Remember Lucifer. When he was cast out of heaven for all of his “*I willing*,” “the pomp and music of [his] harps” were thrown out with him (Isaiah 14:11).

Guilt by Association

For reason of its association with rebellion against God, the sounds of rock music are utterly unfit for God’s presence. Just as there is music totally inappropriate to and incompatible with a tender love scene in a movie, so there are raucous sounds of music wholly incompatible with believers expressing their love for and worship of God. About the compatibility of rock-‘n’-roll and the Christian faith, Arthur Hunt has stated,

Today rock is mainstream, which is why so many Christian artists so casually adopt its style. I realize it might be unpopular to say it, but one cannot simply insert quasi-spiritual lyrics into a voluptuous

aesthetic and call it ‘Christian.’ We should at least be as honest as most rockers, who readily admit to what their music is all about—rebellion and sex.⁴⁹

According to Hunt, and in answer to the question of rapper Curtis “the Voice,” there is music in which the flow is inherently evil. But observers have also noted the similarity of what goes on at both contemporary worship services and secular rock concerts.

The Commotion of Emotion

One former worship team leader offers the following observation:

Misdirected spiritual hunger can produce a desire to throw off all restraint, and music can be the inducement. A quick glance at a rock concert is very revealing. Hands in the air, bodies gyrating, and fans screaming in ecstasy are all the standard. Whipped into a frenzy by loud, pulsating music, they become unhinged, adopting a different model of behavior because of the atmosphere.

As much as we would balk at the suggestion, the same basic mood pervades many congregations during worship time.⁵⁰

Worship should possess an emotional component, but those emotions should always be informed and controlled by the intellect. Worshipers are to love the Lord with a balance of heart, soul, *and* mind (Matthew 22:37). Arthur Hunt warns that if intellect is subjugated to passion, worship moves closer “to a bodily experience. And this should be a concern because pagan worship is also a bodily experience.”⁵¹

Worship must not therefore be primarily a passionate and physical experience as many Christians today pass it off to be. If it is, then it resembles Israel’s seduction to worship the Golden Bull (Exodus 32:1-35). Israel worshipped the bull *physically*. The people “rose up to play” (v. 6b). The people also worshipped the bull *passionately*. “Now when Joshua heard the sound of the people as

they shouted, he said to Moses, “There is a sound of war in the camp” (v. 17).

Rick Warren takes a couple of shots at the musical preferences of traditionalists. On his *Pastors.com* website he accuses traditionalists of “cultural elitism.” He writes, “To insist that all ‘good’ music was written in Europe 200 years ago is cultural elitism.” He then continues, “In churches, we also need to admit that no particular style of music is ‘sacred.’” He finally charges that, “To insist that one particular style of music is sacred is simply idolatry.”⁵² His accusations against a traditionalist view of church music are serious and must be addressed. In rebuttal, I do not suggest that traditionalists are immune from idolatry (See Matthew 15:9). They are not. But neither are contemporaries. In fact, as will be shown, they may be more susceptible.

Vulnerability to Idolatry

Nebuchadnezzar ordered all the people of his nation to the plain of Dura where he demanded a show of loyalty to him by commanding that they bow down before the golden image he had made to himself. The idolatrous worship of the ninety-foot-tall image involved pomp and circumstance provided by, of all things, music! Daniel recorded the king’s decree: “To you the command is given, O peoples, nations and *men of every* language, that at the moment you hear the sound of the horn, flute, lyre, trigon, psaltery, bagpipe, and all kinds of music, you are to fall down and worship the golden image that Nebuchadnezzar the king has set up” (Daniel 3:4b-5).

While ministering in the St. Louis area two decades ago, I developed a friendship with an older man who had been a pioneer missionary after World War II on the island of what was then Dutch New Guinea. The island is now divided into New Guinea to the east and Indonesia to the west. With his wife and two young sons, my friend worked with other missionaries among Stone Age people from the late 1940s until the early 1980s. In case you may not be aware, on that island tribal people killed and cannibalized their enemies and neighbors.

The incident I cite involves a fellow missionary of my friend who retired from missionary service to live on the West Coast in the early 1980s. One converted New Guinean came to America to visit the retired missionary, my friend's former co-worker. Together during his visit, the missionary took the converted Indonesian to a contemporary worship service, drumming beat and all. Not totally understanding the English language, the Indian's heart was devastated by the sounds he heard and the sights he saw. He exited the service depressed of heart. Noticing his depression, the missionary asked, "What is the matter?" The former cannibal turned to the retired missionary and asked, "What were they doing trying to call up the evil spirits?"

I bring this incident up to contest Rick Warren's assumption that it is cultural elitism to think that one type of music might be superior to another. Fact of the matter is, given the implications and purposes of some music, one form of music may be different from another, and the difference may be between heaven and hell.

A Mock Sacrifice

Music can provide occasion for idolatry. Inherent with the experience of rock music there resides idolatrous potential. In his landmark study of the rise of rock-'n'-roll, James Miller described how, in a ritual of idolatrous worship, the renowned guitarist Jimi Hendrix would break and burn his instrument after a concert. Miller writes, "[H]e ended his performances by making out of his guitar a burnt offering, kneeling over it with mock reverence, pouring lighter fluid on the instrument, setting it aflame—and *then*, in a frenzy of feigned passion, smashing the instrument up."⁵³

After half century of dominance, social commentators observe that the culture is now bored with rock, and that the musical medium has exhausted its potential for further innovation and variation. Rock is either dying or dead. Among the reasons for its demise, Thomas Beaudoin notes, "What killed rock was idolatry, the sin that haunts every experience of rapturous (or even mundane) self-transcendence."⁵⁴ And if its secular parent idolatrized itself to death, then contemporary Christian rock

possesses the same potential. Linked articles on the *Christianity Today Library.com* website provide a candid and honest assessment of the rock genre when it is adopted into the worship of the church.

Thin Line, or No Line?

In an article “A Prayer with a Beat,” Rob Moll, a sympathizer with Christian rock, writes that when rock music is employed in church services, “the line is thin dividing the sacred and the profane.”⁵⁵ Again he states that, “the line between worship and hedonism can be thin.”⁵⁶ Note Moll’s assessment that when rock music is employed, a “thin line” exists between the “sacred and profane,” and between “worship and hedonism” (i.e., the philosophy of life that makes the pursuit of pleasure the purpose of life). It can be argued that, based on the beat’s beckoning to dancing, sex, and rebellion, any so-called “thin line” between worship and hedonism, between the sacred and profane, is no line at all. If there is a line, it exists because promoters of rock worship arbitrarily draw it.

In relating the music to the experiential and mystical, Thomas Beaudoin, a former guitar player in a Christian rock band, observes that rock-‘n’-roll music provides “access to the self release that is part of every human encounter with God.” Then ominously he adds, “Musical and sexual experiences are . . . our occasions of idolatry par excellence.”⁵⁷

In trying to uphold the standards of God’s righteousness and holiness, why would any conscientious church flirt with profanity or hedonism in the style of worship it employs? With Saddleback’s emphasis upon “rock worship” and the evaluation of it by individuals sympathetic with contemporary worship music, can Rick Warren justifiably think his musical choices are immune from idolatry? I don’t think so. If the testimonies of Christian hipsters are to be believed, then rock music makes church worship even more vulnerable to idolatry. In fact, it may facilitate it.

At a recent Cornerstone Festival the Christian rock group Pedro the Lion performed. The question for reporter Andrew Beaujon and the thousands of teenagers at the crowded concert

was whether David Bazan, the rebellious bad boy of Christian rock and the group's front, would "flaunt the festival's unwritten ban against curse words and include his lyrical f-bombs." He does, reported Beaujon, and "the audience squeals."⁵⁸ It could be argued that for reason of its religious pretense, so-called Christian rock is even more vulnerable to the sin of idolatry than its secular counterpart.

Exorcising "the Mood"

Of music's influence upon the human soul and body, Robert Jourdain wrote,

[M]usic possesses us . . . Such possession is most evident when a piece seems to take hold of our bodies and make us move. We "get into" the music's rhythms and harmonic cadences and feel compelled to see them through. It is not absolute possession of course. Someone's shout of "Fire!" is exorcism enough to shift our attention elsewhere.⁵⁹

Out of Touch

When the music stops and the worship team puts down their instruments and steps down from the stage, feelings go flat even though "the possession" lingers. A quiet void, something like an emotional letdown, occurs. You can feel it. The mood ends. About that moment, let me ask a few questions. Will the audience do an emotional flip-flop and tolerate an abrupt prophetic message that convicts—this causes people not to feel good about themselves—of "sin, righteousness and judgment" (John 16:8). Could a man of God—an Isaiah, Jeremiah, John the Baptist, or even Jesus—come to the stage in the aftermath of the emotional moment created by the music, confront and offend a "touchy-touchy-feely-feely" audience by preaching a message of repentance? Or, given the emotional state it is in, will the audience demand a message that is in touch with its "feelings" and further sooth its emotions? Being possessed by the ecstasy of the musical moment, will the audience allow those feelings to be exorcised and shocked by some preacher shouting "hell-fire"? Even though they would be

biblical, certain types of messages are out of sync with emotional moods created by certain types of music. Audiences do not want to be shocked out of emotional ecstasy into spiritual reality.

Because of its emphasis upon sound, rock-'n'-roll overwhelms and obscures the message. After all, during our youth, how many of us were attracted to the sound of a song before we understood the lyrics of it? Executives in the music industry called these catchy sounds “the hook” by which young listeners would be attracted to buy the record thereby increasing the recording company’s bottom line. Market-driven ministries use the sounds of rock music to “hook” audiences. And if sounds trump lyrics, and music has a way of doing exactly that, then by its very nature such music cannot attract people to the Word. If a certain type of sound draws attention to itself, then that sound cannot be of the Spirit for it is His business to draw people’s attention to Jesus. Of the Holy Spirit’s ministry Jesus said, “He shall glorify Me” (John 16:14). In the end, the sound will only distract the hearers from the Savior, and listeners will be left with fleeting ecstatic experiences, and that is all.

Driving the Message

Music can drive the message. Allow me to illustrate how. The way contemporary worship services are structured and choreographed, a majority of the time is devoted to the singing of praise songs led by a worship team consisting of guitarists, drums, electric organ, perhaps other musical instruments, and a lead vocal singer(s). The worship team plans the music so as to create a certain corporate mood of good feeling amongst the audience that will supposedly allow the Spirit to work. The intent of the music is to create good feelings on the part of the audience about God and their relationship to Him. The worship team is apparently unaware that the Holy Spirit does not depend upon them, for “the wind [the Spirit] blows where it wishes” (John 3:8). Nevertheless, the worship team attempts to create a mesmerizing mood in the audience that is both real and ethereal. For good reason, some music is called “mood music”!

Counterfeit Unity

Given the inherent power of the medium, the power Rick Warren speaks of may lie in rock music's ability, as has been demonstrated by citation of both secular and sympathetic sources, to induce an ecumenical and emotional oneness that imitates, even counterfeits, the spiritual oneness among believers for reason of their being united together "in Christ" by Spirit baptism, a union that is facilitated by the Holy Spirit and appropriated by faith in the Word, and not through a corporate working-up of emotional togetherness. To the extent that supposed seekers experience a mystical oneness through the music without the Word (Remember Bloom's assessment that as a medium rock is essentially *alogon?*), then such unity is counterfeit. Rock worshippers may assume the mystical oneness they experience in and among them is of the Holy Spirit, but the reality is that their feelings are being generated by the manipulative and mechanical means of music. And the proof is that secular concert goers exhibit and testify to the same types of mystical-spiritual-emotional experiences as congregants attending a contemporary rock worship service.

Authentic Unity

Authentic spiritual oneness comes only as unbelievers trust the Gospel and are baptized by the Holy Spirit into spiritual union with Christ, His Body, the church, and with one another. The true unity of being together "in Christ" cannot be manufactured through musical, mystical, or ecclesiastical mechanisms. It can only happen within the human heart by the sovereign working of the Holy Spirit as He convicts individuals to place their faith in the Savior, thereby placing them together into the Body of Christ.

We turn to address the subject of Christian lyrics. Christian lyrics are about Christ.

Toward a Biblical Theology of Worship Music

Paul wrote to the church of God at Colossae, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord." (Colossians 3:16).

Note: The “word of Christ” ought to be central to the music and worship of the church which includes “psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.”⁶⁰

The Christ-centricity of New Testament Hymns

Good worship music, lyrics, and singing proclaim truth about God and His Christ. Jesus’ Person and Work are to be both the subject and object of the church’s praise.⁶¹ In addition to the Old Testament Psalms, the New Testament contains, alludes to, and quotes from several apostolic era hymns.⁶² For example, it is thought by scholars that the *Kenosis* passage of Philippians 2:5-11 was excerpted from an ancient hymn.⁶³ Paul’s poetic lines in 1 Timothy chapter three, and verse sixteen, are thought to have been part of an ancient hymn.⁶⁴ Other Scripture passages quoted in the New Testament evidence that they were probably ancient Christian hymns (John 1:1-14; Ephesians 5:14; Colossians 1:15-20; Hebrews 1:3; 1 Peter 1:18-24; 2:21-25; 3:18-22; Revelation 5:9 ff., 12; 12:10-12; 19:1ff.).⁶⁵ These hymns exhibit profound Christological content that the Holy Spirit, whose ministry is to bear witness to Christ, led the apostles to quote and include in the New Testament (See John 14:26; 15:26-27.).

The lyrics of the “new song” in the Apocalypse illustrate the Christ-centricity of godly singing. Of the blended group of creatures and elders, John records that, “they sang a new song, saying, ‘Worthy art Thou to take the book, and to break its seals; for Thou wast slain, and didst purchase for God with Thy blood *men* from every tribe and tongue and people and nation’” (Revelation 6:9, KJV).

Of the hymns quoted in the New Testament, a scholar noted that, “these hymns have a common pattern of thought . . . They are related to the person and mission of Christ Jesus.”⁶⁶ The hymn remnants quoted by Paul were about Jesus Christ, the Word. The “new song” in Revelation was about Him.

For apostolic inclusion in the New Testament, the “Christ-hymns” seemingly needed to pass a threefold test of “theological content, stylistic construction and unusual vocabulary.”⁶⁷ The commercially oriented CCM industry seems to fail on all three

counts. With some exceptions, the music's theology is either shallow or non-existent, the prose repetitive, and the language unexceptional. Why is it so? Is it because, as Dr. Bloom observed, the essence of CCM is inherently inhospitable to thought and reason and therefore, at odds with and averse to hymns containing good theology, poetic construction, and exceptional vocabulary? If that is the case, then in part the music and lyrics fail the great commandment of Jesus to believers to, "love God . . . with all your mind" (Mark 12:30). God seeks people to worship Him in a balance of "spirit and truth" (John 4:23).

Sensualities of Song

Ezekiel was a popular prophet among exiled Jews. Impressed by his oratorical skills, great crowds gathered to hear him preach, but his messages had no impact upon the hearers. The crowds were attracted to the style of Ezekiel's speaking, but paid no attention to the substance of his message. It was as if the message went in one ear and out the other. To explain to Ezekiel why the apostate nation was so enamored with his oratory, but so disconnected to his message, the Lord employed a musical analogy that reflects negatively upon sensual music. He explained to the prophet: "And behold, you are to them like a sensual song by one who has a beautiful voice and plays well on an instrument; for they hear your words, but they do not practice them" (Ezekiel 33:32).

First, we observe that there are songs which are sensual. Versions translate the two nouns in Ezekiel 33:32 as "sensual song" (NASB), as "love songs" (NIV, NLT, NRSV), and as "a very lovely song" (KJV, NKJV, ASV). Only the first mentioned translation, the NASB, approximates the Hebrew meaning of the words. The noun "sensual" (Hebrew, *bg*[, 'agab) derives from a root word denoting the sexual lust of a harlot (Ezekiel 23:7, 9, 12).

Furthermore, the Hebrew noun can be understood as a plural of intensity (Hebrew, *!ybg*[, 'agabim), thereby suggesting strong sensuality.⁶⁸ The Lord is saying to Ezekiel that his preaching to apostate Jews in Babylon was like the "*sensualities* of song." At this point a second reference to Professor Allan Bloom's statement,

that rock music appeals to “sexual desire . . . sexual desire undeveloped and untutored,” seems appropriate.

Third, we can note that, as the medium usurps the message, sensual music does not facilitate obedience to God in its listeners. As the Lord told the prophet, “[T]hey hear your words, but they do not practice them.” There is music in which subjective feelings are everything and objective faith is nothing.

From the Lord’s analogy to Ezekiel, we can understand that, unlike the Psalms of the Old Testament and the spiritual songs mentioned in the New Testament, the essence of some music is sensual. As an end in itself, and unlike the Word of God, such music provides no lasting spiritual benefit for the lives of its hearers. That is why devotees of rock must return again, and again, and again, to hear it. It only supplies immediate and momentary ecstasy. As John Taylor commented, “Popular music in every age has been renowned for its ability to move its hearers only fleetingly.”⁶⁹ In, of, and by itself, music does not generate genuine or enduring experiences with God, David’s harping for Saul demonstrating the point (1 Samuel 16:14-23). David’s music temporarily relieved Saul of his angst, but did not cure him of it.

In light of the fact that the Lord does classify some music as sensual, we would do well to ask ourselves this question: How much contemporary Christian worship music is like the “sensuality of song” that provide temporary emotional ecstasy, but give no call for faith in and obedience to the Word? In a question that is relevant to the whole spectrum of worship, Douglas Stuart asks, “[W]ho *obeys* entertainers?”⁷⁰ The Lord’s word to Ezekiel indicts rock music for reason of its sensual overtones. And for reason of its sensual essence and allure, may not the use of rock music to build church attendance be compared to the method of false teachers who, “entice by fleshly desires, by sensuality?” (2 Peter 2:18).

Living in the Spirit

In accord with previously cited evidence, and assuming that the diagnosis of rock’s essence is accurate (that the music promotes rebellion and obsesses over sex), how can such a musical

medium, so tainted by sensuality and riot, complement and facilitate the Holy Spirit's ministry in the lives of believers? For example, one evidence of the Spirit's filling is "submission" (Ephesians 5:21). How can a music that stimulates rebellion facilitate godly submission? How much of adolescent rebellion against authority is induced by rock music? After all, "[R]ebellion *is as* the sin of witchcraft (divination), and stubbornness *is as* iniquity and idolatry" (1 Samuel 15:23, KJV). Another proof of "walking in the Spirit" is that believers will abstain from, "immorality, impurity, sensuality," all of which refer to sexual sins (Galatians 5:19). How can rock music, a medium so immersed in sensuality, facilitate the Holy Spirit's work of separating the child of God from it? The answer on both counts is that, because of the nature of the beast, it cannot!

Because it is known to promote sex and rebellion, both of which stand opposed to the Spirit's sanctification work in believers' lives, why should churches employ a medium of music that promotes what the Holy Spirit opposes? Does not the employment of the rock medium in contemporary worship resemble Israel's worship of "the golden bull," an idolatrous worship which Moses described as being engaged in by "an obstinate people" who expressed themselves through "singing" and "dancing" (Exodus 32:9, 18; and perhaps in "nakedness," v. 25, KJV)? The church however, is to have no participation with "the unfruitful deeds of darkness" (Ephesians 5:11), and believers are to "Abstain from all appearance of evil" (1 Thessalonians 5:22, KJV).

Spiritual Songs and the Spirit's Filling—a Symbiosis

Opposite from undefined feelings *per se*, "spiritual songs" exalt the Person and Work of Jesus, communicate the Word, and magnify the Gospel thereby encouraging and facilitating genuine spiritual experiences and godly living. Authentic spiritual experiences in and among Christians result from the Spirit's filling which is witnessed to by believers "speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs" (Ephesians 5:19). Spiritual songs focus upon the objective Person and Work of Jesus Christ (John 1:1) as recorded in Holy Scripture (2 Peter 1:19), and as

witnessed to by the Holy Spirit (John 15:26). Lasting spiritual experiences ought to be induced by music that is wedded to the biblical Word which bears witness to Jesus Christ.

In the regenerated heart, the results of the Spirit's filling seem identical to the requirements of Spirit's filling.⁷¹ To my understanding the relationship between spiritual songs and the Spirit's filling is symbiotic; that is, in the lives of believers in whom the Spirit dwells, corporate singing of spiritual songs complements, even facilitates, the Spirit's filling (Ephesians 5:22), something that is essential to a believer's sanctification. Therefore, the question arises, how can rock, a medium that subtly nuances or overtly advocates rebellion and sex, complement the Spirit's filling in believers individually, or churches corporately?

Conclusion

Let us return to the question posed by the Reformed rapper "Voice" in his a song titled "Contribution," a question that ought to be asked of all the music employed to worship almighty God. The question reads: "So God do you accept my contribution?"

Rock and "The Rock"

A syncopated beat does not lend itself to thoughtful or logical discourse, and if the medium is not reasonable or logical, then neither can it be theological ("theology" means a logical Word about God). Excepting those songs containing ballad like lyrics that tell a good story, or perhaps make a truthful point, most rock music consists of writers and performers attempting to mix and match inane and repetitive lyrics to an incessant rhythmical beat. Some categories of rock—rap, heavy metal, and punk, etc.—are not only incompatible with the Word, but are hostile to it. I conclude that the music of "rock" is incompatible with the message about the Rock. As a medium of musical expression, rock cannot host the Word, and therefore, cannot deliver the Word.

Away with the Noise of Your Songs!

Isaiah rebuked ancient Israel for her ungodly worship (See Isaiah 1:1-15.). Note that he prefaced that rebuke with an order to Israel, “Hear the word of the Lord,” the implication being that amidst all the activities and exercises of worship, the people had become indifferent to and were not listening to God’s Word. We can note the similarity of Isaiah’s day to ours. When during an hour long service, 40-45 minutes are devoted to mesmerizing the audience’s emotions through singing repetitive choruses under the leadership of a worship team, and 10-15 minutes are assigned to the preaching of a soothing message, both the Word and the Truth are smothered, and the authentic work of the Holy Spirit is quenched (1 Thessalonians 5:19-20). In contrast, heaven seeks “true worshipers” who “shall worship the Father in spirit and truth” (John 4:23).

Because of the self-centeredness, sensuality, and seditious essence of rock music (It is after all, about us!), the Lord might well tell those who, on any given Sunday, congregate at the grandest of contemporary worship celebrations, “I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies . . . Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps” (Amos 5:21, 23; NIV). All of us, whether contemporary or traditional, ought to reflect upon the Lord’s rebuke spoken through Amos the prophet to the crowd of his day. Would the Lord be similarly repulsed by the so-called worship of our day?

