

ENFLESHMENT OF THE WORSHIP EXPERIENCE: A MODEL FOR CHURCH MUSIC

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Introduction

In this paper we argue that Christian worship, including the biblical accounts of it, is embedded in human culture. Because human culture is part of the worship experience, there is need for a method or model to determine what is appropriate and what is not. The hermeneutics of worship need to be biblically based and defined. Hermeneutical approaches to biblical exegesis are designed to translate the message of the Bible from the original text into today's language. This process of interpretation is part of a complex scheme of human oral and textual communication. All human communication, be it oral, musical, or ritual, when crossing from one culture to another, or from one time period to another, needs to be interpreted. Kenneth D. Mulzac puts it this way:

Generally, oral communication takes place in familiar situations with familiar people. We are able to assess the context and intention of the speaker as we analyze and comprehend his/her message. A similar, though not identical, situation occurs when we read written documents. Since the writer is usually absent, the words themselves assume a greater importance than in a situation of oral communication. This introduces some degree of difficulty in the interpretation which may be compounded due to two factors: the extent to which the sender (author/editor) and the receiver (reader) share a common world of discourse and experience, and the extent to which the communication and the form in which it occurs involved specialized content and forms of expression. In biblical studies, other complexities may compound this difficulty in interpretation.¹

Because human oral and textual communication is bound to a "world of discourse and experience," there is a need for understanding the world of the Bible

¹Kenneth D. Mulzac, "Methods, Steps, and Tools in Interpretation," *Asia Adventist Seminary Studies* 5 (2002): 25.

in relationship to the world today.² Mulzac presents hermeneutical rules, a set of steps, for today's understanding of the truth revealed in the Bible. His sixth step focuses on the role of culture in determining the biblical message for today, "The Bible was not written in a vacuum. The people, events, languages, and customs were set in a particular place and time and were influenced or affected by the cultural norms and mores of society."³

The need to account for the "situation of oral communication" described by Mulzac, when written about biblical interpretation, becomes even more crucial when talking about the worship experience. When rituals and musical expressions of worship are the issue at hand, the role of culture is even more acute, and the need for exegesis even more relevant.

Following Aecio Cairus' work, we agree that there are two types of biblical writing: those where the writers testify of what God says (1 Pet 1:10-12), and those where the writers' intelligence (from within their own culture) mediates the message.

²The key idea derived from Mulzac's steps for interpreting biblical culture is based on the axiom that when talking about the divine, humans do so in human language. This idea is also present in Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1958), 1:19.

The writers of the Bible had to express their ideas in human language. It was written by human men. These men were inspired of the Holy Spirit. Because of the imperfections of human understanding of language, or the perversity of the human mind, ingenious in evading truth, many read and understand the Bible to please themselves. It is not that the difficulty is in the Bible. Opposing politicians argue points of law in the statute book, and take opposite views in their application and in these laws.

She says once again:

The Lord speaks to human beings in imperfect speech, in order that the degenerate senses, the dull, earthly perception of earthly beings may comprehend His words. Thus is shown God's condescension. He meets fallen human beings where they are. The Bible, perfect as it is in its simplicity, does not answer to the great ideas of God; for infinite ideas cannot be perfectly embodied in finite vehicles of thought. Instead of the expressions of the Bible being exaggerated, as many people suppose, the strong expressions break down before the magnificence of the thought, though the penman selected the most expressive language through which to convey the truths of higher education. Sinful beings can only bear to look upon a shadow of the brightness of heaven's glory. *Ibid.*, 22.

³Mulzac, 36.

For Adventist exegesis, the meaning intended by the biblical author is paramount, since the communication of divine ideas is mediated by the intelligence of the human author. In some cases, however, the purpose of the author has been merely to testify to a revelation from God, the signification of which he could not fully know at the time (1 Pet 1:10-12), so that he merely transmits the revelation verbatim and lets us know that he is doing just that.⁴

When describing the worship experience, human emotions, feelings, and cultural contexts influence that experience, and thus are “mediated by the intelligence of the human author.”⁵

Having established the need to account for cultural contexts when defining Christian worship, it is pertinent to define what is meant by *culture*. Claude Geffre sees culture as “a system of values and elements that induce modes of life.”⁶ Culture is a “combination of knowledge and technical, social, and ritual behaviour” that is “connected to history, rooted in a certain tradition.”⁷ K. Black’s definition incorporates the mental and ideological aspects of culture along with the material means for culture to be experienced and communicated. “Culture is the sum [of] attitudes, customs, and beliefs that distinguishes one group of people from another. Culture is transmitted through language, material objects, rituals, institutions, from one generation to the next.”⁸ Clifford Geertz defines culture as a system of symbols:

In any case, the culture concept to which I adhere has neither multiple referents nor, so far as I can see, any unusual: it denotes an historically transmitted pattern of meaning embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about, and their attitudes toward life.⁹

According to Geertz, when defining culture one also defines religion; in fact, they go together. He comments:

Religion is: (1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these

⁴Aecio E. Cairus, “A Brief History of Bible Interpretation,” *Asia Adventist Seminary Studies* 5 (2002): 19.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Claude Geffre, “Christianity and Culture,” *International Review of Mission* 84 (2001): 17.

⁷Ibid., 18.

⁸K. Black, *Culturally-Conscious Worship* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2000), 8.

⁹Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 89.

*conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.*¹⁰

Using Geertz' definition of religion does not preclude a believer from accepting divine intervention; one can believe that religion is culturally grounded and still believe in God. One does not take away from the other; it is possible to develop a model where religion exists in a cultural format while acknowledging God as the ultimate rationale for religious life. What is particularly useful about Geertz' definition of religion, however, is the means by which the experience of religion can be factored in. He explains the experience and life of religion by means of culturally bound realities that are humanly construed. Regardless of the reality of God as revealer of truth, human beings cannot experience religion outside of their culturally bound sensory experiences and language. Every time someone worships God they do so via cultural means.

Worship and Culture

Defining worship from the point of view of experiencing it, S. A. Stauffer declares, "Christian worship is a corporate event in the sense of the church being the body or corpus of Christ."¹¹ She further defines worship as an activity that is "inherently related to culture."¹² Worship is a human activity and we bring our cultural identities to our worship. When we get together to worship God, we bring our personal ideas, feelings, and emotions, as well as our beliefs and norms. We express ourselves, our past and present, and our story of who we really are. As Frank Senn states, "We cannot avoid bringing our culture to church with us; it is part of our very being."¹³

Redefining worship, G. W. Hanson explains that the experience of the church in worship is a function of two variables: the degree to which members of the church recognize it as an appropriate response of the individual, and the corporate experience with the transcendent.¹⁴ In other words, worship is an opportunity for believers to express their admiration, respect, obedience, and reverence for God who has chosen to reveal Himself to His people. These expressions can be experienced through people's behaviors, actions, rituals, attitudes, gestures, verbal

¹⁰Ibid., 90 (emphasis his).

¹¹S. A. Stauffer, "Culture and Christian Worship in Intersection," *International Review of Mission* 84 (2001): 66.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Frank C. Senn, *Christian Worship and Its Cultural Setting* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 51.

¹⁴G. W. Hanson, "'Multicultural' Worship: A Careful Consideration," in *Making Room at the Table: An Invitation to Multicultural Worship*, ed. B. Blount and L. Tisdale (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2001), 145-61.

expressions, body movements, and processions. Hanson labels such as spontaneous and ritual responses.¹⁵ He asserts that the experience of a congregation can be authentic when it uses its cultural vocabulary, that is, the importance and value that each congregation gives to the experiences of the believer and their response to God.

All human worship of the divine comes in human language and consequently involves human manifestations of culture. Religious denominations and local congregations are influenced by some ethnic culture.¹⁶ If the assumption that human culture guides all worship experiences proves acceptable, the question then is, how do you determine what is proper worship?

Christian Worship as Metaworship

James F. White, a Christian worship specialist, states that in Christian worship it is important to take into consideration “the whole body and all senses,” and to “recognize that music is a body art.”¹⁷ Also, it is necessary to “think in terms of people’s tastes and choices,” not only in abstract terms of quality.¹⁸ The “whole body” refers to the whole individual *person* as well as the feelings, attitudes, and experiences of the *people* participating in corporate worship as a group, the whole congregation. This embodiment can be called “metaworship” or “enfleshment” (worship that occurs as an experience and manifestation of the flesh), through which the worshiper can feel the holy presence through all the senses and emotions.¹⁹ Timothy L. Carson states, “In metaworship, the Holy is experienced and felt . . . spiritual passion is expressed, thoughtfulness sharpened; and all the

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶P. C. Phan, “Liturgical Enculturation: Unity in Diversity in the Postmodern Age,” in *Liturgy in a Postmodern World*, ed. Keith Pecklers (New York: Continuum, 2003), 55-86, 199-211.