One can only look askance at evangelical churches that have so uncritically adopted a musical medium so intertwined with sensuality and sedition, and employed it to worship of the Holy God. And when questioned regarding the propriety of utilizing such a medium in worship, advocates and practitioners of rock worship react as if critics were attacking a “sacred cow” (See Exodus 32:1-10.).

But maybe such a reaction betrays a deeper problem; and that is, when engaging rock music, a medium so animal, so sensual, and so personal, the musical experience becomes an end in itself. As worshippers engage the music for reason of the feelings it induces in them—something that, given our sensate culture’s

addiction to the rock beat, traditional hymns do not provide even though many of those hymns possess a rich spiritual meaning based on the Word—to the natural or carnal person the singing of traditional hymns seems bland, even boring, in comparison. If that is the case, then employment of the rock medium is idolatrous, especially so as, whether consciously or subconsciously, contemporaries employ a music that suites their tastes and satisfies their fleshly appetites. All the while, as they indulge their cravings, they con themselves by calling it “worship.”

The organ and piano have been placed into mothballs, crosses and pulpits removed from sanctuaries, casual dress adopted, and the stodgy service structure that once involved hymn singing and expository preaching has been jettisoned. Taking its cue from the youth culture, the new worship paradigm now dominates among evangelical congregations to the point that services featuring the singing of traditional hymns and biblical preaching are an endangered species. The new way of doing worship has become the dominant liturgy, and a majority of evangelical Christians are flocking to it. Taking their cue from the Saddleback and Willow Creek models of ministry, congregations continue to shift their worship from traditional to contemporary.

In many respects, rock music has become an ecumenical catalyst that draws Christians together regardless of doctrinal beliefs. In this regard, music can promote heresy.

Discernment Required

Although he seems to have written little, Arius, a third and fourth century false teacher, denied the deity of Jesus Christ. Interestingly, he peddled “his doctrine in popular songs, known as Thaleia (Θάλεια, ‘Banquet’) . . . ”⁷² As in the era of the ancient church, it is incumbent upon Christian believers today to be aware of the effect that contemporary music has not only upon the spirit of believing, but also upon the truth of it.

It has been said that the language of music is universal, and perhaps more than any other genre, rock speaks it. But what language does music speak? Can there be communication without words? In this light, Rick Warren’s first thought, “Music is

powerful,” needs to be assessed and addressed. What is the power to which he refers?

Chapter Five Endnotes

¹ Arthur W. Hunt III, *The Vanishing Word, The Veneration of Visual Imagery in the Postmodern World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2003): 241.

² Upon Hitler’s being sworn in as Chancellor of the German Reich, Shirer describes, “. . . from dusk until far past midnight the delirious Nazi storm troopers marched in a massive torchlight parade to celebrate the victory. By the tens of thousands, they emerged in disciplined columns . . . their bands blaring the old martial airs to the thunderous beating of drums, their voices bawling the new Horst Wessel song and other tunes that were as old as Germany, their jack boots beating a mighty rhythm on the pavement . . .” See William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1960): 4-5.

³ Tom Ehrich, “Music brings us nearest what matters in our faith,” *The Indianapolis Star*, September 9, 2006, B3. Though I disagree with most all of what Ehrich usually writes in his weekly newspaper columns, he does, like Warren, understand the influence of music upon the church and Christians. Rick Warren is on record as stating that if he could start Saddleback over again, he would “put more energy and money into insuring a first-class music ministry that matched our target audience. In the first years of Saddleback, I made the mistake of underestimating the power of music.” See *Pastors.com*, Rick Warren’s MinistryToolBox, Issue #190, 1/19/2005, “Match the music to the people you want to reach: Three thoughts about music in worship.” Online at www.pastors.com/RWMT/?id=190&artid=2924&expand=1

⁴ Mark Bergin, “Holy hip-hop,” *World Magazine*, February 7, 2007. Online at www.worldmag.com/articles/article.cfm?eid=99EF3D7B-97EE-9628-A8E6DBB8B31CE31F

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ The song’s words are available online at www.ap0s7le.com/list/song/28/Stuart_Townend/How_Deep_The_Father’s_Love_For_Us

⁷ Italics mine, “Rock Before Elvis: Where Did Rock and Roll Come From?” Online at www.hoyhoy.com/dawn_of_rock.htm

⁸ Having attended and graduated from an inner city high school in the 1960s, “soul music” was the music of choice for my African-American friends and me.

⁹ “Rock Before Elvis.”

¹⁰ Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1987): 73.

¹¹ Tom Beaudoin, “Ambiguous Liturgy,” *Christianity Today Library.com*. Online at www.ctlibrary.com/345.

¹² Ibid. Beaudoin quotes a person who evaluated that Presley was, “a white man who had the Negro sound and the Negro feel.”

¹³ Rob Moll, “Prayer With a Beat,” *Christianity Today Library.com*. Online at www.ctlibrary.com/36662

¹⁴ *Wikipedia*, “Social effects of rock and roll.” Online at en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_impact_of_rock_and_roll

¹⁵ James E. Miller, *Flowers in the Dustbin: The Rise of Rock and Roll, 1947-1977* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1999): 143.

¹⁶ Gene Edward Veith, Jr., *Postmodern Times* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994): 105.

¹⁷ On a T-shirt I noticed the imprint “ICHTHUS,” the Greek word for “fish” which was an early Christian acrostic for “Jesus Christ, Son of God and Savior.” Engaging the wearer in conversation, he remarked that ICHTHUS was a yearly Christian rock concert for teens that kids from his church attended. He stated that the rock concert was, “kind of like a Christian Woodstock.” The analogy is troublesome.

¹⁸ Rob Moll, “Day of Reckoning,” *Christianity Today*, March 2007, 52.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ted Olsen quotes John J. Thompson, “Too Holy for the World Too Worldly for the Church?” *Christianity Today Library.com*. Online at www.ctlibrary.com/843

²¹ Warren, “Match the music.” In his chapter “Saddleback Seekers,” and of his visit to the church, Jeffrey Sheler reports that “there were nine separate worship venues at Saddleback, each with its own style of music, from hard rock to adult contemporary, and Polynesian to black gospel.” According to Sheler, Saddleback has “avoided the so-called worship wars by accommodating a variety of preferences” having even “Recently . . . added a Traditions venue that featured old-fashioned hymns accompanied by an organ and piano.” See Jeffrey L. Sheler, *Believers, A Journey Into Evangelical America* (New York, NY: Viking Penguin Group, 2006): 115-117. It’s all about “choice,” I guess.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ T.A. McMahon, “The Purpose Drive Life: A Critique,” (Bend, OR: *The Berean Call*, December 10, 2004): 6. McMahon describes “doublespeak” as “persuasive contradictions.” In other words, Rick Warren says one thing in one instance and then contradicts himself in another. For example, Warren commences his book in the first chapter of PDL by stating, “It’s not about you.” (17). Yet McMahon correctly notes of Warren, “He continually appeals to the reader’s self-interests.” (2). Again McMahon writes, “It’s very difficult to keep from accusing Rick of ‘doublespeak’ throughout the book.” (9). At this point, Warren is either

naively or intentionally inconsistent. Double mindedness—and none of us is immune from it—is symptomatic of worldliness, and as James admonishes, “Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you. Cleanse *your* hands, *ye* sinners; and purify *your* hearts, *ye* double minded” (James 4:8).

²⁵ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002): 66.

²⁶ Rick Muchow, *Pastors.com*, “Seeker-sensitive worship does not mean shallow.” See www.pastors.com/article.asp?ArtID=3829

²⁷ Spring Creek Church, Pewaukee, Wisconsin. Online at <http://www.alittleleaven.com/2007/08/elvis-spotted-a.html>

²⁸ The jazz fest type “worship” prelude at Willow Creek was available online at *You Tube*, www.youtube.com/watch?v=-1GqI8_8rCg&mode=related&search=

²⁹ Warren, “Match the Music.”

³⁰ Willem A. VanGemenen, “Psalms,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Volume 5, Frank E. Gaebelin, General Editor (Grand Rapids, MI: ZondervanPublishingHouse, 1991): 318.

³¹ If interested in more details as to why David’s “new song” does not equate to any “new” musical expression that contemporary culture might invent, the reader is invited to peruse the fourteenth essay appended to the end of this book titled, “David’s New Song.”

³² Warren, *Driven Life*, 66.

³³ Francis Brown, *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1979): 827.

³⁴ *Ibid.* 614.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ David Allan Hubbard, *Joel and Amos* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1989): 193-194.

³⁷ Theodore Laetsch, *The Minor Prophets* (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1956): 171.

³⁸ G. Jeffrey MacDonald, “From US churches that are growing, a sound of drums,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, January 3, 2007. Online at www.csmonitor.com/2007/0103/p01s01-ussc.htm

³⁹ A.W. Tozer, *Tozer on Worship and Entertainment*, Compiled by James L. Snyder (Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 1997): 103.

⁴⁰ E.B. Pusey, *The Minor Prophets*, Volume 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1975): 307-308.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* 308.

⁴² Michael S. Hamilton, “The Triumph of the Praise Songs,” *Christianity Today*, July 12, 1999, 34.

⁴³ John Gill, *Exposition of the Old and New Testaments*, Volume 6 (Paris, AK: The Baptist Standard Bearer, Inc., 2005 Reprint): 506.

⁴⁴ Paul S. Jones' chapter 21, "Luther and Bar Song: The Truth, Please!" *Singing and Making Music* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2006): 171-178.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 175.

⁴⁶ Pusey, *Minor Prophets*, 308.

⁴⁷ Hunt, *Vanishing Word*, 202.

⁴⁸ Warren, "Match the music."

⁴⁹ Hunt, *Vanishing Word*, 206.

⁵⁰ Kevin Reeves, *The Other Side of the River* (Silverton, Oregon: Lighthouse Trails Publishing, 2007) 161.

⁵¹ Hunt, *Vanishing Word*, 205.

One can note that, in their attempt to call down rain from their god, the prophets of Baal repeatedly called out, "O Baal, answer us." They also spectacularly "leaped [limped, a type of ceremonial dance] about the altar which they made." Finally in desperation and crying with a loud voice, they stunningly "cut themselves according to their custom with swords and lances until the blood gushed out on them." The Kings narrative relates how those prophets "raved until the time of the offering of the *evening* sacrifice." The worship of these prophets was physical.

In contrast, the Kings narrative relates how, in an orderly way, Yahweh's prophet built the altar, laid out the sacrificial meat upon it, drenched the sacrifice in water, and then without physical ado, prayed to the Lord. In answer to Elijah's worship and simple prayer that Yahweh honor His name, down came the fire! (See 1 Kings 18:25-40.)

⁵² Warren, "Match the music."

⁵³ Miller, *Flowers*, 267.

⁵⁴ Rob Moll, "Prayer," quotes Beaudoin's assessment that rock music possesses idolatrous potential. He also refers to James Miller's general verdict regarding rock set forth in his book *Flowers in the Dustbin* (New York, NY: Fireside, 1999).

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Beaudoin, "Liturgy."

⁵⁸ Patton Dodd, "The Kingdom of Rock Is at Hand," *Christianity Today*, October 18, 2006. Online at www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2006/juneweb-only/124-42.0.html

⁵⁹ Robert Jourdain, *Music, The Brain, and Ecstasy* (New York, NY: Avon Books, 1997): 328.

⁶⁰ Regarding Paul's threefold classification, Bruce comments: "It is unlikely that any sharply demarcated division is intended, although 'psalms' might be drawn from the OT Psalter (which has supplied a chief vehicle for Christian praise from primitive times), the 'hymns' might be Christian canticles (some of which are reproduced, in whole or in part, in

the NT text), and ‘spiritual songs’ might be unpremeditated words sung ‘in the Spirit’ . . .” See F.F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984): 158-159.

If spontaneous, “spiritual songs” will vindicate their origin as truly being of the Spirit for reason that they will exalt Christ’s Person and Work. All singing is to be conducted with a thankful, not a selfish heart. Hymns are to be about Him, not about us!

⁶¹ Though the genitive “of Christ” may be subjective indicating that Christ is the speaker when His word is proclaimed or sung, the better option understands the genitive to be objective; that is, the message contained in “psalms, hymns and spiritual songs” ought to be centered on Christ. See Peter T. O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon* (Waco, TX: Word Books, Publisher, 1982): 206.

From the early centuries, the *Magnificat* (Luke 1:46-55), *Benedictus* (Luke 1:68-79), and *Nuc Dimittis* (Luke 2:29-32) have been used by the church in praise worship. These words uttered by Mary the mother of Jesus, Zacharias the father of John the Baptist, and Simeon evidence godly Christ-centricity as they exalt the Lord.

⁶² See Ralph P. Martin, *Worship In the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964): 39-52.

⁶³ See Ralph P. Martin, *A Hymn of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997).

⁶⁴ Mounce calls verse 16 “the fragment of a Christological hymn.” William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000): 215.

⁶⁵ Martin, *Worship*, 50-51.

⁶⁶ Ibid. 52.

⁶⁷ Ibid. 51.

⁶⁸ *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar*, E. Kautzch and A.E. Cowley, Editors (London, England: Oxford University Press, 1910): 396-397.

⁶⁹ John B. Taylor, *Ezekiel* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1969): 218.

⁷⁰ Douglas Stuart, *Ezekiel* (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1989): 317.

⁷¹ Henry W. Holloman, “Sanctification,” *Understanding Christian Theology*, Charles R. Swindoll and Roy B. Zuck, General Editors (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2003): 999.

⁷² “Arius,” *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, Second Edition, F. L. Cross and E. A. Cross, Editors (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1974): 87.

SIX

Contemplative Mysticism and Evangelicalism

Subverting the Word

Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms *and* hymns *and* spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God.

The Apostle Paul, Colossians 3:16

Music is a vehicle that propels [the disc jockey]—and me and so many others—toward the place we might call enlightenment, or God, or the higher consciousness, or Grace.¹

Cathleen Falsani

O divine master, teach me this mute language which says so much.²

Nicholas Grou, (1731-1803)

In contrast to the world's other religions, Christianity is a mediated faith based upon the unmerited favor of God toward man. Jesus Christ claimed He is "the truth" (John 14:6). Of Jesus Paul wrote, "For there is one God, *and* one mediator also between God and men, *the* man Christ Jesus" (1 Timothy 2:5). Jesus is our great High Priest who "is able to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them" (Hebrews 7:25; See 1 John 2:1).

The Holy Spirit inspired the Holy Scriptures which testify of Jesus Christ (2 Peter 1:20-21; John 5:39; Luke 24:27). This propositional Word of God, the Bible, has come to us via divinely inspired and appointed prophets and apostles (Romans 10:17; Ephesians 2:20; John 17:17). Through the Word of God the Spirit of God graciously applies the life of God to our souls (1 Peter 1:23). The Spirit mediates our salvation (Romans 8:9-10), sanctification (Romans 8:4-8), and prayer life (Romans 8:26-27).

Those Holy Scriptures provide the basis for what Christians should *believe* and how they should *behave*. The Bible mediates our salvation and sanctification (John 17:17). As Paul wrote to Timothy,

You, however, continue in the things you have learned and become convinced of, knowing from whom you have learned *them*; and that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:14-17).

By themselves, these scriptures are adequate “for teaching” (telling Christians *what to believe*), “for reproof” (telling Christians *what not to believe*), “for correction” (telling Christians *how not to behave*), and “for training in righteousness” (telling Christians *how to behave*). Since the Reformation and up until the advent of biblical criticism in the 18th and 19th centuries, Protestants held the Scriptures to be the sufficient rule for Christian faith and practice. The propositional truths of the Scriptures inspire and inform faith. “So faith *comes* from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ” (Romans 10:17).

A Revealed Faith

In drawing attention to the supernatural origin of God’s Word, Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer once said, “The Bible is not such a book that man could write if he would, or would write if he could.” The Christian faith comes to us via the revealed Word. Jesus is the Word (the Logos, John 1:1). The Scriptures are the Word (the logon, 2 Peter 1:19). And the Holy Spirit bears witness to both Jesus and the Word (John 15:26; 2 Peter 1:21; 1 Corinthians 2:9-16). Of the written Word, Buist M. Fanning states,

God's word, whatever form it takes, is thus a communication from him. It is intelligible and articulate, addressed to people in human language so that they may understand and act on it. . . . Human language is assumed to be a sufficient and effective means . . . of communication from God to people.³

But someone has stated that, "Worship is often shaped more by what people desire than by the nature of God's self-disclosure found in the Bible." In that they both subvert the revealed Word of God, the "wordless worship" of contemporary music and contemplative mysticism threaten the rule and sufficiency of Scripture in the life of the church. The revealed faith of the Bible is being undermined by mysticism in evangelicalism, mysticism that includes music that engenders religious *ecstasy*, and contemplation that induces spiritual *encounters*, both of which can easily become a supplement to, or substitute for, the Word of God.

In that its practices and experiences are so various and mysterious, an agreeable definition of mysticism is difficult to arrive at. One dictionary sufficiently defines mysticism as the experience "of an immediate spiritual intuition of truths believed to transcend ordinary understanding, or of a direct, intimate union of the soul with God through contemplation and love."⁴ Through the mechanisms of music and meditation, mainstream evangelical Christians are seeking divine experiences and encounters with God by awakening the spiritual awareness, even a sense of divinity, which is believed to be dormant in the human soul.

We now turn to discuss the universal language, or lack thereof, of music, and the implications of that communicative deficiency for Christian believing.

MYSTICISM VIA MUSIC

William James (1842-1910) pointed out that mystics often employ self-contradicting phrases—like "shoreless lake," "mute language," "whispering silence," and "dazzling obscurity"—to explain their unexplainable and esoteric experiences. He stated that, unlike conceptual speech, music is exempt from such contradictory descriptions demonstrating that music "is the element through

which we are best spoken to by mystic truth.” James proceeds to explain, “Many mystical scriptures are indeed little more than musical compositions.”⁵ It may be deduced that the so-called “language” of music is universal because it is neither conceptual nor verbal, but rather experiential and mystical. As one bumper sticker put it, “When words fail, music speaks.”

Ecstasy and Music

In his book *Music, The Brain, and Ecstasy*, Robert Jourdain wrote of the mystical ecstasy that music can provide. He states:

Ecstasy melts the boundaries of our being . . .
engulfs us in feelings that are “oceanic.”

A defining trait of ecstasy is its *immediacy* . . .
Ecstasy happens to our *selves*. It is a momentary
transformation of the knower . . .

Music seems to be the most immediate of all
the arts, and so the most ecstatic . . . Nonetheless,
once we are engulfed in music, we must exert effort
to resist its influence. It really is as if some “other”
has entered not just our bodies, but our intentions,
taking us over.⁶

Though incapable of rational description, ecstatic experiences do have a way of possessing us. Sometimes, perhaps more often than not, music provides a mysterious ecstasy that seemingly transcends time, matter, and space. And genres other than rock-‘n’-roll offer such experiences.

Serene Subjectivism—Sacred and Secular

In a few instances, traditional hymns evidence mysticism. I think of the song, “In the Garden.”⁷ The lyrics ooze with it. In part, the song goes:

I come to the garden alone,
While the dew is still on the roses;
And the voice I hear,
Falling on my ear,
The Son of God discloses.

And He walks with me, and He talks with me,
 And He tells me I am His own;
 And the joy we share as we tarry there,
 None other has ever known.

Obviously, the hymn speaks of a singer who hears a “voice” disclosing esoteric matters to which nobody else is privy.

As is apparent from Andrew Lloyd Webber’s *The Phantom of the Opera*, and contained in the words of *The Music of the Night*, softer secular music can encourage and engender ecstasy.⁸ The lyrics read:

Night-time sharpens, heightens each sensation
 Darkness wakes and stirs imagination
 Silently the senses abandon their defenses
 helpless to resist the notes I write
 for I compose the music of the night

 Softly, deftly,
 music shall caress you
 hear it, feel it secretly possess you
 Open up your mind,
 let your fantasies unwind,
 in this darkness which you know
 you cannot fight—
 the darkness of the music of the night.

Perhaps this accounts for some music’s appeal—the seductive soothing of it upon the human soul. From “easy listening,” to “light rock,” and to some classical pieces, there exists a murky and undefined interconnectedness between the sensual and the mystical, the sexual innuendo of Ravel’s *Bolero* providing another example. From military marches to hard rock, music can arouse and control strong feelings within people.

Touching the Heart, but not the Head

Rick Warren states, “Music is powerful.” Music is powerful—but powerful for what purpose, and to what end? Warren claims that it has the power to evangelize people in ways that the spoken word cannot. He states,

A song can touch people in a way a sermon can't. Music can bypass intellectual barriers and take the message straight to the heart. It is a potent tool for evangelism.⁹

Note his use of the word "bypass." It suggests that even though the music has penetrated the heart, there remain the clogged arteries of intellectual barriers. Temporarily, emotion has by-passed the intellect. But what is the power to which Warren refers?

Feeling beyond Knowing

As we have seen, and as we shall see, the beckoning beat of rock music is capable of inducing spiritual feelings in human hearts. Warren's statement that music possesses the ability to touch a person's soul as it by-passes the mind's rational function reveals a mystical bent, that music can induce feelings beyond knowing. To demonstrate this evaluation of Warren's words, some knowledge of the function that rhythm, repetition, and rocking serve in achieving states of emotional, or mystical, ecstasies will be helpful.

Rhythm and Repetition

On the radio the other day, a rock song played in which a simple phrase on the theme of love was repeated over and over again, *ad absurdum*. In rock music, repeated refrains are common. What function does repetition serve? Renowned guitarist Jimi Hendrix believed,

Once you have some type of rhythm, like it can get hypnotic if you keep repeating it over and over again. Most of the people will fall off by about a minute of repeating. You do that say for three or four or even five minutes if you can stand it, and then it releases a certain thing inside of a person's head.¹⁰

To one degree or another, much contemporary worship music follows suit. Kevin Reeves states that attendees at the church where he led worship were classified as "inner court, outer court,

or holy of holies Christians,” and that it was his and the worship team’s responsibility to move the whole audience into a deeper experience with God, from the outer court into the holy of holies. How was this done? The worship team employed the technique of repeating the short chorus over and over again.¹¹ We know such songs as “seven-eleven” songs; that is, they consist of seven-word lyrics repeated eleven times or more.

Chanting

In this respect, such singing is constituted to be like the spiritual/mystical practice of chanting. One dictionary on alternative spiritualities states that chanting, “is an ancient, universal practice, and is often done in conjunction with drumming, hand-clapping, [and] dancing.” It goes on to say, “Group chanting, accompanied by dancing, hand-clapping, or drumming is considered more effective in raising consciousness because the energies and movement of many people are united, which facilitates achievement of the objective.”¹² And what, we ask, is the objective people seek to experience together? It is, as the dictionary says, to “achieve an altered state of consciousness, ecstasy, communion with the Divine . . .”¹³

About approaching God by this mechanism, Jesus warned, “And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition, as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words” (Matthew 6:7). Because praise is a form of prayer addressed to God, cannot Jesus’ prohibition be paraphrased in the following manner: “*When you praise, use not vain repetitions as do the heathen*”? When something is repeated over and over again, it serves no rational function, but becomes mindless and meaningless. In some ways, such singing of repeated lyrics resembles praying the rosary.

Rocking

Between “rocking,” the term used to describe the music’s origin in African-American churches in the South before World War II, and mystical experiences there was, and remains, a connection. One observer described the likely connection between

rhythm and mysticism as follows: “Driven by African-American slave songs, gospel, soul, funk, and rhythm and blues, *the beat impelled Rock’s original devotees into dance-induced, altered states of consciousness . . .*”¹⁴ As we have seen, Elvis Presley borrowed from what he saw and heard while attending “rocking” services at nearby churches in Memphis. According to Norman Mailer, Elvis “displayed ‘soul’ . . . a proximity to black music [that] will take him ‘nearer to that God *which every hipster believes is located in the senses of the body*’.”¹⁵ Through beat, rhythm, and repetition, rock music was originally used to stimulate altered states of consciousness in which people felt they were experiencing the Holy Ghost.

When engaging rock music at concerts or through headsets connected to iPods or CD players, individuals testify to the medium’s ability to create religious experiences in them.

Deadheads

Devoted followers of the Grateful Dead rock band were known as “deadheads.” As one describes Grateful Dead concerts,

[M]any a Tour Head will attest, the magic of the Grateful Dead was in being present—witnessing that moment when one of the band’s legendary space jams would open up and the music would lift off into the unknown. These moments also brought with them experiences of personal revelation and a sense of connectedness, a feeling of being part of a larger whole, not unlike being cells that make up an organism.¹⁶

To refer to The Spinners, the communal group of young people dressed in austere clothing who would twirl away with the band’s music, they often were seen lying prostrate after Garcia’s band would finish their songs. Perhaps John Barlow best summed up the phenomenon. “[Deadheads] have” he said, “what I consider to be one of the most positive developments in the history of spirituality: a religion without beliefs.”¹⁷ The religion inspired by the music was without definition, without words (*alogon*), and without beliefs. The only category into which such a religion fits is mystical.

Occult “Breakthrough”

In another example of music’s power to induce mystical experience, occultist Wilburn Burchette reported a “breakthrough” which happened to him while listening to rock music as a young boy. He described:

I was getting to the point where my mind was blank. I remember shifting consciousness and having a sensation of my mind being above time. I felt I could move forward, backward in time. The physical sensation is an orgasm of the soul, because you are in complete, absolute union. You extend your mind and being out of this dimension, and *wham!* You receive a knowing beyond words. When you transcend over into the other dimension, you split in two, and yet you are one. This is what all the alchemists brought out: you split in two, and yet you are one. This is pretty weird for most people, but you have split in two, you have another being which can realize the Absolute, the Godhead. These two *you’s* are in perfect union.¹⁸

A reporter for the Chicago *Sun Times* interviewed a popular area disc jockey. When asked to define himself spirituality, the disc jockey responded, “I’m a mystical expressionist . . . I take the idea of mysticism very seriously . . . the idea that there is something within each and every one of us that can take us to a place we’ve never been before . . .” Then the reporter comments, music is the “vehicle” that pushes her and the disc jockey “and so many others—toward the place we might call enlightenment, or God, or the higher consciousness, or Grace.”¹⁹

Through its powerful rhythm and repetition, rock music is capable of delivering, as Jimi Hendrix knew, a narcotic-like influence upon the human soul.²⁰ Like other opiates, endorphins released by neurons in the brain can deliver spiritual-mystical experiences. We turn now to such mystical “encounters” as testified to by contemporary Christians.

The Musical Mysticism of Evangelicals

With its sound (beat, rhythm, and intensity) and content (repetitive lyrics), rock music is quite capable of generating spiritual experiences in the hearts of people, experiences that might be mistaken for divine encounters.

Tom Beaudoin describes one:

The effect of the music coursing through my nervous system is to produce a lift, a somatic levity that sends me at once deeply within and outside my body, spacing me in three simultaneous modes: as embodied spirit, as disembodied spirit, and as a spirit ecstatically holding them bound.²¹

Who and where was he when he experienced such mystical ecstasy? The author was a guitar player who played Christian rock-'n'-roll for 15 years, and what he experienced, while listening to the rock band *Creed*, was on a spiritual retreat in of all places, a monastery!

In his book *Velvet Elvis*, emergent Pastor Rob Bell describes another:

I remember the first time I was truly in awe of God. I was caught up for the first time in my life in something so massive and loving and transcendent and . . . true. Something I was sure could be trusted. I specifically remember thinking the universe was safe, in spite of all the horrible, tragic things in the world. I remember being overwhelmed by the word *true*. Underneath it all life is somehow . . . good . . . and I was sixteen and at a U2 concert. The Joshua Tree tour. When they started with the song "Where the Streets Have No Name," I thought I was going to spontaneously combust with joy. This was real. This mattered. Whatever it was, I wanted more.

I had never felt that way before.²²

"U2-charists"

Parallel to Bell's experience, and further indicating the connection of rock music to spirituality, it should be noted that

U2's music is now being employed by the Church of England to boost attendance. In one congregation, a bishop was to preside over what is blasphemously referred to as a "U2-charist", a Holy Communion service that employs the Irish supergroup's best-selling songs in place of hymns." The communion service is described:

In what is more rock concert than Book of Common Prayer, a live band will belt out U2 classics such as Mysterious Ways and Beautiful Day as worshippers sing along with the lyrics, which will appear on screens. The atmosphere will be further enhanced by a sophisticated lighting system that will pulse with the beat . . .²³

USA Today reported that "U2-charist" worship has also come to Episcopal congregations in the United States, and likely will find its way into other denominations and congregations as well.²⁴ One worshipper, a Roman Catholic who attended a "U2-charist" at a nearby Episcopal church in Briarcliff Manor, N.Y., remarked of her experience: "It makes you, like, warm inside," says Bridgette Roberts, 15. "Usually at church," she continues, "you love Jesus and everything. But this way you can express how you feel."²⁵

Rock Induced Oneness

In his book *Flowers in the Dustbin*, James Miller, a former *Newsweek* writer, described a rock concert that could easily be confused with a contemporary worship service: "The audience was being summoned to a carnival of excess, a ritual of solidarity, an ecstatic loss of personal identity—the sort of thing (not coincidentally) that does sometimes happen during rock and roll concerts."²⁶ Perhaps the loss of identity happens more often than not, explaining why, in part, youth remain addicted to rock concerts during which they lose their sense of self as they are absorbed into the corporate oneness of the mystical moment. To the rock addict, every concert potentially offers, both for the individual and the group, deliverance into ecstasy.

Churches have caught on, and via the same type of musical manipulation, attempt to induce mystical oneness around revelry of sound that imitates and substitutes for genuine spiritual experience and unity. As at secular rock concerts, many contemporary worship services facilitate the experience of becoming one with the music as members of the audience, with eyes closed and faces alternately contorting in grimaces of ecstasy and agony, lift their hands toward heaven, mouth the familiar words together, and collectively sway from side to side. In union with others, worshippers experience the psychological abandonment of self which lies at the heart of mystical experience.

Music and mysticism are connected, but the relationship needs further focus and definition. As referred to previously, mystical encounters are meant to be experienced, not described.

Without the Word

About music in general, but rock in particular, Professor Alan Bloom stated:

Music is the soul's primitive and primary speech and it is *alogon*, without articulate speech or reason. It is not only not reasonable, it is hostile to reason. Even when articulate speech is added, it is utterly subordinate to and determined by the music and the passions it expresses.²⁷

Note that Bloom describes rock music as *alogon*.²⁸ Without words, the medium induces unexplainable feelings within people's souls.

Likewise, Thomas Beaudoin states regarding the medium's overtones, "Theologically, what we have in the lived experience of many young adults today is a bodily participation in a multisensory rock and roll symbol system which is . . . an ambiguous liturgy not of the word but of the world."²⁹ Like Bloom's assessment that music is *alogon*, note Beaudoin's observation that rock-'n'-roll is an ambiguous liturgy that is *not of the word*.

Therefore, a question arises: Assuming that beat subordinates speech and repetition replaces reason, then how can anyone think that a wordless medium of the world is compatible

with the Word of God? Logically, things which are incompatible cannot be made compatible. And if the nature of the beast is irrational, then for reason of the religious feelings it induces, rock worship can only be classified as mystical.

Music and Mysticism

Some of you who might read this material may fault this pastor for reading too much into the connection between music and mysticism. My reply to such criticism would be, “If it looks like a duck, walks like a duck, and quacks like a duck, it’s a duck!” If its not mysticism being generated in rock worship, then what is it?

By analogy and inference then, rock music and mysticism share something in common: both engender indescribable feelings of religious experience. In the connection between that music and mysticism, there exists real spiritual danger for Christian believers. The danger is that they will, individually and corporately, substitute man-made, man-centered, and mechanically induced non-rational musical experiences for those genuinely prompted by the Holy Spirit through the propositional and cognitive Word of God. The subjective can easily trump the objective. But regarding valid musical experiences, Paul wrote to the Ephesians, “. . . but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord” (Ephesians 5:18b-19).

Head and Heart

As Rick Warren states, do feelings engendered through music evangelize people? Through music, are despisers of Christianity led to accept in their hearts revealed biblical truths which they remain unconvinced of in their heads? Can people be converted in their hearts and yet remain unconverted in their heads?

On its own, music is capable of inducing spiritual experiences. But accepting Bloom’s assertion that rock music is neither compatible with the Word or reason, and Beaudoin’s assessment that rock is an “ambiguous liturgy” that is not of the word, then, contrary to Rick Warren’s assertion, biblical evangelism

is not taking place through music. By themselves, religious feelings do not convert the human heart. Conversion takes place only as the Spirit bears witness to the propositional Gospel (2 Peter 1:20-21), and graciously gives new birth from above (John 3:3-8). Wordless ecstasies are momentary. They do not save people's souls for eternity.

The way to the heart is through the head. Biblical believing is based upon revealed and propositional truths that must be accepted by the mind before they can be believed in the heart. Guilt feelings induced by the Holy Spirit's gracious conviction of sin, righteousness, and judgment, prompt people to want to believe the Gospel, but salvation nevertheless rests upon a cognitive assent to the Gospel, "that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). As the Reformers put it, saving faith is based upon knowledge (*notitia*), acceptance (*assensus*), and trust (*fiducia*). Such faith, as Paul wrote, "comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17). Any concept of a faith that bypasses cognition of and faith in the Word of God is irrational and mystical, and therefore, not faith at all (Jude 3; Mark 12:30). Faith does not rest upon feelings felt, or ecstasy experienced, but upon propositional truths cognitively accepted. Because we feel does not mean it's real. Rather, individuals are evangelized by what they believe in their heads *and* receive in their hearts. In, of, and by itself, and contrary to Rick Warren's assertion, music possesses *no* evangelistic power.

Musical Mediators

Yet in the contemporary church, singers, worship leaders, and worship teams stake a claim to be able to mediate access to God. As one former worship team leader notes, "Leading worship has come to be one of the factors in establishing appropriate congregational mood, with the stated intent that the Holy Spirit may not be hindered in His ministry."³⁰ Human agency therefore, assumes responsibility for creating an atmosphere in which it is thought that the Holy Spirit can work. The former worship leader notes that, according to their ability to manipulate and control the

emotional atmosphere of an audience, some worship leaders have, “attained charismatic stardom by voice and vivacity.”³¹

For example, one worship leader’s CD contains the following promo. It advertises her as, “Fresh, energetic and anointed” The CD jacket goes on to state that she is “an accomplished singer/songwriter, keyboardist and speaker.” The promo concludes by stating that the recording, her second musical project, “takes you through the door of worship, right into the heart and presence of God.”³² Note those last words: her newest music project “takes you through the door of worship, right into the heart and presence of God.” One has to wonder how any human can, through music, usher us into the presence of the God who is everywhere present anyway (Psalm 139:7-10).

The Bible knows nothing of musicians who possess the ability and authority to escort members of a church audience into the presence of God. Many of today’s worship leaders claim to be mediators between believers and God, but this they do by usurping the place of Christ and the ministry of the Holy Spirit. And this they do without the mention of any such ministry in the New Testament, and without having to meet any of the spiritual or moral qualifications for local church leadership (See 1 Timothy 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9.). In reality, these worship intermediaries attempt to read and control the mood of the audience by appealing to “the feel” of the flesh. Instead of pastors and elders leading a congregation’s worship in prayer and through the preached Word, worship teams—made up of lead singers, drums, guitars, an electric organ, saxophone, and whatever other musical instrument that might prove useful in achieving the desired emotional affect upon the audience—lead.

But the noise of music is not the only mechanism being used by evangelicals to engender ecstasy. The quiet of the contemplative life is now also being employed to trigger the reception of divine communication.

Pop-worship

Bored with the pop-worship that dominates most churches in this post-Christian culture, numbers of evangelicals are tired of

listening to the contemporary Christian music and pep talks of user-friendly Christianity. Increasingly, they are looking for new places and ways to get spiritual satisfaction.

Smells and Bells

Rituals and symbols, “smells and bells,” have been a part of the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions. The sounds, smoke, tapestries, and ceremonies of those traditions fascinate some for whom evangelical Christianity has become increasingly monotonous. Bob Wenz of the National Association of Evangelicals detects this emerging tendency. He sees,

. . . a growing trend among evangelicals that is focusing more on the sensory aspects of worship than on the cognitive aspects like marking foreheads with charcoal on Ash Wednesday as a sign of humility before God, or lighting Advent candles in the weeks before Christmas.³³

Two words jump out of Wenz’s statement, words he juxtaposes in opposition to one another; the words “cognitive” and “sensory.”

Evidently, within evangelical Protestantism, some individuals are finding cognitive Christianity tedious. Cognition means, “the act or process of knowing; perception.” In deference to emotion, cognition has to do with the mind. At the base of our living, knowledge and wisdom ought always to inform us. Man cannot live by experience alone. For that reason, Solomon wrote Proverbs—to advise persons against destroying their lives through experiences that sex, drugs, and alcohol provide. Cognition informs us to avoid situations and actions that can induce injury, or even death. Likewise, through spiritual cognition wedded to the Scriptures (i.e., doctrine), we learn to avoid harmful teachings that destroy our souls. Therefore, this growing disinterest in a cognitive faith is dangerous.

MYSTICISM VIA MEDITATION³⁴

Rational and loving two-way discourse between believers and God lies at the heart of the biblical faith. Despite biblical

evidence to the contrary, there are spiritual directors in evangelicalism, including Rick Warren, who teach their disciples to pray in alternative ways.³⁵

First, let it be said that the Scriptures are not against meditation. One cannot read the Psalms without noting their emphasis upon the exercise. Wrote David, “I will meditate on Thy precepts . . .” (Psalm 119:15-16; See Psalm 1:2b). Paul instructed,

Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things (Philippians 4:8).

But Scripture points out that meditation is to be directed toward and centered upon God’s Word (Joshua 1:8), and God’s works (Psalm 143:5), which then direct the contemplator to consider God’s person (Psalm 119:55). Meditation is thinking upon the objective truths in God’s Word. Meditation is not the practice of solitude and silence into which void (i.e., a sort of worked-up *tabula rasa*) contemplators hope to receive new and fresh revelations from God.

Second, the love relationship between God and His people is personal, and between two persons, love is communicated in words. In thinking upon their spouse, husbands and wives say to each other, “I love you!” Loving relationships are based upon good two-way communication. Why should we expect that the experience of love expressed between God and His children should be any different? Words attend to love. God rationally communicated His love for us through His Son, the Logos, to whom the Scriptures bear witness. That said, and their experiences being unrestrained by either the sufficiency of scripture or doctrinal considerations, the movement of evangelicals into the meditative practices of eastern religion and spiritual disciplines of ancient Christendom needs to be noted.

Discovering Eastern Religion

In an interview published in *Christianity Today*, emerging church Pastor Rob Bell of Grand Rapids, Michigan, admits,

This is not just the same old message with new methods. We're rediscovering Christianity as an Eastern religion, as a way of life. Legal metaphors for faith don't deliver a way of life. We grew up in churches where people knew the nine verses why we don't speak in tongues, but had never experienced the overwhelming presence of God.³⁶

Note Bell's subtlety. He demeans doctrinal distinctions by calling them "legal metaphors," while at the same time uplifting some kind of mysticism which he calls experiencing an "overwhelming presence of God."

Allow me to respond to Bell's comment. First, doctrine and experience are not polar opposites. All one has to do is read Paul's epistles and observe how the apostle intertwines doctrine and experience. Furthermore, most of the Christians I know are not hung up on why they don't speak in tongues. For most of us, tongues-speaking is but a blip on the theological radar screen. Third, what does Bell mean by experiencing God's overwhelming presence? Does he mean that like Moses, every Christian needs a "burning bush" experience (Exodus 3:2-6)? Does he mean like Ezekiel, that believers ought to see a storm containing a "great cloud with fire flashing forth continually and a bright light around it," (Ezekiel 1:4)? Does he mean that Paul's Damascus Road experience should be normative for all Christians (Acts 9:3-9)? Does he mean that like the Apostle John, all believers should feel themselves transported "in the Spirit on the Lord's Day" (Revelation 1:10, NKJV)? Is he demeaning believers who have not experienced what he calls God's overwhelming presence, and by inference, relegating them to second class status in the kingdom? Does Bell really know what he means when speaking of the overwhelming presence of God? Has he ever really experienced it?³⁷ If he has, as he says he has, his claim is unverifiable to everyone except himself. While not on visions they have seen, far

too many evangelicals seem to be taking their stand on experiences they have experienced (See Colossians 3:18b).

Sensory to Sensual

In any activity of life, it is but a small step from the “sensory” to the “sensual,” and worship is no exception. By adopting a sensory approach to spiritual living, the focus of Christians becomes more upon the human experience of the moment than the divine truth of eternity. Worship becomes fixated upon how we feel about what’s going on within us rather than upon the cognition of God’s Word without us. And given the instincts and appetites lurking within our souls, that thing the Apostle Paul calls the “flesh,” the sensual can prey upon the spiritual, that is, unless truth informs, arbitrates, and restrains experience. Left on its own, the sensory-sensual subverts biblical Christianity to an experience oriented religion of “self.” And as Paul wrote, such a religion possesses “no value against fleshly indulgence” (Colossians 2:27). By its very nature, fire cannot control fire. Neither can the flesh control the flesh.

Unlike Rob Bell’s dismissal of biblical doctrine to be a bunch of “legal metaphors,” the New Testament places the highest value upon a cognitive faith, the Apostles’ Doctrine (Acts 2:42). It is the Christian’s birthright. But like Esau, increasing numbers of evangelicals appear to be forfeiting that birthright and blessing for a bowl of sensate soup.

Mystical Faith

As it focuses and depends upon unexplainable and undefined experiences, a mystical faith is unmediated, and because it’s individually intuited, it is, more or less, a wordless faith. Mystics claim “their experience is inherently incapable of being expressed with words . . . that no language can do justice to their experience.”³⁸ Regarding mysticism, Winfried Corduan further notes, “Upon analysis, mysticism and a meaningful use of language seem to be mutually exclusive.”³⁹ As with so many other evangelicals, the best Bell can do is describe his experience as a feeling of God’s “overwhelming presence.” The contrast between

Christianity and mysticism is that in the former, religious truth is cognitive and comes *externally* to the soul by divine revelation from without, something Bell dismisses as a bunch of legal metaphors, while for mystics, religious truth is subjective and comes *internally* to the soul via human experience from within. B.B. Warfield defined the distinction between Christianity and mysticism when he wrote,

Above all other elements of Christianity, Christ and what Christ stands for, with the cross at the center, come to us solely by “external authority.” No “external authority,” no Christ, and no cross of Christ. For Christ is history, and Christ’s cross is history, and mysticism which lives solely on what is within can have nothing to do with history; mysticism which seeks solely eternal verities can have nothing to do with time and that which has occurred in time.⁴⁰

Somewhat like the Charismatics who assert that the gift of prophecy brings a supplementary Word from God, today’s evangelicals are seeking revelatory experiences based upon an “internal authority” that they view to be corollary with or superior to the propositional and revealed Word of the Bible. They are doing so by using a variety of spiritual disciplines, or mechanisms, including contemplative prayer.

Contemplative Prayer

A former Hindu has stated that Hindus do not pray. They only meditate. Practitioners of eastern mystical religions do not pray for reason that, in their worldview, no personal God exists to pray to. To them God is identified to be in the creation—in people, animals, trees, rocks, and so forth—and because immanency equates to divinity, eastern mystics seek through meditation to experience a paranormal sense of their union with the cosmos. Being of eastern religious origin, mystics believe that wordless meditative prayer will help them to become conscious of their oneness with the universe and God.

Evangelical speakers, pastors, and authors are embracing and recommending meditative prayer with one slight twist: contemplators engage the discipline or mechanism of solitude and silence for the purpose of hearing God speak to them, to receive a “fresh revelation” from him. As one contemplator says, “intimacy automatically breeds revelation.”⁴¹ As another says,

And so I've just begun . . . to make a conscious effort to be in a time of prayer and, yes, to speak to him, but then to consciously say, “Okay, I'm done talkin' now, because I'm just gonna sit here in the stillness and wait to see what it is that you want to say to me”.⁴²

In evangelicalism, the contemplative prayer movement is affecting the mediated understanding of the Christian faith. The narrator in the *Be Still* DVD states, “Contemplation is different from other types of Christian prayer.” To explain how this form of prayer differs from traditional prayer, Richard Foster says,

Contemplative prayer is listening prayer. It is attentiveness. . . . It's being all ears to what the Father has to say to us.⁴³

He then quotes Nicholas Grou who requested, “O divine master, teach me this mute language which says so much.”⁴⁴ In this manner of praying, the communication that transpires is unmediated. Contemplatives feel themselves to be contacting God via “mute language,” which mystical description of prayer is typically self-contradictory. If language is mute, the indescribable communication is soul to Soul, the human with the Divine. There is no need for mediation by the Word, Jesus Christ and the Scriptures, or for that matter, intercession by the Holy Spirit.

Elsewhere Richard Foster offered guidelines for prayer at variance with biblical examples and instructions. He advises that,

Every distraction of the body, mind, and spirit must be put into a kind of suspended animation before

this deep work of God upon the soul can occur. . . .
There comes inner silence, peace, stillness. During
such a time Bible reading, sermons, intellectual
debate—all fail to move or excite us.⁴⁵

To achieve such a state of soul, he advises repeating the same word (mantra) and breathing exercises. Resulting from these stimuli, prayer becomes a non-rational state of soul (“new consciousness”) induced by repeating a word or listening to one’s breaths. Contemplative prayer seeks to bypass the logical and verbal to experience God. Prayer becomes neither thinking nor talking, but just the “silence,” an incubative state of soul in which it is hoped that a fresh revelation from God can be hatched. To contemplators, prayer is above and beyond words. It’s mute language, or whispering silence.

Jesus and Contemplative Prayer

To justify their engaging in such a prayer practice, contemplative spiritualists prevail upon a number of biblical texts and examples, many of which are dealt with in the essays at the end of this book. Contemplatives cite the example of Jesus, and suggest He practiced solitude and silence. Though the Gospels do portray that Jesus retreated away from the crowds and sought solitude in which to pray to the Father, they do not record that Jesus meditated in “silence,” or prayed in “mute language.” Donald Bloesch points out that,

[A] close examination of the prayer life of our Lord would seem to indicate that His prayers were definitely petitionary and intercessory in nature. He withdrew from the company of men not in order to extricate Himself from the bonds of the flesh and become one with the Infinite but rather to bring His supplications before God and intercede for His fellow man in agony and sometimes in tears.⁴⁶

The author of Hebrews confirms that, “During the days of Jesus’ life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries

and tears to the one who could save Him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission” (Hebrews 5:7, NIV). At length, the words of one of Jesus’ prayers to the Father are recorded in the 17th chapter of John’s Gospel. Furthermore, Jesus instructed His followers to pray using words (Matthew 6:9-13).

Who Goes There?

Contemplatives practice solitude and silence to hear God speak to them. But if a voice speaks, there is some question regarding its identity. In the segment “Fear of Silence” in the *Be Still* DVD, Richard Foster offers advice about how to discern who might communicate in the quiet. He said,

Learning to distinguish the voice of God . . . from just human voices within us . . . comes in much the same way that we learn any other voice. Satan pushes and condemns. God draws and encourages. And we can know the difference.⁴⁷

Though there could be others, Richard Foster admits to a cacophony of possible voices that might interrupt the silence to speak: first, human voices within and without (a source that could involve hearing oneself speak; in which case, contemplators would be listening to themselves); second, Satan’s voice; and third, the voice of God.

In order to determine whose voice might be speaking, Foster provides criteria. If the voice is positive and reaffirming, then the voice is God’s. If however, the voice is that of a bully who “pushes and condemns,” then the voice must be that of Satan.⁴⁸ To discern whether or not the voice is human, Foster offers no advice.

In his book advocating contemplative prayer, Foster admits that Satan may seize the silence as an occasion to speak. He writes,

I also want to give a word of precaution. In the silent contemplation of God we are entering deeply into the spiritual realm, and there is such a thing as supernatural guidance that is not divine guidance . . . there are various orders of spiritual beings, and some

of them are definitely not in cooperation with God and his way!⁴⁹

That contemplative spiritualists engage in practices that, by their own admission, expose them to the influence of Satan's voice is troubling. In his classic analysis of mystical experiences, William James (1842-1910) noted a century ago that,

[M]ystical states may be facilitated by preliminary voluntary operations, as by fixing the attention, or going through certain bodily performances, or in other ways which manuals of mysticism prescribe; yet when the characteristic sort of consciousness once has set in, the mystic feels as if his own will were in abeyance, and indeed sometimes as if he were grasped and held by a superior power. *This latter peculiarity connects mystical states with certain definite phenomena of secondary or alternative personality, such as prophetic speech, automatic writing, or the mediumistic trance.*⁵⁰

In this statement, James identifies mystical states with the world of the occult, a world in which Christian believers are forbidden to participate (Deuteronomy 18:9-14). Question: Why should believers engage a devotional technique that might invite the devil to speak to them? Scripture admonishes believers, "Neither give place [i.e., an opportunity] to the devil" (Ephesians 4:27). Question: Why should Christians flirt with a spiritual exercise that might expose them to hear Satan or a demon speak? Scripture calls upon believers to "resist the devil" (James 4:7).

It is no wonder that in a bibliographical note regarding Richard Foster's initial edition of *Celebration of Discipline*, philosopher Arthur Johnson stated,

In an attempt to provide advice on living the Christian life, Foster promotes a very mystical view of Christianity. Much of what the Protestant Reformers opposed is promoted by Foster.⁵¹

No Wordless Faith

With its mystical emphasis upon experiencing spiritual ecstasy through songs, solitude, and silence, evangelicals are subverting Scripture. But for spirituality to be of God, it must be linked to the Word. As Paul wrote of the Spirit's ministry,

[T]he *thoughts* of God no one knows except the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things freely given to us by God, which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual *thoughts* with spiritual *words* (1 Corinthians 2:11b-13)

Everything in Its Time

Sooner or later, all believers will experience the presence of God. During my excruciatingly painful heart attack in Hungary, I knew, as never before in my life, that the Lord was with me. But I should shudder to think that to experience God's overwhelming presence, all Christians need to suffer a heart attack like me! I thought I was dying, that I was a goner from this earth (2 Corinthians 5:6-8). Excepting the comforting presence of the indwelling Christ who promised never to forsake us (Hebrews 13:5), and the Holy Spirit who groaned in prayer for me (Romans 8:26), my experience was mine, and mine alone.

While the ambulance transported me on an hour and a half ride to the hospital in Budapest, while I fell in and out of consciousness, and while being defibrillated seven times, I repeated to the medics, or so I am told, "Thank you for trying to help me." For this simple gesture, I became known to them as, "the American gentleman." This simple gesture, during a time when most afflicted persons become inward oriented, has stimulated at least one of the doctors who attended me during that ride to the hospital to consider the claims of Christ upon his life. In our walk with Christ, every now and then, God grants to us an exceptional sense of His presence. But most of the time, as we look unto Jesus, meditate upon the Scriptures that testify of Him, and live our lives

by faith, we do so without any overwhelming sense of God being with us. In our daily walk with Jesus Christ, we accept by faith that the Spirit of Christ lives within us.

Nevertheless, I do expect to experience God's overwhelming presence when I get to heaven. Then whatever experience we might have had on earth will pale in comparison. Along with a numberless multitude of other believers, we will be overwhelmed. As the Apostle Paul wrote, "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I shall know fully just as I also have been fully known" (1 Corinthians 13:12). In time, everything will come to God's children. Meanwhile, we walk by faith in the living Word as He is born witness to by the written Word.

Chapter Six Endnotes

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¹¹ Kevin Reeves, *The Other Side of the River* (Silverton, OR: Lighthouse Trails Publishing, 2007): 159.

¹² Rosemary Ellen Guiley, “Chanting,” *Harper’s Encyclopedia of Mystical & Paranormal Experience* (New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 1991): 92.

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¹⁴ Emphasis mine. Dirk Dunbar, “The Evolution of Rock and Roll: Its Religious and Ecological Themes,” *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*, Vol. II: Fall 2002. Online at www.usask.ca/relst/jrpc/article-evofrock.html.

¹⁵ Emphasis mine. Quoted by Tom Beaudoin, “Ambiguous Liturgy,” *Christianity Today Library.com*. Online at www.ctlibrary.com/345.

¹⁶ Matthew Rick, “The Magic and Mysticism of the Grateful Dead,” *Deadisticism*. Online at www.1ster.net/~shady/deadisti.html.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Reported in Brad Steiger, *Revelation: The Divine Fire* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1973): 92.

¹⁹ Cathleen Falsani, “The Rev. of rock ‘n’ roll.”

²⁰ In the bodily ecstasy of the musical experience, “Special neurons produce substances called endorphins, which resemble opiates and which act on neurons in the brain’s pain pathways . . . If endorphins are released when there is no pain to be counterbalanced, a euphoria results that is much like that produced by drugs like morphine.” See Jourdain, *Ecstasy*, 317.

²¹ Beaudoin, “Ambiguous Liturgy.” Understanding rock music’s connection to mysticism, Beaudoin describes one singer to be “like some modern-day hesychast.” A “hesychast” is “a member of a sect of mystics that originated in the 14th century among the monks on Mount Athos, Greece.” See *Random House College Dictionary*, 621.

²² Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005): 072.

²³ Jonathan Petre, “Hymns replaced by U2 lyrics at church,” *ReligionNewsBlog.com*, January 30, 2007. Online at www.religionnewsblog.com/17326/hymns-replaced-by-u2-lyrics-at-church

²⁴ Gary Stern, “Episcopal ‘U2-charist’ uses songs in service,” *USA Today*, October 26, 2006. Online at www.usatoday.com/life/music/2006-10-25-u2-churches_x.htm

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Miller, *Flowers*, 299.

²⁷ Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1987): 71. Before his decease, Dr. Bloom taught philosophy at the University of Chicago. His chapter “Music” remains an outstanding inquiry about rock music’s influence, especially upon youth.

²⁸ The word “alagon” consists of the alpha privative “a” joined to “logon” meaning word, or rational discourse. Like atheist, no God, or agnostic, no knowledge, “alagon” means no rational discourse. To ascertain that the rock medium is incapable of hosting meaningful discourse, all one needs to do is listen to the words that are irrationally strung together with no purpose other than to fit the sound of it.

²⁹ Beaudoin, “Liturgy.”

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³² Mary Alessi. Online at www.maryalessi.com/music.htm

³³ Religion News Service, “Evangelicals Adopting Rituals,” *The Indianapolis Star*, 6 March 2004, F3.

³⁴ For more in depth treatments of how contemplative spirituality has infiltrated evangelicalism, see Ray Yungen, *A Time of Departing, How Ancient Mystical Practices are Uniting Christians with the World's Religions*, 2nd Edition (Silverton, OR: Lighthouse Trails Publishing Company, 2006), and Brian Flynn, *Running Against the Wind, The Transformation of a New Age Medium and His Warning to the Church*, Second Edition (Silverton, OR: Lighthouse Trails Publishing, 2005).

³⁵ Based upon Paul's injunction to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17), Rick Warren recommends using “breath prayers.” See *The Purpose Driven Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002): 89. Interested readers are directed to Essay Eight appended to this book.

³⁶ Quoted by Andy Crouch, “The Emergent Mystique,” *Christianity Today*, November 2004, 38.

³⁷ See Bell, *Elvis*, 072. As referenced previously, Bell describes being overwhelmed by a divine presence while attending a U2 concert.

³⁸ Winfried Corduan, *Mysticism, An Evangelical Option?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991): 84.

³⁹ Ibid. 92.

⁴⁰ Originally appearing in *The Biblical Review* in 1917, “Mysticism and Christianity” is reprinted in the ninth volume of *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield*, 10 Volumes (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2003): 649-666.

⁴¹ Michelle McKinney Hammond, “Fear of Silence,” *Be Still* (DVD © 2006 Twentieth Fox Home Entertainment LLC).

⁴² Priscilla Shirer, “What Is Contemplative Prayer?” *Be Still* (DVD © 2006 Twentieth Fox Home Entertainment LLC).

⁴³ Richard Foster, “What Is Contemplative Prayer?” *Be Still* (DVD © 2006 Twentieth Fox Home Entertainment LLC).

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, Revised Edition (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1988): 103. See also Foster quoting Thomas Merton, *Prayer, Finding the Heart's True Home* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992): 160.

⁴⁶ Donald G. Bloesch, *The Crisis of Piety* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1968): 109.

⁴⁷ Richard Foster, "Fear of Silence," *Be Still* (DVD © 2006 Twentieth Fox Home Entertainment LLC).

⁴⁸ For further elaboration on this point, see Essay Seven appended to the end of this book.

⁴⁹ Foster, *Prayer*, 157.

⁵⁰ Emphasis mine, James, *Religious Experience*, 391.

⁵¹ See Arthur L. Johnson, *Faith Misguided: Exposing the Dangers of Mysticism* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1988): 153.

SEVEN

Summary and Conclusion

You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.

James 4:4 (KJV)

I looked for the church and found it in the world; and alas, I looked for the world and found it in the church.¹

Horatius Bonar (1808-1889)

In many churches the coffee cup has now become as important as the communion cup. How do you like your coffee—straight, sugar and/or cream, latte, or cappuccino? Then too, how do you like your worship? Do you like it cold, or hot? If you like it cold, attend the traditional service at 8:30 a.m. Or, if you like it hot, attend the praise service at 10:30. Choose the style that suits your taste. Churches today are dividing, not over substance, but style. What God has joined together—the one body of Christ—style is tearing apart (See Ephesians 4:1-6.). According to preferred style, worship services are now segregated in local churches.

What Will the Next Generation Think?

Several years ago Steve Green sang a contemporary Christian song titled, “Find Us Faithful.” Borrowing from the “hall of faith” in Hebrews chapter eleven, the wishful lyrics go:

Oh may all who come behind us find us faithful
May the fire of our devotion light their way
May the footprints that we leave
Lead them to believe
And the lives we live inspire them to obey
Oh may all who come behind us find us faithful.²

To change the wish of the song to a question, “Will those coming after us find us to have been faithful?”

Paul instructed Timothy, “And the things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, these entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also” (2 Timothy 2:2). From this apostolic directive, we can see that a transitioning of the Christian faith from one generation to the next is like a relay race. In a relay, the exchange of the baton from one runner to the next is the most vulnerable time of the race. Unfortunately, the exchange within evangelicalism does not appear to be going well. As evidenced by the younger generation’s growing disenchantment with organized religion, (i.e., the church), contemporary evangelicals appear to be fumbling the baton, and in danger of being disqualified from the race. In some people’s minds—including my own—there’s doubt that coming generations of believers will find the present generation to have been faithful.

In the downgrade controversy in England over a hundred years ago, biblical believers conclude that while Charles Spurgeon remained faithful, many of his contemporaries did not.³ We remember Spurgeon. We do not remember the others. If evangelicalism is losing its spiritual power, it is for reason that the Word is being sold-out, sabotaged, sacrificed, suffocated, and subverted. In short, worldly leaven is saturating the movement.

The Word and the World

James Montgomery Boice (1938-2000) warned about the intrusion of a worldly spirit into the life of the church. He wrote,

As Christians, we must be on guard against Satan’s tactics. We are warned not only against his infusion of his own people into the Christian community but also against the visible church’s bureaucratic growth (which confuses money, size, and structure with spiritual fruit) and against the infusion of evil into the lives of believing people (which confuses a loving and forgiving spirit with treason to Christ’s cause). In other words, we are to beware of the

church becoming secular, that is, of becoming like the world around it.⁴

The New Testament warns Christians against the leaven of worldliness. Paul advised, “And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect” (Romans 12:2). James warned, “You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (James 4:4). And John counseled,

Do not love the world, nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world (1 John 2:15-16).

In view of the Scriptures’ warning against the leaven of worldliness, believers need to know what it is.

But to understand what it is, we first ought to know what it is not. It is not “from the Father” (1 John 2:16). Therefore, the “world” does not refer to the earth (John 1:10a), God’s creation (John 1:10b), or people (John 1:10c). Worldliness rather represents the system that during this evil age contests with the Father for the loyalty of human hearts (2 Corinthians 4:3-4). The Bible presents two value systems that are competing for the allegiance of mankind. First, there is the devilish and temporal; and second, there is the godly and eternal. The two antagonists are involved in a fight to the finish, until one of the systems loses.

Worldliness may be defined as Satan’s value system that opposes God by peddling the lie that life’s reality is bounded by the horizons of birth and death. Worldliness is to be temporally, as opposed to eternally, minded. It seeks to indulge humanity’s fleshly appetites at the expense of obeying God’s Word. It values things above people. It esteems individuals, not for reason of their godly

character, but rather, for their position and influence in society. Christians can be distracted from God by sensuality (“the lust of the flesh”—experiences that temporarily gratify me), stuff (“the lust of the eyes”—acquisitions that temporarily satisfy me), and status (“the pride of life”—associations that temporarily signify me). In short, worldliness is hedonistic, materialistic, and egoistic.

Worldliness is about “me,” not God, and currently a worldly system is playing itself out in contemporary evangelicalism. It is no wonder D.M. Panton once remarked that the “pulse by which we can measure the real spirituality of an epoch, or of a soul, or of a group of souls, is the measure of horror they find in the word ‘*world*.’”⁵ According to the apostle John, worldliness is evidenced in three ways (1 John 2:16).

Sensuality—“the lust of the flesh” (Hedonism)

American culture craves pleasure. People are selling it and buying it. Pleasure is big business. We are into feeling “high.” For reason of the ecstasy that accompanies victory, we love to see our sports teams win. In so many other ways, we show ourselves to be addicted to the sensual fulfillment that comes from sex, alcohol, drugs, food, and music. Our culture is gluttonously addicted to feeling good. The danger for the church is that, like the culture, it will become similarly addicted.

To the extent that churches use the world’s music to peddle “feel” to their audience, they are catering to the worldly lust for pleasure that resides within our fallen human nature. When churches employ music that originates from the world, and appeals to the flesh, they are promoting worldliness in their midst.

One observer remarked, “Today’s contemporary worship is where spectacle meets spirituality—prayer at 110 decibels and 720 dots per inch.”⁶ Not content to worship the invisible God who created the heavens and the earth, the ancient Israelites made idols out of carved wood and precious metals, gods they could see. No longer content to worship the Father in “spirit and truth” (John 4:23-24), modern evangelicals appear similarly intent upon making worship a “spectacle” by employing liturgical dance, drama, movie clips, and even rock bands with their pulsating beat, strobe lights,

and smoke. The Word of God is not thought capable of doing the work of God. Enhancements and attractions—spectacles—are needed, or so it is assumed.

The medieval church also provided spectacles, “smells and bells.” Giant cathedrals, elaborate liturgies, colorful tapestries, priestly vestments, icons, and artistic statues provided church goers with relief from an otherwise drab and dreary life. Spectacles produced spectators. To deliver the people from such spectating, the reformers engaged their congregations to be hearers, rather than seers. As Sinclair Ferguson noted, “Expository preaching which engaged the minds of the congregation as hearers (in contrast to elaborate liturgy at which the congregation were spectators) was a leading characteristic of all the mainstream reformers . . .”⁷ As opposed to the Scriptures, the church growth movement has also tailored the church’s worship to attract and meet the needs of spectators.

Stuff—“the lust of the eyes” (Materialism)

Nothing succeeds like success, and evangelicalism today is under the influence of affluence. Not only do Americans like their food portions “super-sized,” but also their churches. Like the giant cathedrals built to God in Europe centuries ago, evangelicals seem bent upon building bigger and larger sanctuaries and facilities.⁸ To many, religion is not only about feeling, but also about seeing, and to that end, bigger is better.

In most people’s minds “bigger” seems to indicate that something significant is going on. There’s something deep in the human psyche that seeks meaning from giving to, and feeling part-owner of, something big. As in the New Testament era when Jews sought after “signs” to validate their faith (1 Corinthians 1:22), so evangelicals today seek after “size” to validate theirs.

Again, this manifests the spirit of worldliness that has invaded the evangelical church.

Success—“the pride of life” (Egoism)

But worldliness not only enters the lives of believers and churches by way of selfish feeling and seeing, but also through

arrogating. Someone defined egoism as “the self-centered hankering to inflate our own little reputations.”⁹ And now-a-days, nothing seems to inflate our reputations more than being associated with status-driven churches.

An evangelical leader once lamented that evangelicalism worships “at the shrine of sanctified or unsanctified statistics.” He went on to state,

We are sinfully concerned about size—the size of sanctuaries, the size of salaries, the size of Sunday schools. We are sinfully preoccupied with statistics about budgets and buildings and buses and baptisms. I repeat: too many of us are worshipping the . . . goddess of success.¹⁰

Since Vernon Grounds penned these words thirty years ago, the situation in the evangelical movement has not gotten better. It’s gotten worse. People want to belong to “the church of what’s happening now.” As size-ism appeals to and seduces human egos, status consciousness indicates that a worldly spirit has invaded the evangelical church.

Furthermore, preaching to “felt needs” is nothing more than a stroking of human pride, an attempt on the part of some preachers to sanctify the ego trip of their audience. In our narcissistic culture, most people do not possess inferiority complexes, but superiority complexes. Survey after survey has shown that people feel themselves to be better than their neighbors.

By nature, and in our fallen condition, we love ourselves. The New Testament’s call to selflessness indicates that we do (Matthew 16:24; Ephesians 5:33). That is why the Law, Jesus, and Paul commanded us to love God first, and then, “You shall love you neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 22:39; Romans 13:9). In Jesus’ words we find two commands, not three. He gives no command for us to love ourselves, but only to love God first, and second, our neighbor. His command to love our neighbors as ourselves assumes that self-love resides in us. In order to love others, Jesus was not telling people to learn to love

themselves, but rather, to love others like they love themselves. But self-love is spiritually dangerous, for as the Apostle Paul told Timothy, “in the last days difficult times will come. For men will be lovers of self . . .” (2 Timothy 3:1-2). Obviously, we are living in the days of narcissism that Paul predicted would come upon the church.

The irony of this emphasis upon self-esteem and self-love is that the Apostle Paul, the one who loathed the fleshly nature of the “self” which resided in his soul, was the man who, outside of Jesus himself, made the greatest impact upon the world for the cause of Christ and His church (See Romans 7:24.).

A Wise Warning

In the Roman Empire during which time they were martyred for refusing to do homage to Caesar, Christians became known as “the third race,” the first being the pagan Gentile nations of the Roman Empire, and the second being Jews of the Diaspora. Yet in spite of being so stigmatized, these Christians, who had been so separated from the world’s system, exercised great influence upon it. As the church father Tertullian (160-225 AD) stated, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.” In light of this historical fact, one older authority on evangelical spirituality warned,

Mark well, O popular Christian and worldly-wise preacher, venturing how far you must go with the world in order to win the world: never had the Church so much influence over the world as when she had nothing to do with the world.¹¹

Pietistic Christianity, accuse some activist Christians, isolates itself by retreating from society and culture. Some charge that the weakness of pietism was that it did not engage the culture. These scorners punned that evangelical pietism was so heavenly minded that it was no earthly good. But can that charge be reversed? It is possible for Christians to be so worldly minded that they’re no heavenly good? William Law (1686-1761) thought so. He

wrote that, “that the sin of all sins, or the heresy of all heresies, is a worldly spirit.” Then later he asked, “What is the apostasy of these last times, or whence is all the degeneracy of the present Christian church? I should place it all in a worldly spirit.”¹² A worldly spirit does not agree that,

God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised, God has chosen, the things that are not, that He might nullify the things that are, that no man should boast before God (1 Corinthians 1:27-29).

A worldly spirit maintains that the church must keep up with the culture for fear of becoming irrelevant to society, no matter how godless and debased society and culture might become.

Lukewarm Laodicea

In the book of Revelation, the church of Laodicea was the seventh congregation judged by the risen and glorified Christ. As Jesus assessed it, the church was “neither cold nor hot,” but only “lukewarm” (Revelation 3:15). For reason of lukewarmness, Jesus threatened the congregation, “I will spit you out of My mouth” (Revelation 3:16). The question arises, what caused the congregation to become lukewarm, and invite the Lord’s judgment?

In part, the answer may lie in the church being located in an extremely prosperous and affluent city. Being materially *self-sufficient*, the church became spiritually *self-righteousness*. While the church was materially rich, it was spiritually poor. Like the deluded and parading emperor who thought he was attired in splendid garments, but, in fact, was wearing only his undergarments, the Lord counseled the wealthy congregation to buy from him “white garments” symbolizing divine righteousness (Revelation 3:18; 7:14).

Another clue accounting for the congregation’s lukewarmness is suggested by the church’s name, Laodicea. The name consists of a compound word meaning the people (*laos*) rule, or judge (*dike*). In other words, the people, not Christ, controlled

the life of the church, and, inevitably, when power belongs to the people, the church becomes a man-centered organization, and not a Christ-centered organism. In parlance employed by the church-growth movement, the Church of Laodicea was audience-driven.

The qualities exhibited by the contemporary evangelical church suggest that, of the seven churches evaluated by the risen and glorified Christ, it is most like Laodicea. The suburban locations and physical facilities of the mega-churches indicate their affluence. A man-centered and needs-oriented preaching, which strokes the human ego, points to a spirit of self-righteousness. But the Lord's verdict is that we are "wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked" (Revelation 3:17). Yet with amazing love, and standing outside the church, the Lord asks Laodicea-like congregations to repent, and promises that if they do, He will enter the opened door and fellowship with them in their midst (Revelation 3:20).

The World, the Flesh and the Devil

Years ago preachers and theologians warned Christians about their three enemies: the world (John 15:19), the flesh (Galatians 5:17a), and the devil (1 Peter 5:8). When for reason of the flesh's cravings the world invades the church, we can know that the devil is not far behind. As Paul wrote to Timothy,

But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, by means of the hypocrisy of liars seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron, *men* who forbid marriage *and* *advocate* abstaining from foods . . . (1 Timothy 4:1-3a)

Paul warned that the enemies of faith, monasticism (forbidding marriage) and asceticism (abstaining from certain foods), would enter the church. Of both these movements, we can note the place such "spiritual disciplines" occupy in the contemplative traditions and practices extant in ancient and medieval Christendom. In their rejection of both traditional and contemporary worship, many

emergent evangelicals are opting to practice contemplative spiritualism. It will be interesting to see where this mysticism will lead. Could mystical rituals eventually lead practitioners to mystery religion?

Mystical to Mystery

Digressing for a moment . . . between mystical practices and mystery religion there is a similarity of approach to experiencing God. Historically, the origin of mysticism probably can be traced to the Greek mystery religions that were “designed to bring the initiate to an awareness of the holy and of the timeless state in which it exists, and for him to gain secret wisdom which must not be shared with the outside, uninitiated world.”¹³ Regarding the mystery religions that contested with Christian doctrine during early church history, J.N.D. Kelly observed their appeal “undoubtedly lay in the satisfaction they could give to the craving for an intense personal experience of the divine, with the accompanying sense of release from guilt and fear.” Kelly concluded that “the moral impact” of mystery religion “should not be underrated.”¹⁴ Where could mysticism lead its practitioners? Mysticism may take her practitioners back to the gnostic religion that spawned it.

Remember and Repent

To churches that have jettisoned their evangelical past in favor of doing church the contemporary way, the Lord’s word to the church at Sardis might be appropriate. He said to that congregation, “I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead” (Revelation 3:1). Then the living Christ instructed that congregation, “Remember therefore what you have received and heard; and keep *it*, and repent” (Revelation 3:3a). Note the emphasis: the Sardis congregation was to *remember and repent* based upon what it had *received and heard*.

At one time Sardis heard the Word, and the key to that church’s recovery was to remember, repent, and return to the Word. Dr. Arthur W. Hunt states that,

Returning to the Word means . . . preserving older forms of worship that are *logos*-centered—maintaining Scripture reading and keeping the sermon the centerpiece of the service. It also means taking off our pragmatic eyeglasses whereby all things are viewed under a success-oriented paradigm: Does it work? How does it look? Will it draw a crowd? It means asking tough questions in loving confrontation: What is wrong with the older hymnals? Do we really need a contemporary service and a traditional one? What are we saying by having two services?¹⁵

Allow me to address Hunt's last two questions. First, does calling the prime time service "praise worship" thereby imply that traditional worship is less praiseful, and therefore, inferior? Seemingly, it does. But for reason of it being traditional, worship is not thereby of lesser quality than so called "celebrations of praise." Traditional services, featuring vibrant congregational singing, prayer, and expository preaching, do praise God!

Second, why should any local congregation divide over of all things, style of worship? Jesus prayed for the unity of the body (John 17:21-22). The Scriptures declare there to be "one body" (Ephesians 4:4-5). The Spirit's baptizing work creates unity (1 Corinthians 12:12-13). The Apostle Paul wished: "Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus; that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 15:5-6). In light of Jesus' prayer, the Scripture's declaration, the Spirit's work, and the apostle's wish, why do men sunder what God is joining together? No wonder Hunt asks, "What are we saying by having two services?"

Recently, I heard of a young man called to pastor a mega-church. At the time of his call, the church featured multiple services separated according to traditional and contemporary styles of worship. Under the young pastor's charge, the congregation jettisoned the contemporary service, and now offers worship

featuring vibrant singing of traditional hymns and expository preaching in all three services. Guess what has happened to that church? As manipulative pastors might fear, did a mass of the membership leave because they could no longer hear short “needs” oriented messages that accommodate the mood set by contemporary music? Not at all! The church continues to offer three well attended traditional services, because under God, the leadership followed biblical priorities of worship. What happened in that large congregation could happen in thousands of others, if the leadership would only remember, repent, and return to the basic priorities of New Covenant worship (See Acts 2:42; Ephesians 5:18-19.). There’s a place for simple church.

Spiritual churches that honor God’s Word will always be in tension with worldly congregations that do not. For His immediate disciples, and “for those also who [will] believe in Me through their word” (That’s us!), Jesus prayed,

I have given them Thy word; and the world has hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. I do not ask Thee to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil *one*. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; Thy word is truth (John 17:14-17, 20).

In the end, the Purpose-Driven prescription of doing church will, I believe, prove to have been a placebo. The Spirit of God does not come upon methods. He comes upon churches, churches mighty in the Word.

A Graying Church

Admittedly, the church is graying in America. Some fear that like the dinosaurs, many American congregations may be headed for extinction. Perhaps they are. Many local congregations may already be “cut flower churches”; that is, while retaining a semblance of outward beauty and fragrance, they espouse a powerless “form of godliness [i.e., *religion*]” (2 Timothy 3:5). Even though these churches may not yet realize it, for reason of having

cut themselves off from the Word, they are dying. In time the flower's petals will wither and fall off. What has happened to churches in Great Britain may portend the future of American Christianity.

The Purpose-Driven philosophy seems to feed off the fear of a dying church. But failing to cultivate spiritual health by returning to the Word, churches are only embracing methods of temporary life support. However, being separated from the life of the Word and the Spirit, churches will inevitably be forced to pull the plug, and die. Purpose-Driven would have us believe that life can be sustained by adopting *new methods*. Jesus and the apostles would tell us that life can only be sustained by returning to the *old message*. For churches cut off from their Gospel roots, no new method is going to bring them real spiritual life. Pragmatism possesses no power to resurrect the dead. Only the Word and the Spirit can do that (Romans 1:16; Revelation 3:3a).

The Promise

But amidst this pessimism, there speaks the promise of Jesus Christ. Based upon Peter's confession that Jesus is "the Christ, the Son of the living God," Jesus proclaimed, "you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades shall not overpower it" (Matthew 16:18). Jesus promised that the church would be built upon the bedrock of Peter's confession. In protest of Rick Warren's call to the church for a new reformation based not upon creeds, but deeds, it can be noted that Jesus viewed that the church would be built upon a creed, the confession that He is "the Christ, the Son of the living God"!

Interestingly, the "gates of Hades" can be interpreted in a couple of ways. It may refer to the resistance of Satan and his demonic hoards against the church's progress as he and his minions, through deception or persecution, attempt to destroy the true church (See John 8:44.). If this is the understanding, then God's archenemies will not defeat the church!

But the "gates of Hades" may refer to the death of the saints. If this is the understanding, then the deaths of believers will neither frustrate nor extinguish Christ's building of His church.

New members will replace deceased members. If church history teaches us anything at all, it teaches us that the church will survive and thrive, not for reason that it's Purpose-Driven, but rather, because it's driven by the Word of the living Christ. Upon Peter's confession, Jesus Christ will build His church, He himself being the chief cornerstone (1 Peter 2:6), and the apostles and prophets being the foundation (Ephesians 2:20).

The church can and should take great comfort in the promise of Jesus to Peter. In the ebb and flow of this age's history for two millennia, Jesus has successfully built His church, and He has been doing so long before the mechanics and modern methods of church growth came along, and should He delay His return, He shall do so long after our passing from the scene. But as church history has shown, the greatest threat the church faces is not the enemy without, but the enemy within—a worldly spirit that sells-out, sabotages, sacrifices, suffocates and subverts the Word.

Preach the Word

After having been accepted for study at Dallas Theological Seminary in my mid-twenties, I resigned from public school teaching and enrolled there in the late summer of 1970. In the confines of Chafer Chapel during the matriculation service that hot August evening, I shall never forget the words and sound of the faculty, students, and their wives singing together, “All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name” (Diadem). Whether in congregational worship, or playing it on my car's CD, that hymn still stirs my soul to worship the Lord Jesus Christ, because unlike much contemporary Christian music, the hymn is about Him!

During that initial service at Dallas, I noticed a plaque at the front of Chafer Chapel with an inscription, which at that time, I could not read. A Greek phrase of three words was inscribed on it: “κήρυξον τὸν λόγον” (2 Timothy 4:2). As I discovered later, those words, the seminary motto, best summarized the intent and purpose of the seminary, and why students took four years out of their lives to prepare for Christian ministry at Dallas. By learning the biblical languages, understanding the books of the Bible, and studying theology, we desired to learn more about God and His

Word, and then go out and communicate His message to people. With simplicity of heart I approached my education for the Gospel ministry to “preach the Word.” The marketing techniques and management savvy of seeker-sensitive, user-friendly, and audience-driven Christianity were all foreign to me. I had left a profession to follow the Lord’s calling upon my life.

I viewed then, and still do after thirty-eight years of ministry in three local churches, that, like a bank executive who looks after the financial interests of his clients, ministering the Word is a sacred trust. Paul wrote to Timothy, “And the things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, these entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also” (2 Timothy 2:2).

Regardless of my personal inadequacies and imperfections, the expository preaching of the Bible has brought spiritual blessing and growth to the churches I have pastored. I am reminded of Hudson Taylor’s statement that, “God’s work done in God’s way will never lack God’s supply.” As I have remained faithful to the Word, the Lord has, time and time again, proven His faithfulness to me.

But so much time has so quickly passed by, and looking back upon the simple intent of ministry I possessed thirty-seven years ago, and comparing it to the cool communication skills, marketing savvy, and managerial acumen demanded of today’s pastors, I have often asked myself, was I then, and am I now, naïve to think that the simple teaching of God’s Word will grow a church? No. Though I am an imperfect minister, down through the years God has blessed the faithful, truthful, and loving exposition of His Word in the hearts His people. Why should I now change the track of my ministry and desert such a method of church growth?

Whether to small or large groups of people, I will continue to engage in the ministry of the Word as long as the Lord physically and mentally enables me. I encourage all other Bible-believing pastors and congregations to keep the most important thing the most important thing; that together, we will keep the trust that God has entrusted to us—to “preach the Word.” Jesus still

calls men of God to build His church by preaching His Word. As Dr. Joel Beeke states, “God begets and multiplies His church only by means of His Word (James 1:18).”¹⁶

Conclusion

In the 1992 election for President of the United States of America, the Democrat Bill Clinton defeated the incumbent Republican President George H. Bush. With all the distractions, assorted issues, and rabbit trails that a hard-fought political campaign raises, there was a sign posted in the National Democratic Party’s Campaign Headquarters, called the “war room,” that served to keep the most important issue the most important issue. When the Republicans brought other controversial issues to bear upon the election, the sign in the headquarters served to keep all campaign strategists and workers on focus and on task. The sign read: “IT’S THE ECONOMY, STUPID!”

If I might be allowed the liberty to adapt these words to all of us who engage in local church ministry, who continuously engage the struggles and battles of spiritual warfare in the local church’s trenches, and who might be tempted to engineer church growth by man-made methods—“IT’S THE WORD, STUPID!” In contrast to the way in which the methods of mega-church growth distract pastors and congregations from the Word, and even obstruct the ministry of the Scriptures and their witness to the Person and Work of Jesus Christ, may God help all of us, pastors and people, to stay on focus and on task, as we keep the most important thing the most important thing—as we preach, hear, and obey the Word of God until either we die, or the One comes to whom all of us will give account.

“MARANATHA!”

Chapter Seven Endnotes

¹ The quote is ascribed to Horatius or to his brother Andrew (1810-1892), both ministers of the Church of Scotland.

² Steve Green, “Find Us Faithful.” Online at www.thesonglyrics.com/g_song_lyrics/stevegreen_lyric2.html

³ John F. MacArthur, Jr., “Spurgeon and the Down-Grade Controversy,” Appendix 1, *Ashamed of the Gospel* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1993): 197-225. Available online at www.Spurgeon.org/downgrd.htm

MacArthur states, “No creed but Christ’ was a popular sentiment among evangelicals in Spurgeon’s day. There were many who felt creeds and doctrinal statements were somehow sub-Christian” (219-220). In this regard, we can compare Rick Warren’s call for a new reformation based not upon creeds, but deeds.

⁴ James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Volume 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2001): 242.

⁵ D.M. Panton quoted by L.E. Maxwell, *Born Crucified, The Cross in the Life of the Believer* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1945): 34.

⁶ Paul Asay, “Religion: Techno Churches,” *The Colorado Springs Gazette*, March 14, 2007. Online at www.gazette.com/onset?id=20164&template=article.html

⁷ Sinclair B. Ferguson, “The Reformed View,” *Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification*, Donald L. Alexander, Editor (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988): 69-70.

⁸ Vernon Grounds noted that even thirty years ago evangelicals were building, “bigger, more elegant, air-conditioned churches—even glass cathedrals—that we really do not need for worship of our carpenter-Savior in a world where millions of people have never yet heard the gospel.” Vernon C. Grounds, “Loving the World: Rightly or Wrongly,” *Christianity Today*, April 4, 1980, 21-22.

⁹ *Ibid.* 22.

¹⁰ Vernon C. Grounds, “Faith to Face Failure, Or What’s So Great About Success?” *Christianity Today*, December 9, 1977, 13.

¹¹ Maxwell, *Born Crucified*, 42-43.

¹² William Law, *The Spirit of Prayer*, (Rio, WI: Ages Software Inc., Master Christian Library, Version 8): 103, 108.

¹³ R.A. Gilbert, *The Elements of Mysticism* (Boston, MA: Element Books, Inc., 1991): 4-5.

¹⁴ J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, Revised Edition (New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 1978): 12.

¹⁵ Arthur W. Hunt III, *The Vanishing Word: The Veneration of Visual Imagery in the Postmodern World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2003): 244-245.

¹⁶ Joel R. Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Spirituality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2004): 432.

APPENDIX ONE

The Parable of the Leaven: An Interpretation

Corruption on the Rise

He spoke another parable to them, “The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took, and hid in three pecks of meal, until it was all leavened”.

Jesus, Matthew 13:33

But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith . . .

The Apostle Paul, 1 Timothy 4:1

[T]he history of the Church has not been that of a community of one heart and one mind, carrying out the will of its Head under the guidance of the Holy Ghost, and steadily growing in love, holiness, wisdom and power; but of a community divided against itself, forgetful of God’s purpose, filled with ambition to rule this world, and covetous of its pleasures and honours.¹

Samuel J. Andrews (1817-1906)

The title of this book, *Church on the Rise*, is adapted from Jesus’ *Parable of the Leaven* that He stated in the thirteenth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, verse thirty-three. For this parable, and the one that precedes it, the Parable of the Mustard Seed, many, even opposite, interpretations are offered. Based upon what they presume is a misunderstanding of the meaning of leaven in Jesus’ parable, some might be inclined to dismiss the title, and consequently, the contents of this book. Therefore, I offer my interpretation of the parable with the hope that the title will be thought an appropriate description of what is going on in contemporary evangelicalism.

Interpreting the parables of Matthew 13 is complicated by the fact that Jesus uttered these stories to conceal spiritual truth from unbelievers. Alluding to the words of Isaiah, Jesus said, “Therefore I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they

do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand” (Matthew 13:13). Yet in contrast to unbelievers, Jesus also intimated that it would be given to believers to understand His stories. To the disciples He said,

To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted. For whoever has, to him shall *more* be given, and he shall have an abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him (Matthew 13:11-12).

Regarding the understanding of His parables, Jesus distinguished between two groups—those to whom it was given to comprehend what they heard Him say, and those to whom it was not given to understand. To the later group Jesus’ parables remained cryptic sayings, while to the second group, to those who trusted Him, He would enable them to know the parables’ meaning. Believers would both hear and understand the significance of the seven illustrative stories Jesus told in this chapter. Unbelievers would not. In understanding Jesus’ words, such a cleavage, I believe, continues today. For reason of grace, there exist those *who understand* His words. For reason of possible personal bias, there exist those *who do not understand*. And for reason of God’s judgment residing upon them, there exist those *who cannot understand*. So allow the meaning of Jesus’ words to be explored so that, by God’s grace, we might understand His parable.

Various Interpretations

Various interpretations can be influenced by bias brought to bear upon the text, especially with those offered for the Parable of the Leaven. In the face of all the biblical and rabbinical evidence to the contrary, some assert that the leaven of Jesus’ parable represents the gospel and the permeation of it throughout the world, which according to this interpretation, would represent “the three pecks of meal.” According to this proposal, the parable pictures the church triumphant in the world during this age, and as such, appeals to postmillennialists, Christian reconstructionists, and

some amillennialists whose eschatological belief system holds that the kingdom promises are being fulfilled in and through the church now, that Christian “leaven” is permeating and influencing the world for good, and that in the future, Jewish-Christian law and Christians will politically control the planet, thereby establishing a worldwide Christendom.² For reasons to be explained, this is not the understanding held by this pastor.

For legitimate interpretive and theological reasons, and in concert with other expositors, I hold that the “three pecks of meal” represents the church or Christendom, and that the “leaven” represents satanic evil and corruption that has infiltrated, and is sabotaging, the kingdom of heaven.³ As such, it is Christendom that stands in need of repentance and reformation, as it has, and will continue to be, infiltrated by unbiblical beliefs and ungodly practices until this age has run its course. But to understand the parables of Jesus in Matthew 13, we must first know something of the time frame to which the Lord assigned them.

Timing is everything!

The Jewish mind viewed time to be lineal; that is, unlike the eastern worldview which sees life as endless repetition and reincarnation, Jews viewed that history had a beginning, will move through a series of epochs, and will one day reach its appointed end. To the Jewish mind history was combined of two ages, “this age,” and “the *age* to come” (Matthew 12:32). One source defines this age as,

. . . the time period from creation to the judgment that concludes the age and is followed by the age to come. . . . In this scheme, this age (or world) is marked by trouble and evil, which will be eliminated in the age (or world) to come (2 Bar. 15:8, 48:50).⁴

When viewing the two distinct ages mentioned by Jesus, a question arises, in which age are we now living? At the time of Jesus’ first coming, did He end the old age and inaugurate a “new age,” or as He designated it, “the age to come”? Or, is the course

of “the age to come” entirely future? A-millenarians and post-millenarians advocate that we have already arrived at, and are living in, the age to come, the age introduced at the time of Jesus’ crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, and judgment upon Jerusalem in A.D. 70. All that remains for Christians to do is exert their influence, even control, over society. But as the Puritans discovered in a previous century, along with the American evangelical activists of the 1980s and 1990s, such influence is inconsequential upon society for reason of *Satan’s control*—“the whole world lies in *the power of the evil one*” (1 John 5:19)—and for reason of *Christendom’s corruption*.

There’s spiritual arrogance in thinking that organized Christians and a corrupt institutional church can, and ought to, exert power and control over a world’s system that is now temporarily governed by Satan. Of the failed agenda of the Moral Majority during previous decades, one leader noted that it was doomed from the beginning. He stated that the Moral Majority “was an attempt to change values in the world at large when those values haven’t even been significantly changed in the community of faith.”⁵ As one cartoon character exclaimed, “I have seen the enemy. He is us!”

Of the history of Christendom, Samuel J. Andrews (1817-1906) wrote that it,

... has not been that of a community of one heart and one mind, carrying out the will of its Head under the guidance of the Holy Ghost, and steadily growing in love, holiness, wisdom and power; but of a community divided against itself, forgetful of God’s purpose, filled with ambition to rule this world, and covetous of its pleasures and honours.⁶

In this leavened state, the church has hardly positioned itself to be a positive influence in the world. It is too much like the system it seeks to confront and reform.

Nevertheless, from the perspective and time of His speaking the parables, and His explanation of their meaning to the disciples, Jesus’ stories contain prophetic truths. For example, three

times Jesus employed the phrase “the end of the age” (Matthew 13:39, 40, 49). In the Great Commission, Jesus promised His spiritual presence in the disciple-making process until “the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). Jesus associated “the end of the age” with the judgment and separation of believers (wheat) from unbelievers (tares), and the casting of unbelievers “into the furnace of fire” where “in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matthew 13:40-42). Jesus also associated this angelic gathering and separation with His second coming (Matthew 24:29-31; 25:31-46).

Given that Jesus’ parables envision a coming judgment and separation of unbelievers from believers by His angels at the end of the age, we can see that the time period referred to in the parables indicates spiritual conditions of the present time until the Lord comes to administer the judgment that will conclude this age. In the words of a previous generation’s comedian, Jesus’ Matthew 13 parables describe “the church of what’s happening now.” The time frame into which any application of these parables fit began when Jesus first spoke the parables, and will continue until the Lord’s second coming and the judgment-separation of unbelievers from believers by the angels.

The New Age and the Second Coming

From the perspective of the New Testament, there is a sense in which God inaugurated a new age at the time of Jesus’ incarnation. Through the Word, and by the Holy Spirit, Jesus began an ongoing spiritual revolution in and among believers which will continue until the end of the age (John 7:37-39; 14:16-18; Matthew 28:20b). After referring to an incident that occurred during the Old Testament redemptive era, the Apostle Paul stated, “Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, *upon whom the ends of the ages have come*” (Emphasis mine, 1 Corinthians 10:11). Elsewhere, the author of Hebrews hypothetically wrote that if Jesus’ sacrifice did not fully accomplish redemption for sin, then “He would have needed to suffer often since the foundation of the world; but *now once at the consummation of the ages* He has been manifested to put away sin by

the sacrifice of Himself' (Emphasis mine, Hebrews 9:26). Jesus' first coming inaugurated "the last days," the time period that *began* with His incarnation, and *will continue* until the consummation of "this age," and *will end* when "the age to come" begins (Hebrews 1:1-2; 1 Peter 1:20). Like a down-payment on a house, the present spiritual kingdom fulfills some aspects of the promised Old Testament kingdom. This present fulfillment guarantees that, in "the age to come," the full spiritual, political and social dimensions of the promised theocratic kingdom will be realized. This fulfillment of the earthly promises of the coming judgment-separation and commencement of the theocratic kingdom belong to the "not yet" category of biblical prophecy, but these promises reside in continuum with the spiritual promises that have already been realized "now" (Acts 2:14-18; Joel 2:28-32). The fulfillment of the latter promises guarantees the fulfillment of the former. The stage for Jesus' second coming and commencement of His kingdom reign is set. Jesus is coming again, and then God will "be all in all" (1 Corinthians 15:28). In this godless and profane world, we long for the day when the world will be purged of its false gods and will be forced to submit to the authority of the true God.

But that societal revolution will not happen until Jesus' second coming and divine judgment end this age. Though in part the "new age" has been inaugurated, "the age to come" will not be realized until the Messiah's long-anticipated theocratic kingdom commences on earth (Isaiah 9:6-7; Daniel 2:44; Luke 1:32-33; Revelation 20:6). The interval between Jesus' first coming and second coming is the inter-advent age. The parables of Matthew thirteen are descriptive of the spiritual conditions that will persist during the inter-advent age, the time period Jesus called the kingdom of heaven.

The Parable of the Leaven: An Interpretation

In the context of this time frame, how might we understand the Parable of the Leaven? To this end, several issues must be addressed. The relationship of the side-by-side parables of the Mustard Seed and Leaven must be explored. Their relationship to the context supplied by the other parables ought to be

compared. These two parables should not be studied in isolation from the chapter's other parables. Too, the reference of the "three pecks of meal" needs to be identified. The representation of leaven needs to be addressed, as well as the sabotaging action of the woman.

The Kingdom of Heaven and the Kingdom of God

Some Bible teachers and scholars distinguish the kingdom of God from the kingdom of heaven while others do not. Personally, I hold that a distinction needs to be made between the two expressions, even though the New Testament often refers to them interchangeably. Context is determinative of the meaning. One distinction between the "kingdom of God" and the "kingdom of heaven" might be as follows: In His address to Nicodemus in John 3, Jesus stated that the kingdom of God consists only of regenerate individuals, of those who have been "born from above" (John 3:3). Yet as employed by Jesus in Matthew 13, the kingdom of heaven appears more earthly in that this kingdom consists of "wheat," true sons of the kingdom, and "tares," sons of the devil (Matthew 13:37-39).

The Parable of the Mustard Seed

Most Bible expositors believe that the parables of the Mustard Seed and the Leaven should be interpreted in tandem. As such, the Mustard Seed Parable likely points to the phenomenal growth of the kingdom of heaven. From the smallest of seeds, the kingdom will grow into the largest of trees. Certainly, the worldwide history of Christendom bears witness to such growth. More or less, the word of an obscure and itinerant Judean prophet has grown to influence the whole of western civilization. Whether visible or underground, some semblance of a Christian church exists throughout the world. But enter the birds.

The Birds

To what do the birds refer? In His interpretation of the Parable of the Sower (Matthew 13:3-9), Jesus earlier identified the birds with "the evil one" (Matthew 13:19). Therefore, it is natural

to the context to associate the birds in the Mustard Seed Parable with an invasion of evil that corrupts the tree, the kingdom of heaven. With their droppings, fowls do tend to befoul any area where they congregate in mass. For those who viewed Alfred Hitchcock's movie *The Birds*, who can forget the scene in which flocking, attacking, and pecking black birds terrorized the lead character, Melanie Daniels, played by Tippi Hedren? As has been well documented, an overabundance of flocking birds poses an unsanitary health hazard to humans. Jesus posed to His hearers that the kingdom of heaven will become host to invading and befouling fowls. As such, the invasion of the birds in the Mustard Seed Parable parallels the infection of the meal by the yeast in the Leaven Parable (Matthew 13:33). As Toussaint observed, "The parable of the mustard seed indicated what the program of the kingdom would appear to be in the eyes of men; the parable of the leaven gives God's view of it."⁷

The Parable of the Leaven

Crucial to the interpretation of the Parable of the Leaven, are the character of the leaven, and the action of the woman. We begin with the leaven. Does it represent good, as amillennialists and postmillennialists hold, or evil as premillennialists believe? Abundant evidence exists from the Old Testament, from Jewish sources of the inter-testament period, from the sayings of Jesus, and from the writings of Paul, that leaven represents evil.

Leaven in the Old Testament

The Feast of Unleavened Bread, during which Israelites refrained from eating yeast, commemorated Israel's hasty flight from Egypt (Exodus 12:17-20). Even proponents of the idea that the yeast represents good, are forced to admit that normally it is "associated with evil in the OT . . ."⁸ With the exception of the offerings that worshippers ate (Leviticus 7:13; 23:17), the use of any leaven was prohibited within the Hebrew sacrificial system, and in the worship of Yahweh (Exodus 23:18; 34:25; Leviticus 2:11; etc.).⁹ Yeast was forbidden, but why? As Ross deduces, "The idea behind this restriction may be that people should not offer to God

anything with corruption working in it.” As extended to the persons making the offerings to God, “then it certainly meant” continues Ross, “that they should not offer themselves with malice, wickedness, conflicts, or guilty fears.”¹⁰ Craig S. Keener lists rabbinical and inter-testament historical sources from Jewish texts which “emphasize leaven’s function as a symbol of evil . . .”¹¹

Leaven in the New Testament

From these eras, we turn to the New Testament, or apostolic age. A few chapters after Matthew 13, Jesus warns His disciples to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the Herodians (Matthew 16:6; Mark 8:15). Jesus identified the leaven of the Pharisees to be hypocrisy (Luke 12:1), and the leaven of the Sadducees to be false teaching (Matthew 22:23). As may be deduced from the gospels, the leaven of the Herodians involved political scheming and judicial entrapment (Matthew 22:15-17).

In the writings of the Apostle Paul, leaven indicated either sexual immorality (1 Corinthians 5:6-8), or doctrinal evil (Galatians 5:9), the latter involving forced and legalistic circumcision upon Gentile Christians by the Judaizers.

To summarize: Overwhelmingly, in Scripture yeast represents “an evil penetrating force . . .”¹² Why, it must be asked, should it not too in the Parable of the Leaven? The opinion that the yeast is not evil because evil does not fit the context is suspect, especially in view of Jesus’ mention of “the enemy” sowing tares among the wheat in the preceding verses, and their side-by-side growth in the kingdom of heaven until the separating-judgment of the reapers, or angels (Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43). In that the parables of the Mustard Seed and the Leaven are sandwiched between the Parable of the Tares (vv. 24-30), and Jesus’ interpretation of it (vv. 36-40), it becomes difficult to see how the yeast Jesus spoke of represents the glorious penetration of the Gospel into the world. The context is too sinister. The actions of the woman now need to be scrutinized.

Hidden Leaven

The parable states that a woman hid the yeast “in three pecks of meal, until it was all leavened” (Matthew 13:33). First, the amount of the meal that was leavened should be noted—a dry measurement of about three pecks, or twelve quarts. The NIV translates it, “a large amount of flour.” Bloomberg states that three *satas* is “variously estimated to be between twenty to forty-five liters . . . which could feed well over one hundred people.”¹³ If all Jesus meant to picture was a normal mixing of yeast into flour for purpose of baking in a home oven, such an amount of flour seems excessive.

Second, the text says that she “hid” (ἐγκρύπτω) the yeast in the flour. The verb can mean to conceal, and was so used in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) to describe Achan when in his greed he first stole, and then “concealed” (ἐγκρύπτω) in his tent, the forbidden spoils of war (Joshua 7:20-22). To interpret that the woman merely “mixed” the yeast into the flour in the normal course of baking does not do justice to the meaning of “hide.”

That a woman might unlawfully attempt to hide leaven can be understood, especially if she was in violation of the “no leaven law” that governed Israel’s three national feasts (i.e., the feasts of Unleavened Bread, Ingathering or First Fruits, and Passover). Among other things, these feasts required all males to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to appear before the Lord, and under threat of excommunication, commanded the purging of all leaven from Jewish households (Exodus 12:19; 23:18; 34:25). In the Feast of Unleavened Bread, as with the other feasts, the law mandated that “there shall be no leaven found in your houses; for whoever eats what is leavened, that person shall be cut off from the congregation of Israel.” Then the law continues, “You shall not eat anything leavened; in all your dwellings you shall eat unleavened bread” (Exodus 12:19).¹⁴ Understanding human nature as being what it is, we can see why, for reason of baking convenience and unbelief in God’s law, a woman might not obey God’s order to rid her household of the leaven.

Appendix 1—Parable of the Leaven: An Interpretation 187

In summarizing his view, and representative of the interpretation of many others that leaven represents good influence, Keener remarks that, “Jesus’ kingdom invades the world in a hidden way.”¹⁵ Along with others, he advocates this in spite of the fact that Pentecost was a public event, and that the Gospel was, and is, to be declared openly (Acts 2:1-4; Acts 5:42; 9:15; 17:16-19). Contrarily, James M. Boice wrote that Jesus’ leaven parable indicates that, “the presence of evil is pervasive, not merely in the hierarchal structures of the church but in its many members and its life.”¹⁶ If anything is hidden, it is how leaven is invading and sabotaging the kingdom of heaven in ways that many Christians are unawares.

Leaven and Worship

Of the meaning of leaven in ancient Israel, Ryken notes, “Worship of the true God could not be combined with other gods or religions. Unleavened bread symbolized this requirement of purity of worship.”¹⁷ From Ryken’s observation about leaven, we can see the potential for the church becoming corrupt in its worship in addition to being polluted in its moral character, heretical in its teaching, and politicized and scheming in its methods.

The prophets warned and indicted Israel for her ungodly worship (See Isaiah 1:1-15). Note that Isaiah’s indictment of Israel’s worship is prefaced by the divine injunction “Hear the word of the Lord . . .” (v. 10), the implication being that in her worship, Israel did not listen to God’s Word. Likewise, worship without the Word can obstruct the spiritual work of God in a local church, especially in instances where, in order to promote growth, the pure gospel (our sin, Jesus’ substitutionary sacrifice for our sin, and His bodily resurrection from the dead), and expository preaching are neglected and by-passed for pragmatic reasons.

Application—Sabotaging the Work of God

So during this inter-advent age, what might be learned from Jesus’ Parable of the Leaven? It is this: According to the warnings of Jesus, Paul, and other apostles, the church lives under

the constant threat of corruption permeating her midst (See Matthew 7:15; 24:11, 24; Acts 20:28-31; 2 Peter 2:1; 1 John 4:1.). Jesus asked the question, “. . . when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?” (Luke 18:8). During the “later times,” the Apostle Paul predicted massive defection from the faith (1 Timothy 4:1-3a). Peter predicted the same (2 Peter 3:3), as did Jude (Jude 18). Therefore, it’s not difficult to see how by His use of the leaven image Jesus meant to symbolize the corruption of Christendom. In the eyes of the Lord, the intrusion of such leaven, into what otherwise ought to be a holy church, may be either overt or covert. The virus of evil can enter the body of Christ through various ways and means. As seen in the example of Simon the Sorcerer, hypocrisy, legalistic false teaching, and politicizing have all threatened the work of God in and through the church from its beginning (Acts 8:9-24).

It is my conviction that the evangelical movement is being leavened not only by Pharisaical hypocrisy (Note the prominent pastors whose immoral and private behavior belied their public profession.), Sadducean false teaching (Note the unorthodox and unbiblical teachings that are promoted through various media, parachurch ministries, and conferences.), Herodian scheming (Note the pragmatism in which the goal of church growth justifies any means to achieve it.), but also through musical experiences which cater to the fleshly impulses of Christians who confuse their emotional catharsis with worship.

Appendix One Endnotes

¹ Samuel J. Andrews, *Christianity and Anti-Christianity in Their Final Conflict* (Minneapolis, MN: Reprinted by Klock & Klock Christian Publishers, Inc., 1898): 338.

² See Thomas D. Ice, “Reconstructionism, Christian,” *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology*, Mal Couch, General Editor (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1996): 359-362.

³ See James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Volume I (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2001): 240-243. John F. Walvoord, *Matthew: Thy Kingdom Come* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1974): 102-104.

⁴ “age, this,” *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period, 450 B.C.E. to 600 C.E.*, Jacob Neusner, Editor in Chief (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999): 19.

⁵ Edward Dobson, quoted by John Seel, “Nostalgia for the Lost Empire,” *No God But God* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1992): 74.

⁶ Andrews, *Anti-Christianity*, 338.

⁷ Stanley D. Toussaint, *Behold the King* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1980): 182.

⁸ D.A. Carson, “Matthew,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Volume 8, Frank E. Gaebelin, General Editor (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984): 319.

⁹ Roland K. Harrison, “Leaven,” *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Volume 3, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, General Editor (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986): 98.

¹⁰ Allen P. Ross, *Holiness Unto the Lord* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002): 105.

¹¹ Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999): 388.

¹² Floyd V. Filson, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1960): 162.

¹³ Craig L. Bloomberg, *Matthew* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992): 220. The NIV marginal reading estimates the amount of flour was about ½ bushel, or 22 liters.

¹⁴ “Bread could be made from yeast or leaven, but the continuing use of leaven from batch to batch opened up the way to corruption and infection. The annual destruction of all leaven (Exod. 12:14-15) thus had hygienic as well as religious significance.” See Leon Morris, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992): 353, Footnote 83.

¹⁵ Keener, 388.

¹⁶ Boice, *Matthew*, 242. See Boice’s assessment of today’s secular church on pages 242-243.

¹⁷ “Leaven, Leavening,” *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, General Editors (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998): 498.

APPENDIX TWO

Dance and the Church

Aestheticism on the Rise

Let Israel rejoice in him that made him: let the children of Zion be joyful in their King. Let them praise his name in the dance: let them sing praises unto him with the timbrel and harp.

Psalm 149:2-3

The universal importance of dance as part of the induction of new adherents into the mystery cults of the Greco-Roman period . . . made dancing highly suspect for Christian worship.¹

Eleanor B. Johnson

“It’s difficult to get people to come to church” said A.W. Tozer, “when the only attraction is God.” So churches now offer enticements. In audience-driven congregations, expository preaching is down, but entertainment is up. Churches self-hype their services by calling them celebrations, and offer a smorgasbord of attractions varying from rock music, to drama, to skits, to multimedia presentations, and now, to something called liturgical, or sacred, dance. Recently, a website advertised a book with the title, “Dancing into the Anointing: Touching the Heart of God through Dance.” Of course, practitioners of all these so-called worship activities attempt to find justification from a text somewhere in the Bible.

In the context of local church worship, questions about dance arise. At least two psalms invite the Hebrew nation to praise the Lord “with dancing,” to “Praise Him with timbrel and dancing” (Psalms 149:3; 150:4). They did it. Why shouldn’t we? If persons like David danced before God (2 Samuel 6:14), then we should take our cue from him, and do the same. Do these Old Testament injunctions, and the example of David, provide justification for employing liturgical dance in the worship of the church as

advocates claim? Does God need, or want, the dance of moderns to praise Him? Is dance, we might ask, a means of grace that draws worshippers closer to the heart of God?

Dance in the Old Testament

It must be known that between the biblical world and our world, there exists a cultural divide. Modern dance does not necessarily equate to the dance mentioned in the Old Testament. Because God invited the Israelites to dance before Him under the Old Covenant, it does not follow that He invites worshippers to dance in the church under the New Covenant. To the Hebrews, the occasion for dance was important. Their culture was wedded to dance. Feasts and sacred days of Israel's religious calendar provided occasions for Israel to express their praise to the Lord via the medium of dance. At those times, even the bed-ridden were exhorted to exalt the name of their God! (Psalm 149:5). One scholar summarized, "Much of what we consider everyday life was so bound to sacral concerns in biblical times that the cultic/secular dichotomy is not as useful in classifying dance as the occasions on which it was performed."²

Those who employ dance in contemporary worship use certain psalms as proof texts for doing so. We should note that in addition to dance, the psalmist invited Israel to praise the Lord with trumpet, harp, lyre, stringed instruments, pipe, and with loud and resounding cymbals (Psalm 150:3-6). Mention of these instruments highlights the cultural difference between our day and that of ancient Israel. If the instruments are foreign to our culture, then so too, it might be suggested, is the type of dance the Hebrews employed in their worship of God. Do proponents of modern liturgical, or sacred, dance also advocate using such instruments to accompany their dance before the Lord? Or, is modern "worship" dance scripted and choreographed to be accompanied by softer, and perhaps, more sensual music?

In the Hebrew religion and culture, dance was a participatory and spontaneous exercise of praise to God, rather than an artistic activity performed by dancers before a worshipping congregation. Furthermore, the invitation to dance was open to the

whole congregation, not restricted to a performance by a dance troop in a worship service.

A Definition of Old Testament Dance

Dance in the Old Testament was processional. Of the several words used for dance in the ancient Hebrew language, the root meaning of the most frequently used word (Hebrew, **חָוַל**, *huwl*) means to “perform a whirling dance.” It often describes the post-war emotions of the Hebrew people who expressed “the emotion of joy, particularly as the way to describe women who danced when their men returned safely from war.”²³ The word connotes spontaneous, as opposed to choreographed, bodily movements. As such, Hebrew dancing suggests something like the physical exhilaration and celebration NFL fans feel and demonstrate when their favorite team scores a touchdown, or wins a championship game.

Shall the Church Dance Like David?

In discussing the merit of dance in worship, advocates of it invariably seize upon the Old Testament example of King David. As Robert Webber defines it, liturgical dance is the “expressive use of the body similar to that used by David, who danced before the Lord.”²⁴ It is argued that, like David, congregations ought to offer sacred and celebratory worship to God through the medium of dance. David, says the historical record, danced “before the Lord,” so why shouldn’t we? (2 Samuel 6:14). The answer to this question lies in our understanding of both the occasion and the description of what David actually did before the Lord when the ark was rescued from the Philistines and brought back to Jerusalem (2 Samuel 6).

The Occasion

From the days of aged Eli and Samuel, a state of war existed between Israel and the Philistines (1 Samuel 4:1-2; 5:25). Early in that war, the Philistines captured the Ark of the Covenant, the symbol of the Lord’s Divine Presence with the nation. For one-hundred long years the ark had been separated from the tabernacle.

First, it stood under Philistine control for several months. Then, it rested for a short time at Beth Shemesh. The duration of the ark's captivity was spent at the town of Kiriath Jearim. But all the while, God's ark lawfully belonged in Jerusalem.

When David consolidated his reign over Israel, after Saul's death and the defeat of the Philistines, he determined that the ark should be returned to its rightful place, to the tabernacle in Jerusalem (2 Samuel 4-6). While moving the ark, a disaster occurred.

Instead of moving the ark in a manner prescribed by the law—it was to have been shouldered by Levites with poles run through the ark's golden rings—David moved the ark like the Philistines had on other occasions, “on a new cart” pulled by oxen (Compare Exodus 25:13-14; Numbers 4:15, 20; 1 Samuel 6:1-21; 2 Samuel 6:1-11.). As the ark moved, Israel rejoiced with musical celebration (2 Samuel 6:5; Psalm 150).

When the celebratory procession reached “the threshing floor of Nacon,” the cart and the ark suddenly wobbled. To keep the ark from falling over, Uzzah instinctively reached out to steady it. In that instant, “the anger of the Lord burned against Uzzah, and God struck him down there for his irreverence; and he died there by the ark of God” (2 Samuel 6:7). In the midst of the celebration, why did God smite Uzzah? He died because the ark was not moved “according to the ordinance” of the Lord (1 Chronicles 15:13). In other words, the Israelites were breaking the law of God by transporting the ark in an illegal manner that they had learned from the pagan Philistines, and Uzzah touched the forbidden and paid the penalty.

Some lessons to be gained from this incident are: first, God's children must not imitate the ways of the world (i.e., the way the Philistines moved the ark) in how they conduct His business and worship Him. And second, they must not profane the sacred, and if for some reason they do, no amount of ceremonial hoopla will compensate for indifference to, or variance from, God's standards.

In the aftermath of this tragedy, and emotionally smitten by anger and fear over what had happened, David ordered the

procession and celebration to stop. The ark was stored in the house of Obed-edom the Gittite for a cooling off period of three months. When it became apparent that God blessed Obed's household for reason of the ark's presence, David concluded that it would be safe to make another attempt to move the ark to its rightful place. To usher the ark into Jerusalem, the king organized a second procession. He determined to move the ark according to God's laws, and not the way of the pagan Philistines. During this procession, David was seen "dancing before the Lord."

David's Dance Described

David's Position

As the ark was being transported into Jerusalem, David's position was "before the Lord" (2 Samuel 6:14, 16). In that the ark symbolized the dwelling presence of God, the preposition "before" suggests that David danced in the Lord's presence. Yet such understanding does not exhaust the meaning of David's position. In the context, "before the Lord" means that David danced "in front of" the ark. As Youngblood notes: "In this context, 'before the Lord' (v.5; cf. v.14) is virtually tantamount to 'before the ark' (a literal translation of 'in front of it,' v.4)."⁵ We understand that David's dance was processional, "in front of," or, before the ark.

David's Movements

The Scripture says that, "David was dancing (Hebrew *Pilpel* participle, *rkṛkm*, suggesting rapid and repeated whirling movements) before the Lord, with all his might" (2 Samuel 6:14, 16). David's movement could be interpreted in several ways; that David may have repeatedly performed athletic spin moves—"360s" or "180s"—as he led the procession; that as the procession and carriers transported it into the city, David circled about the ark⁶; or that the king of Israel engaged in "an old ritual dance."⁷

Added to his whirling, the scene also describes him as "leaping" before the ark as it entered the holy city (2 Samuel 6:16). The word "leaping" (Hebrew, *zpm*, *Piel* participle, signifying intense action) suggests "to leap, show agility." When the two descriptions are combined ("dancing and leaping"), a picture emerges of David spontaneously and athletically jumping up and down in a whirling

fashion in front of the ark as the procession transported it back to Jerusalem. The physical demands of David's movements may explain why, in part, he "uncovered" himself by removing the cumbersome royal garments to wear only "a linen ephod," an undergarment like that typically worn by Levites (2 Samuel 6:14, 20; See 1 Chronicles 15:27.).

David's Strength

One final point: David danced "with all his might" (Hebrew, *לְכָבֵד*). His movements were physically demanding, and can be compared to the most exhausting of today's aerobic workouts.

David and Today's Sacred Dance

One can only compare the processional, spontaneous, athletic, and aerobic dance of David to the choreographed and scripted dance advocated within contemporary evangelicalism to see that the form, occasion, culture, and motivation of it is a world apart from modern sacred dance. Ancient Hebrew and modern liturgical dance simply do not belong to the same genre of movement. So let's stop promoting the use of sacred or liturgical dance in the modern church by referencing it to the example of David. On this point, apples are not being compared with apples.

When the dance of David is studied for what it was, it becomes difficult to see any similarity between it and the liturgical dance of today. Robert Webber justified the use of sacred dance "similar to that used by David." In his book *Worship Is a Verb*, he describes the dance of a young girl that he once observed during an ordination service at a local Baptist church, a service crafted and choreographed to present mystical imagery and symbolism to the congregation.⁸ We need not fear this type of dance he wrote, because it "certainly will not turn us into worldly Christians, nor impede our worship or produce unclean thoughts."⁹ Assuming his point for a moment, that such dance will not turn us into worldly Christians or corrupt our thoughts, then it must follow that neither will observing such dancing turn us into spiritual Christians.

In that most often it involves bodily movement scripted to rhythmic music, dancing primarily appeals to humanity's fleshly

nature. Like the worship expressed in the ancient fertility religions, Israel's passionate and physical worship of the golden bull was idolatrous. Exodus records that after offering sacrifices to the molten calf, the Israelites "rose up to play" (Exodus 32:6). The word for "play" (Hebrew, **qj x**, *tsabaq*) can possess a sexual meaning as when Abimelech observed Isaac "caressing" (**qj x**) Rebekah, or when Potiphar's wife accused Joseph of attempting to make sexual "sport" (**qj x**) of her (See Genesis 26:8; 39:14, 17).

Associated with the Israelites' sexual playing was their dancing. "And it came about, as soon as Moses came near the camp, that he saw the calf and *the* dancing; and Moses' anger burned, and he threw the tablets from his hands and shattered them at the foot of the mountain" (Exodus 32:19). Based upon this incident, Paul warned the Corinthians, "Do not be idolaters as some of them were; as it is written, 'The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to dance'" (1 Corinthians 10:7, RSV).

The Absence of Dance in the New Testament

Having observed the cultural disparity between ancient Hebrew and modern sacred dance, it must now be asked whether, or not, the New Testament encourages the praise and worship of God through dance. With the coming of Christ, the expression of worship of God became distinct from that engaged in by the Hebrew people. The Old Testament cultus broke down. In the worship of the church, precedent for the employment of liturgical dance in the New Testament is absent. Even though people danced in the context of the Greek and Roman cultures, such activity never found entry into the worship of the early church, and for good reason. Dance was irrelevant to the simple form of worship the apostolic church embraced. The transition from the Old to the New Testament marked a cleavage between the "spectacle" and the "spiritual" in worship.

Dance in the Apostolic Church

Hebrew dance was not used in the worship of the apostolic church. While its service order derived in part from the Jewish synagogue, the early church's expression of worship

distinguished itself from Judaism for both theological and cultural reasons.

The End of the Old Order

Upon Jesus' death, "the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom" (Matthew 27:51). With the breaking down of the old order, the church grew to embrace both Jews and Gentiles (Ephesians 2:14-16). A new age had dawned, and along with it, a spiritual setting in which there would no longer be "Jew nor Greek," but rather, "all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). The Law descended from God through Moses, but "grace and truth" had come through the Lord Jesus Christ (John 1:14). In the ongoing drama of redemption, the time had arrived when the temple and its services would no longer be needed in the worship of God because Jesus predicted that those who truly worshipped the Father would do so "in spirit and truth" (John 4:24). The Lord also announced judgment upon the temple, its services, and its celebrations, thereby nullifying the old order of worship (Matthew 24:1-2).

With the obvious change of worship "style" between the testaments, it should come as no surprise that sacred or liturgical dance finds no reference in the life of the apostolic church.¹⁰ If dance, as some moderns suggest, is a viable expression of worship, why is it not mentioned, or encouraged, in the New Testament? Could it be because the ceremonial law and its practices had become obsolete in the life of the church? (See Colossians 2:16-17). With the birth of the body of Christ, Jewish feast days and national celebrations were no longer relevant to the church's worship. In other words, the occasions for dance had ceased.

Dancing into the Mysteries

As a religious observance and ritual, dancing to worship pagan gods occupied a prominent place among the gnostic religions of the ancient world. However, the activity is not mentioned in the New Testament, the era of the apostles (A.D. 35-100). Dancing began to be incorporated in the life of the Church sometime during the patriarchal age (*circa* A.D. 150-450). Of this

intrusion of the dance exhibition into the church's worship, E. Louis Backman wrote,

[T]he Jewish dance ceremonial determined in a high degree the development of Church dances. But in all probability the highly-developed dance customs of the pagan mysteries cannot have been without influence on the development of the Church dances of Christianity. The terminology used by the patriarch Clement of Alexandria and Ambrose regarding the meaning of the Church dances . . . is the pure language of the mysteries and employs clearly and openly the terminology of the mysteries.¹¹

If sacred dance was that noticeable in the surrounding culture, then its absence in the New Testament is telling. Admittedly, this is an argument from silence, but the silence is deafening. Perhaps, the absence of dance's mention in the New Testament can be explained for a number of reasons.

Why not?

First, the apostolic church did not practice dance because it represented the intrusion of the spectacle upon what otherwise was its practice of a very simple expression of spiritual worship involving "the apostles' teaching . . . fellowship . . . the breaking of bread and . . . prayer" (Acts 2:42). The early church distinguished itself by focusing upon doctrines to be believed, and not upon fasting, feasting, and festivals (See Colossians 2:16-17.). There is no evidence that dancing was practiced in the simple church of the apostolic era, and such apostolic practice, we might assume, would have been consistent with apostolic precept.

As to the difference between culture and Christianity, Professor Ramsay MacMullen defines culture as "the way of doing things." Christianity he describes as belief, and a Christian as someone who has "seized upon a doctrine" by which his life is wholly directed and shaped. The difference between culture and Christianity may be compared to the difference between folkways

and faith. To the extent that the Christian faith remains centered upon the teachings in a book, the Word of the New Testament, the book then becomes the filter through which the Christian religion should be, and most often is, defined. MacMullen says that the role of Scripture “will screen out, it will simply not allow as ‘religion,’ dancing and other communal or individual cult acts.”¹²

Second, the apostolic church did not employ dance because of its association with the old order of things—the ceremonies, feasts, and sacred days of Judaism. After Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension, the day came when no longer would worship take place on Mt. Zion with its required sacrifices, ceremonies, and rituals, but rather, would take place in a manner consistent with how the Father seeks to be worshipped; that is, “in spirit and truth” (John 4:23). The Father no longer seeks to be worshipped according to some outward form and spectacle, but from a spirit of inward faith. While Jews comprised the vast majority in the initial Christian church, the church’s practices and emphases were distinct from Judaism (See the book of Hebrews.). The tearing of the veil in the temple at the time of Jesus’ crucifixion possessed tremendous implications regarding the passing of the old way of worship, and the emergence of a new standard (Matthew 27:51).

And third, the church hesitated to use dance in worship because of its association with paganism. One scholar observed, “The universal importance of dance as part of the induction of new adherents into the mystery cults of the Greco-Roman period . . . made dancing highly suspect for Christian worship.”¹³ Another wrote, “Dancing as a religious activity was not prominent in early Christianity, probably because of its pagan licentious associations.”¹⁴ As Paul commanded the Thessalonians, “But examine everything *carefully*; hold fast to that which is good; abstain from every form (Or, *appearance*) of evil” (1 Thessalonians 5:21-22).

Filtered Out

The early church discerned and filtered out from its corporate worship those activities associated with and advocated by surrounding Jewish and pagan cultures, dance being but one

religious activity in which the apostolic church refused to adopt from the cultures which surrounded it.

“Once upon a time” Protestants agreed that the Spirit mediated spirituality through the Scriptures as together they witnessed to God’s works in history and to Jesus Christ (2 Peter 1:21; John 5:39; 17:17). But modern evangelicalism is forsaking “spirit and truth” worship and turning to arousals provided by the spectacle of sacred dance.

Appendix Two Endnotes

¹ Eleanor B. Johnston, “Dance; Dancer,” *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, General Editor, Volume 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979): 858.

² Ibid. 856-57.

³ David S. Dockery, “2565 לִוְיָ,” *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, Willem A. VanGemeren, General Editor, Volume 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997): 46.

⁴ Robert E. Webber, *Worship Is a Verb* (Nashville, TN: Star Song Publishing Group, 1992): 194.

⁵ Ronald F. Youngblood, “1, 2 Samuel,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Volume 3, Frank E. Gaebelin, General Editor (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992): 870.

⁶ S.R. Driver, *Notes on the Hebrew Text of the Books of Samuel* (Winona Lake, IN: Alpha Publications, 1912): 269.

⁷ Joyce G. Baldwin, *1 and 2 Samuel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988): 209.

⁸ Webber, *Worship*, 194-195.

⁹ Ibid. 195.

¹⁰ Some church fathers tried to justify dance in Christian worship celebrations, and did so by attempting to distance it from the sensual dancing performed by Herod’s daughter, Salome (Matthew 14:6). See Johnson, “Dance,” 858. Nevertheless, dance is not advocated by the apostles in the New Testament as a means of sanctifying grace by which to draw the audience closer to God. Rather, it is a mechanical and mystical ritual.

¹¹ E. Louis Backman, *Religious Dances in the Christian Church and Popular Medicine*, Translated by E. Classen (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1952): 1-2.

¹² Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianity and Paganism in the Fourth to the Eighth Centuries* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997): 106.

¹³ Johnston, 858.

¹⁴ "Dancing," *Encyclopedia of Biblical and Christian Ethics*, R. K. Harrison, General Editor (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1987): 101.

APPENDIX THREE

Getting “High” on God

Inner Opiates and the Megachurch “Experience”

That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again.

Jesus, John 3:6-7

God’s love becomes . . . such a drug that you can’t wait to come get your next hit. . . . You can’t wait to get involved to get the high from God.¹

Megachurch Attendee

Introduction

When looking out upon pan-evangelicalism, a diverse movement primarily consisting of Christians claiming a quasi-commitment to the Gospel, one can be left groping to explain the rise of the megachurch. During this last generation, over 1,600 super congregations, primarily evangelical, have emerged on the American religious scene.² Can the megachurch movement be accounted for reason that church-goers want to be part of something “big,” where for reason of the strength and unity of their numbers, they really feel that God is at work? Do parents desire their church to be a “full service” institution that can meet the needs of their entire family? Does superior preaching attract the masses? Is the attraction the choreographed spectacle of modern and upbeat “worship” performed by professional musicians that when combined with the latest technological special effects, can deliver the “worship experience”? Answers to these questions and more may help to explain the phenomenon of the megachurch in America, and account for how these large congregations both

attract and keep the folks coming back for more. However, a recent study, coming out of the University of Washington, may provide another answer to the question, why the mega-church?

Euphoria’s Source: Transcendent or Immanent?

That study, “‘God is like a drug’: Explaining Ritual Chains in American Megachurches,” concludes that these churches are exceptional in orchestrating the arousals of strong feelings amongst their congregants; euphoria that might be compared to the feeling a crowd gets when seeing its basketball team win a championship game on a last second shot.³ Katie Corcoran, a Ph.D. candidate who co-authored the study, suggests that megachurches are “somewhat unique in that these feelings are not just experienced as euphoria but as something transcendent or divine.”⁴ As she observed, “You can look up to the balcony and see the Holy Spirit go over the crowd like a wave in a football game.”⁵ Yet that same study suggests that the *raison d’être* for the megachurch may be something more immanent than transcendent.

The megachurch is good at evoking emotions which, according to Corcoran, are inspired by employing a “unique style of worship” that creates a common and shared experience among their crowds. With the goal of stimulating a unified euphoria, the megachurch employs “upbeat modern music, cameras that scan the audience and project smiling, dancing, singing, or crying worshippers on large screens, and an extremely charismatic leader whose sermons touch individuals on an emotional level,” the synchronicity of which serves “to create these strong positive emotional experiences.”⁶

Then too, there’s the “pastor [who] functions as an ‘energy star’ who engages the congregation through an accessible, informal and emotional sermon” that “‘just feels right’ or ‘just makes sense’ for congregants,” says James Wellman, a professor of American religion who along with Corcoran, co-authored the study.⁷ But the explanation for the megachurch phenomena may yet have a more inner reason.

Chris Lisee, the reporter who covered the presentation of the University of Washington study, assesses, “Maybe religion

really is the opiate of the [megachurch] masses—just not the way Karl Marx imagined.” Well, what is the religious opiate that the revolutionary was not aware of? The opiate may in fact be a combination of inner chemicals/hormones that when called up, directly affect the brain to “feel good.”

Pleasure Seekers

Opiates and Oxytocin

A generation ago the English psychiatrist William Sargant (1907-1988) noted that, “feelings of divine possession . . . can be helped on by the use of many types of physiological stimuli.” He goes on to state that, “electrical recordings of the human brain show that it is particularly sensitive to rhythmic stimulation by percussion and bright light among other things . . .”⁸

Now two authors of the University of Washington study theorize that the arousal of good feelings within the human body-soul can be induced by applying the right combination of external stimuli. (I use the combination “body-soul” in recognition that the characteristics belonging to humans are complex and interwoven, and that the interplay between the physical and mental can be externally manipulated to induce profound internal experiences, whether religious or not.) On this point, the authors of the U of W study “theorize [that] the spiritual high from megachurch services is experienced” for reason of “the brain’s release of oxytocin, a chemical that is thought to play a part in social interaction,” something they call an “oxytocin cocktail.”⁹ Oxytocin acts as a neuromodulator in the brain, and for the role it plays in social recognition, pair bonding, etc., is “sometimes referred to as the ‘love hormone’.”¹⁰ And in a sensate culture, people just “love to feel the love.”

Desires and Dopamine

Several years ago, Dean Gotcher researched the interplay of hormones within the human body, and wrote about the role played by dopamine. Of the affective inner drug, he states:

Dopamine is a chemical which the body naturally synthesizes to transmit messages of pleasure from the nerve endings to the midbrain. The midbrain then synthesizes the neurotransmitter dopamine to activate other parts of the brain in an effort to find what caused the pleasure, to record it, and if necessary to figure out how to continue, restore, or create the environment which caused the pleasure. Our body naturally loves the effect of dopamine. It seeks after the conditions which trigger its release in the body. Most drugs of habit are related in some way to affecting dopamine production, replacement, or inhibition¹¹

Megachurches are big businesses, and big business calls for an affective way to stimulate and manage growth. If a business is to be successful, the product must be made pleasurable (It seems that’s why advertising capitalizes upon images of people being happy and having fun, of partying, romancing, etc.). Advertising must project pleasure in order to make profits. To this end, means must be devised by the corporation to affect the release of dopamine in the human body in order to stimulate customers to feel need for their product(s). For corporations to become profitable, their product(s) must be made pleasurable. For this reason, megachurch philosophy has tapped into the human need to be pleased and ministering to those “felt needs” they helped create.

In his book *PyroMarketing* that describes Rick Warren’s marketing campaigns, Greg Stielstra notes that,

Our brains are electrochemical devices. Electrical impulses trigger the release of chemicals called neurotransmitters, which, in turn, govern the behavior of electrical impulses. The chemical messenger dopamine is the pleasure drug. Its presence reinforces pleasurable behaviors.¹²

Remember the cultural manta, “If it feels good, do it.”? As we live in a sensate culture, it then becomes the “purpose” of the megachurch, like any other successful business enterprise, to plug into a marketing philosophy that will cause its customers to “feel good” about what they’re doing—what might be called the dopamine affect. On this point, Stielstra writes:

The reward circuit that we each possess influences our thoughts and guides our behaviors. . . . As we anticipate a good experience, our brains release a certain amount of dopamine. If our expectations are met, then elevated levels continue. If things turn out even better than we had hoped, dopamine is increased even further. If we are disappointed, then dopamine levels plummet. We learn by repeating those activities that feel good and avoiding those that don’t.”¹³

Of course, the obvious connection of the dopamine affect to the megachurch phenomena is their emphasis upon ministering to “felt needs”; and in an intentional way, emotional “needs” tend to overwhelm rationality. That is why the U of W study relates that the “energy stars” who serve as the churches’ “communicators” generally are not “analytical or theological” in their messages. (Or should I have written, ‘massages?’).

Ecstasy and Endorphins

In her best-selling book, *Full & Fulfilled*, Nan Allison states that, “High concentrations of endorphins in the brain produce a sense of euphoria, enhance pleasure, and suppress pain, both emotionally and physically.”¹⁴ In his book *Music, The Brain, and Ecstasy*, Robert Jourdain states:

Special neurons produce substances called endorphins, which resemble opiates and which act on neurons in the brain’s pain pathways . . . If endorphins are released when there is no pain to be

counterbalanced, a euphoria results that is much like that produced by drugs like morphine.¹⁵

What then can be employed to stimulate the release of endorphins—the morphine which is endogenous to the human body? Jourdain observed that as a mechanism, music can stir-up ecstasy. Of the pleasure, he wrote:

Ecstasy melts the boundaries of our being . . . engulfs us in feelings that are “oceanic.” A defining trait of ecstasy is its immediacy . . . Ecstasy happens to our selves. It is a momentary transformation of the knower . . . Music seems to be the most immediate of all the arts, and so the most ecstatic . . . Nonetheless, once we are engulfed in music, we must exert effort to resist its influence. It really is as if some “other” has entered not just our bodies, but our intentions, taking us over.¹⁶

Renowned guitarist Jimi Hendrix (1942-1970) knew what his music could do to his audience’s head. He testified,

Once you have some type of rhythm, like it can get hypnotic if you keep repeating it over and over again. Most of the people will fall off by about a minute of repeating. You do that say for three or four or even five minutes if you can stand it, and then it releases a certain thing inside of a person’s head.¹⁷

The brain’s release of the pleasure hormones may explain what Hendrix noted about his audience’s response to his music, and why Rick Warren thinks that a song can touch an audience in ways that a sermon can’t. On his *Pastors.Com* website, he has stated,

A song often can touch people in a way that a sermon can’t. Music can bypass intellectual barriers

and take the message straight to the heart. It is a potent tool for evangelism.¹⁸

Because of its intrinsic emotional appeal, music delivers “feel” to the human body and soul. That’s why the language of music is said to be universal. Though listeners might be linguistically diverse, they can together feel a song even though not comprehending its words.

Why are certain songs felt? Who knows, whether it’s a hit by an “oxytocin cocktail” or perhaps some other combination of inner opiates which affect a “feel good” mood within the human brain and body. Nevertheless, the release of these hormones may help to account for the genius of the megachurch. From the effects observed, audience-driven megachurches know how to titillate the release of the feel-good hormones within the brain (like adrenalin in the body) so that their seeker-sensitive audience will leave on a “high note.” This may explain one congregant’s candid explanation of why he attended one megachurch. In an interview for the U of W study, he confessed: “God’s love becomes . . . such a drug that you can’t wait to come get your next hit. . . . You can’t wait to get involved to get the high from God.”¹⁹ And it’s called worship, of course.

This whole idea of going back to church to get your next “love-hit” from God reminds me of a 60s hit song, performed variously by different artists and groups. Evidently, in a created ambiance consisting of upbeat music, special effects and the “energy star” whose sermons touch the congregants on an emotional level, megachurches have discovered their “Love Potion No. 9.” That song concludes with a man, so love smitten with the help of a gypsy counselor, kissing a “cop at Thirty-Fourth and Vine”! On this point, it can be noted the original version of the song did not end with the lyrics of a man kissing a policeman, but rather:

I had so much fun, that I’m going back again,
I wonder what happens with Love Potion Number Ten?²⁰

And in their going back to church to get repeated “highs from God,” returnees might be wondering what’s going to happen when they get “love hits” numbers 11, 12, 13, 14, and so on. As the following testimonies indicate, music affects mood.

Pleasure Finders

Testimony #1—Rob Bell

In his book *Velvet Elvis*, the emergent-liberal churchman Rob Bell describes his musical experience turned spiritual:

I remember the first time I was truly in awe of God. I was caught up for the first time in my life in something so massive and loving and transcendent and . . . true. Something I was sure could be trusted. I specifically remember thinking the universe was safe, in spite of all the horrible, tragic things in the world. I remember being overwhelmed by the word true. Underneath it all life is somehow . . . good . . . and I was sixteen and at a U2 concert. The Joshua Tree tour. When they started with the song “Where the Streets Have No Name,” I thought I was going to spontaneously combust with joy. This was real. This mattered. Whatever it was, I wanted more. I had never felt that way before.²¹

Seemingly, music can be “consciousness-altering,” can’t it?

Testimony #2—Wilburn Burchette

In Brad Steiger’s book *Revelation: The Divine Fire*, Jack Wheaton relates in an interview that, “rock music . . . is the simplest and cheapest—and least dangerous—way for young global village adolescents to ‘trip out.’”²² [21] Then Steiger tells how he developed a fascinating relationship with a “young occultist-musician named Wilburn Burchette” who “was deep into his unorthodox experiments with music”; for Burchette believed that at the most basic level, “everything in our universe is composed of

vibratory atoms.” So in order to experience “any creative-spiritual breakthrough,” the vibrations of music must be experimented with. So Burchette experimented and reported this “breakthrough” which happened to him while listening to rock music as a young boy:

I was getting to the point where my mind was blank. I remember shifting consciousness and having a sensation of my mind being above time. I felt I could move forward, backward in time. The physical sensation is an orgasm of the soul, because you are in complete, absolute union. You extend your mind and being out of this dimension, and wham! You receive a knowing beyond words. When you transcend over into the other dimension, you split in two, and yet you are one. This is what all the alchemists brought out: you split in two, and yet you are one. This is pretty weird for most people, but you have split in two, you have another being which can realize the Absolute, the Godhead. These two you’s are in perfect union.²³

Burchette then adds: “Emotions are not stagnant; they are dynamic. This is why music motivates them [emotions] so well.”²⁴

Testimony #3—Tom Beaudoin

Tom Beaudoin describes his spiritual encounter engendered by listening to music.

The effect of the music coursing through my nervous system is to produce a lift, a somatic levity that sends me at once deeply within and outside my body, spacing me in three simultaneous modes: as embodied spirit, as disembodied spirit, and as a spirit ecstatically holding them bound.²⁵

Who and where was he when he experienced such mystical ecstasy that was simultaneously both inside and outside his body? The author was a guitar player who played Christian rock-‘n’-roll for 15 years, and what he experienced, while listening to the rock band Creed, was on a spiritual retreat in of all places, a monastery!

Testimony #4—a Disc Jockey

A reporter for the Chicago Sun Times interviewed a popular area disc jockey. When asked to define himself spirituality, the disc jockey responded, “I’m a mystical expressionist . . . I take the idea of mysticism very seriously . . . the idea that there is something within each and every one of us that can take us to a place we’ve never been before . . .” Then the reporter comments, music is the “vehicle” that pushes her and the disc jockey “and so many others—toward the place we might call enlightenment, or God, or the higher consciousness, or Grace.”²⁶ [25]

Testimony #5—the International House of Prayer (IHOP)

Mike Bickle testifies that, after years of “pretty boring” prayer, “a series of supernatural events and divine directives” caused him and twenty full time “intercessory missionaries” to launch the International House of Prayer, Kansas City, Kansas. These missionaries would commit to raise their own financial support and pray fifty-hours a week, one half of that time being spent in a central prayer room where intercession would be blended with musical worship. How did the music affect the “experience” of praying?

Bickle reports that since the blended worship started years ago, “the music has never stopped. We call that keeping the fire on the altar,” he relates. Misty Edwards, the most recognized worship leader at IHOP, testifies of the experience of leading twelve two-hour sets of prayer-music-worship each week for nine years: “In those early days, the music being related in our brains to fire was brilliant.”²⁷

Testimony #6—King Saul

When in His judgment upon the king the Lord allowed an evil spirit to trouble Saul’s soul, his servants knew that a musician “who is a cunning player on a harp” could make him feel better (1 Samuel 6:16). If only fleetingly, music possesses power to soothe the soul. Though David’s music did not drive the haunting spirit away from Saul, it temporarily relieved the king from the angst caused by his sin and the evil spirit (1 Samuel 16:14-23; 18:10; 19:9). David’s ministry to Saul was palliative.

Seemingly, music-worship can be “mind” and “consciousness” altering. As indicated by these testimonials, music can affect a persons’ perception of their psychological being, and to one degree or another, all of us perhaps, have experienced the “feel good” relief music can provide. But many people, Christian and not, testify of having attained psychological relief in their beings through experiencing music. The relief within their consciousness is no doubt triggered by the release of inner opiates that pleasure the human soul and body.

Worship Eroticized

So like secular rock concerts, many contemporary worship services employ music and technology to stimulate the audience’s experience of ecstatically feeling at one with each other and with God. A dictionary on alternative spiritualities states that the activities of drumming, chanting, dancing and hand-clapping are considered means for “raising consciousness because the energies and movement of many people are united, which facilitates achievement of the objective.”²⁸ And what, we ask, is the objective people seek to experience together? It is, as the dictionary says, to “achieve an altered state of consciousness, ecstasy, communion with the Divine . . .”²⁹

In modern worship the experience of “communion with the Divine” evidences itself as the audience—with their eyes closed and faces alternately contorting in grimaces of ecstasy and agony—lifts their hands toward heaven, mouths the familiar words, and sways together from side to side. Feelings of being at one with God and each other are enhanced as “cameras . . . scan the audience and

project smiling, dancing, singing, or crying worshippers on large screens.”³⁰ In a technologically rich environment, worshippers are experiencing the psychological abandonment of self which lies at the heart of all mystical experience. Worshippers believe that in their altered states of consciousness they are experiencing God. But the explanation of the phenomena may lie closer to home; worship experiences may have resulted from the release of “feel-good” hormones (love potions) in the body, the release of which has been triggered by the energy of up-beat “worship” music and enhanced by visual technologies that build into a crescendo the audience’s feelings of togetherness with God and with each other. (Can’t you just feel the love in this place?) As to this assessment, each believer under God and in the Spirit needs to make their personal evaluation all the while knowing that one of the Spirit’s fruit is “self-control” (Galatians 5:23). And as indicated by many worship scenes today and as at a secular rock concerts, people, individually and corporately, appear “out of control.”³¹

My impression of the whole contemporary worship thing, and inquiring onlookers are catching on to it, is that much of the so-called worship experience in megachurches results from the application of certain stimulants to the soul (music being the most immediate), and as such, as the flesh is momentarily gratified, as the angst of guilt temporarily relieved, and as self-control briefly lost, worshippers exit the celebration exclaiming, “Wow! I could really feel the love in this place!” As an elderly Jewish friend, now deceased, once told me, “People leave church all excited over excitement!”

But such worship is not really spiritual because worshippers are being manipulated by the baser stimuli that naturally lie within them. That’s why Jesus told Nicodemus, “That which is born of the flesh is flesh” (John 3:6). Proof to the point: one can attend or observe secular rock concerts and observe the same mass erotic behavior and phenomena taking place as in modern worship services. Readers, you may not agree with this assessment. But from the phenomena that are taking place in “the church of what’s happening now,” somebody, and I am not alone, needs to address this issue.

In some earlier writings, I documented that the essence of music is mysticism; that is, by itself, as it originates within the human soul without words, music is alogon (i.e., irrational).³² (Perhaps that’s why a certain genre is called “soul music.”) As to the influence of mysticism upon the Christian faith, T. Austin-Sparks, whose insights in the differentiation between soul and spirit I have grown to appreciate, observes that mysticism easily deceives people into thinking they’ve had a spiritual experience. The author explains [bracket comments are mine]:

How near to the truth in perception and interpretation can the mystical go! What wonderful things [a world of make believe] can the imagination see, even in the Bible! What thrills of awe, amazement, ecstasy [passionate feelings], can be shot through an audience or congregation [the worshippers] by a master soul [“an extremely charismatic leader . . . an energy star”]! But it may all be a false world with no Divine and eternal issues. It may all go to make up this life here, and relieve it of its drabness, but it ends there. What an artificial world [musically and technologically induced] we live in! When the music is progressing and the romantic elements [inner opiates, oxytocin “cocktails”] are in evidence—the dress and tinsel—and human personalities are parading [worship teams], see how pride and rivalry assert themselves, and what a power of make believe [positive emotions] enters the atmosphere [“Can’t you feel just feel the love?”]! Yes, an artificial world.³³

Yes, it’s a world dominated by the artificial, superficial and temporal love-god that originates within the human soul, the god which goes by the name of Eros. Austin-Sparks then goes on to say, “The tragedy in this melodrama is that it is ‘real life’ to so many. This soul-world is the devil’s imitation. It is all false, wherever we may find it, whether associated with religion or not. . .

. How Satan must laugh behind his mask!”³⁴ As Warren Smith has stated regarding his experiences in New Age religion, “The devil can make you feel good about things that are bad, and make you feel bad about things that are good.” And devil’s trick resides in the inner “trip”.

Conclusion

“Centuries ago” commented Dr. Wheaton, “Plato said that he cared not what others taught in the schools of a society, but that if he could teach music, he would eventually control that society.”³⁵ Megachurch leadership has evidently caught on—if they control the music, they can control the emotions of the congregants, and if they can control the emotions, they can control the micro-society which is their congregation! The problem with such a control mechanism is that it begins with the arousals of the flesh and ends in the arousals of the flesh. There’s nothing spiritual about it. The whole thing is a charade.

“Wow” Worship

We live in an erotic and sensate culture which says, “Let your feelings be your guide,” a culture that megachurches have discovered how to tap into through the manipulations of modern technology. So the “experience” of worship can be accounted of for reason of the awakening and release of inner opiates in the human body that lie dormant until aroused and sustained through technological control mechanisms, which the megachurch has discovered to involve upbeat modern music accompanied by strobe lights and smoke (the arousal), giant screen projecting images of an audience smiling, dancing, singing or crying together (creating the feeling of oneness), and a cool communicator who touches people at the emotional level (this place just feels right). On this point, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones (1899-1981) warned, “that our ‘techniques’ and our ‘mechanics’ [of spirituality] actually divert the attention of people from the truth of the message to some lower, particular, immediate and practical action may have the opposite effect from what is intended.” He then adds, “It is surely our business to avoid

anything which produces a merely psychological condition rather than a spiritual condition.”³⁶

Simply stated; much of modern worship appeals to fleshly instincts, those canal delights resident within humanity’s fallen being. What begins in man’s heart ends in the same sphere. While momentarily gratifying, fleshly feelings are ephemeral. They don’t last. As the congregant previously cited confesses: “God’s love becomes . . . such a drug that you can’t wait to come [back to worship and] get your next hit.”³⁷ This fact alone ought to indicate that these ephemeral arousals have nothing whatsoever to do with God’s steadfast love, His “lovingkindness” (See Psalm 48:9). Nevertheless, the fleshly appeal of getting your next “love hit” prevails over much of what today passes for, “Wow-Worship!”

A.W. Tozer (1897-1963) noted that carnal worship distracts Christians from really desiring God. He assessed:

We’re so determined we want to be happy that if we can’t be happy by the Holy Ghost we’ll drum up our happiness. Religious ‘Rock and Rollers’! We’re going to get happy somehow [even] if we’ve got to beat it up with a tom-tom.³⁸

Often contemporary worshippers excuse their new way of worshipping with the caveat, “Oh, it’s not about us.” But with the selfish arousals the music and accompanying technology stimulate, along with egocentric feel-good sermons that feed those arousals, maybe . . . just maybe, the worship really is about them and not Him. And if that is the case, then like Israel’s worship of the “Golden Bull,” a god they could both see and “feel,” such worship is idolatry, all protests notwithstanding! How Satan and his demons must laugh behind their masks as contemporary Christians—stimulated by the sights and sounds of worship so-called, and thinking they are worshipping Almighty God—have in reality become “hooked” upon their own emotional experiences. But then, maybe in a panentheistic way, their feelings do represent the god they believe dwells within (entheogens).³⁹ In the fleshly

nature of souls, have in the fleshly nature that is their soul, become duped on dopamine!

“Will” Worship

Scripture does portray music as employed to worship God, but from the New Testament perspective, only as it glorifies the Lord Jesus Christ (See Colossians 3:16; Revelation 5:9-14.). If like marijuana, music is employed to stimulate ecstasy within the human body-soul, it is, as the worship of the “Golden Bull” in Exodus portrays, idolatry. And as described by the sight and sounds narrated in Exodus, that worship does resemble a rock concert and what passes today as worship celebrations (Compare Exodus 32:1-35; Psalm 106:19-27; 1 Corinthians 10:6-8.).

To me it stands as an irony that, as in contemporary churches, stringed instruments are the instrument of choice for worship in Heaven (Revelation 5:8). But in some way, Lucifer must distorted the worship of Heaven for Scripture records that in God’s judgment “the pomp and music of [his] harps” were thrown out with him (Isaiah 14:11). Perhaps those instruments were perverted by Satan in the idolatry of self-worship (“I will . . . I will . . . ; Isaiah 14:13-14). I think it can be concluded that Satan’s worship was all about himself.

To remind us, Jesus stated: “That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (John 3:6). Unlike false teachers whose modus operandi is appealing to fleshly arousals (2 Peter 2:10), the Apostle Paul never employed the methods of the flesh to achieve results in the Spirit. Like oil and water, flesh and Spirit do not mix. Jesus said so. But Satan’s con-job is ever to make people think that experiences in the soul are experiences from the Spirit. Yet based upon the findings presented in this writing, I am fearful that so much that is called worship today is simply the parading and gratification of the flesh, and “that which is born of the flesh is flesh.”

Appendix Three Endnotes

¹ Quoted in Chris Lisee, “Study: Large Worship Services Trigger a High,” *Church Report*, Wednesday, August 22, 2012

(<http://www.thechurchreport.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=siteContent.default&objectID=159270>). Ironically, the results of the study, conducted by researchers at the University of Washington that consisted of 16,000 surveys and 470 interviews of mega-church attendees, were presented at the American Sociological Association in Denver on Sunday, August 19, 2012.

As a former local church pastor, I attempted to understand the megachurch movement and offered my explanation which for the most part, with a few exceptions, was treated with disdain and disagreement by many, and indifference by most. I concluded that the genius of the megachurch was that it was able to deliver “feel-good” experiences to congregants via rock ’n roll music and short and uplifting messages delivered by the pastor. As my views were scorned by many, I sometimes wondered whether or not my views were sane. Now a recent study by researchers at the University of Washington has brought confirmation regarding the “genius” of the megachurch movement

² Ibid. See also Keegan Hamilton’s article “Getting High on God: A new UW study suggests that attending a Protestant megachurch is a lot like doing drugs,” which had appeared in the *Seattle Weekly News*, August 29, 2012 (<http://www.seattleweekly.com/2012-08-29/news/getting-high-on-god/>).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid. The reporter quotes Corcoran’s assessment.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ William Sargant, *Battle for the Mind: A Physiology of Conversion and Brain-Washing* (London, England: William Heinemann Ltd., 1957): 88. Though disavowing Sargant’s humanistic assumptions and conclusions, I find his treatment of the techniques whereby religious experience can be manufactured helpful for understanding what may be taking place in many of today’s churches.

But that God has reasonably revealed Himself in the Word, delivers my soul from any despair that the Christian faith and experience can be accounted for and explained away by reason of having applied certain mind-altering techniques. Salvation comes to us not by the application of procedures, but rather on account of believing God’s revealed Word. In Christ, God has come down to us! Therefore, experiences manufactured below will not get us to the One who is above. Disavowing salvation by the application of any technique, Jesus told Nicodemus, “That which is born of the flesh is flesh” (John 3:6a).

⁹ Lisee, “Large Worship Services Trigger a High.”

¹⁰ “Oxytocin,” *Wikipedia: the Free Encyclopedia* (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oxytocin>).

¹¹ The Discernment Research Group, “The Dopamine-Driven Church,” *Herescope*, April 19, 2007. See: (<http://herescope.blogspot.com/2007/04/dopamine-driven-church.html>). This article interacts extensively with Dean Gotcher’s presentation, “The Dialectical Drug Culture: If you build it, they will come,” Institution for Authority Research, Revised April 6, 2007, which can be read at: (<http://www.authorityresearch.com/2006-11%20The%20Dialectical%20drug%20culture%20-%20Dopamine.htm>).

¹² Greg Stielstra, *PyroMarketing: The Four-Step Strategy to Ignite Customer Evangelists and Keep Them for Life* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2005): 127.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Nan Allison, *Full & Fulfilled*, quoted in “What are Endorphins?” *Altered States* (<http://altered-states.net/barry/newsletter260/index.htm>). “Endorphins (‘endogenous morphine’) are endogenous opioid peptides [originating from within the body] that function as neurotransmitters. They are produced by the pituitary gland and the hypothalamus in vertebrates during exercise, excitement, pain, consumption of spicy food, love and orgasm, and they resemble the opiates in their abilities to produce analgesia and a feeling of well-being.” See “Endorphin,” *Wikipedia: the Free Encyclopedia* (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Endorphin>).

¹⁵ Robert Jourdain, *Music, The Brain, and Ecstasy* (New York, NY: Avon Books, 1997): 317.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 327-328.

¹⁷ David Henderson, *Scuse Me While I Kiss the Sky: The Life of Jimi Hendrix* (New York, NY: Bantam Books, 1981): 356.

¹⁸ Emphasis added, Rick Warren, “Match the music to the people you want to reach,” *pastors.com*, Ministry Tool Box, Issue 190, January 19, 2005 (<http://www.pastors.com/RWMT/?ID=190&artid=2924&expand=1>).

¹⁹ Quoted in Lisee, “Study: Large Worship Services Trigger a High.”

²⁰ “Love Potion No. 9 (song),” *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia* ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Love_Potion_No._9_\(song\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Love_Potion_No._9_(song))).

²¹ Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 20005): 072.

²² Jack Wheaton quoted by Brad Steiger, *Revelation: The Divine Fire* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1973): 90. Dr. Jack Wheaton, then a member of the Music Department at Cerritos College (1973), has subsequently authored books on the decline of Christian music, including

Crisis in Christian Music (Volume 1), *Crisis in Christian Music: The Paganization of Worship* (Volume 2), and *The Amazing Power of Music*.

²³ Ibid. Burchette quoted by Steiger, 92.

²⁴ Ibid. 95.

²⁵ Tom Beaudoin, “Ambiguous Liturgy,” *Christianity Today Library.com*. Online at www.ctlibrary.com/345. Understanding rock music’s connection to mysticism, Beaudoin describes one singer to be “like some modern-day hesychast.” A “hesychast” is “a member of a sect of mystics that originated in the 14th century among the monks on Mount Athos, Greece.

²⁶ Cathleen Falsani, “The Rev. of rock ‘n’ roll,” *Suntimes.com*. June 25, 2006 (www.suntimes.com/output/falsani/cst-nws-falsani25.html).

²⁷ Marcus Yoars, “IHOP Marks 13 Years of Non-Stop Prayer,” *CHARISMA NEWS*, May 7, 2012 (<http://www.charismanews.com/us/33360-ihop-marks-13-years-of-non-stop-prayer>). Reproduced on the Internet, the article originally appeared in the November, 2010 issue of *Charisma* magazine.

²⁸ Rosemary Ellen Guiley, “Chanting,” *Harper’s Encyclopedia of Mystical & Paranormal Experience* (New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 1991): 92.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Lisee, “Large Worship Services Trigger a High.”

³¹ In his study of the relationship between drumming, dancing, trance, and collapse among African tribal peoples, Sargant observed that during part of the ritual, “They looked very much like fans of the Beatles or other ‘pop groups’ after a long session of dancing.” See William Sargant, *The Mind Possessed, A Physiology of Possession, Mysticism and Faith Healing* (Philadelphia, PA, and New York, NY: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1974): 118. As described by Sargant, the tribal phenomena may be compared to “The Spinners,” a communal group of young followers of Grateful Dead, who would twirl away as the band played. Upon completion of the concerts, they were often observed lying prostrate. See Matthew Rick, “The Magic and Mysticism of the Grateful Dead,” *Deadisticism* (www.lster.net/~shady/deadisti.html).

³² See Pastor Larry DeBruyn, *Drumming up Deception: whether in celebration or in contemplation—“feeling” the beat!* (Indianapolis, IN: Moeller Printing Company, Inc., 2008). Pastor Larry DeBruyn, “On Religious Excitements,” *Discernment Newsletter*, May-June, 2009 (<http://www.discernment-ministries.org/Newsletters/NL2009MayJun.pdf>). Pastor Larry DeBruyn, “Emergent Worship: Wonder or Wasteland?” *Discernment Newsletter*, January-February, 2010, (<http://www.discernment-ministries.org/Newsletters/NL2010JanFeb.pdf>).

³³ T. Austin-Sparks, *What is Man?* (Tulsa, OK: Emmanuel Church, 2009 reprint of 1963 edition): 78.

³⁴ *Ibid.* 78-79.

³⁵ Plato cited by Jack Wheaton. See Steiger, *Revelation*, 91.

³⁶ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Conversions: Psychological & Spiritual* (London, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1959): 40. Lloyd-Jones wrote this booklet as a response to Sargant’s point that religious experiences could be wholly accounted for reason of the mechanisms applied.

³⁷ Lisee, “Large Worship Services Trigger a High.”

³⁸ A.W. Tozer, *Tozer on Worship and Entertainment*, Compiled by James L. Snyder (Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 1997): 103.

³⁹ The word *entheogen* derives from three Greek words: a preposition “en”; the noun “God”; and a verb “to generate.” The resultant meaning of entheogen is “that which generates god or divine inspiration in a person.” Some drugs are known as “entheogens.” To achieve consciousness of one’s own divinity, entheogens (i.e., psychedelic drugs) are employed. In Galatians 5:20, in the apostle’s list of the lusts of the flesh (those spiritualities which oppose true spirituality), “idolatry” and “witchcraft” (‘sorcery,’ NASB; Greek, *pharmakeia*, i.e., drugs) are associated together. As they mess with peoples’ consciousness, drugs engender an idolatry of feel-good experiences apart from the Holy Spirit.

More Information Available

For any who are interested in pursuing the entertainment and mystical trends within the contemporary church, they can consult the author’s website *Guarding His Flock Ministries* (www.guardinghisflock.com). At the end of each article on the website, there is rectangular box where readers can supply their email address to mail themselves a PDF copy of the article they are interested in to be freely downloaded, printed, read, duplicated and distributed.