¹⁷James F. White, “Worship and Culture: Mirror or Beacon?” *Theological Studies* 35 (1974): 299.

¹⁸Ibid., 299-300.

¹⁹Enfleshment is defined as an experience of the flesh and through the flesh. It is not to be interpreted as being “of the flesh” in the most common sense that Paul uses that term, referring to a sinful tendency. (For examples of flesh as sinful tendency, see Rom 7:5; 1 Cor 1:26; Gal 4:29; Eph 2:3; Phil 3:3; Col 2:23.) Instead, this flesh is what Paul describes as defining the human experience; it is the very essence of what humans are. It is the biblical “heart,” in today’s terms equivalent to the mind or consciousness. Enfleshment is about flesh as a definition of what God created from dust, instead of flesh as a tendency towards sin. Flesh is what defines us as creatures with a human culture; we are human flesh and are bound by human experiences of the flesh, and experience the divine in the flesh. This is particularly true for Seventh-day Adventists who believe in the unity of the human and reject the duality of flesh and spirit within the human experience. Cf. 2 Cor 3:3; 1 Tim 3:16.

senses are engaged.”²⁰ In metaworship, everybody is called to worship God with all their emotions, senses, traditions, beliefs, choices, and tastes. The worship experience involves not only the whole church congregation, but the person as a whole: physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. Metaworship, as a corporate experience of the community of worshipers, brings meaning and provides the opportunity for the whole congregation to express their own desires and hopes.

It is helpful to consider the process of enculturation when discussing worship and culture. Stauffer speaks of “contextualization,” which in Christian worship is “the use or echo of the local cultural and natural elements in worship.”²¹ Geffre says that in Gospel work, enculturation means the incarnation of the gospel in native cultures and also the introduction of these cultures into the life of the church.²²

White believes that the forms and functions of worship can vary and are adaptable to all cultures.²³ There are doctrinal and doxological elements of worship that are universal in its presentation (that is, the centrality of the Gospel message), but the majority of worship elements show a dependency upon culture and reflect the beliefs, traditions, customs, and origin of the congregation’s culture.

Enfleshment as a Worship Mode

The Third International Consultation of the Lutheran World Federation’s Study Team on Worship and Culture, held in Nairobi, Kenya, January 1996, concluded that

Christian worship relates dynamically to culture in at least four ways, it is trans-cultural, the same substance for everyone everywhere, beyond culture. It is contextual, varying according to the local situation (both nature and culture). It is counter-cultural, challenging what is contrary to the gospel in a given culture. And it is cross-cultural, making possible sharing between different local cultures.²⁴

The Lutheran World Federation team represents five continents of the world. Their intention is to call churches to explore the local or contextual elements of liturgy and worship and their relationship with the cultures around them.

²⁰Timothy L. Carson, *Transforming Worship* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2003), 40.

²¹Stauffer, 72.

²²Geffre, 17-29.

²³J. White, 299. He adds, “In this pluralistic approach to worship we have rediscovered some of the things that revivalism knew. We need to know and understand people in order to plan Christian worship. We need to take seriously the importance of the whole body.”

²⁴Lutheran World Federation, “Nairobi Statement on Worship and Culture: Contemporary Challenges and Opportunities,” *Ecumenical Chronicle* (1996): 415-17.

This *enfleshment* of the worship experience is *enfleshment* in the sense that God interacts with us humans, that is, in the flesh of our human context and reality. This is what Carson described as *metaworship*. For White this enfleshment is called *whole body experience*, and Stauffer describes it as a *contextualization* experience. Geffre calls it *enculturation* while the Lutheran World Federation calls it *contextual*. An experience of worship enfleshment acknowledges human culture and brings it to the surface. Doing this helps to both criticize and celebrate the human culture of the context where the worship experience is taking place.

Using language and elements that are culture specific makes the worship experience relevant and joyous to those who identify with that culture. All worship that is meaningful must happen in human language and human culture. What is all too common, however, is to have worship in a foreign culture, as discussed below, mostly European or Euro-American in origin, that has been made the norm and has been imposed through evangelism.

Paul Tillich presented the idea that religion and culture do not stand by themselves but need each other.²⁵ Culture is a “form of religion” and religion, in turn, is the “substance of culture.”²⁶ This mutuality, however, will not eliminate the persistent tension which religious values should impart when confronting human culture at large, since worship should both affirm and criticize the culture with which it must live.²⁷ The dual relationship between social and religious values promotes a conflict that is in a constant state of flux and has never been totally resolved.

Worship, Music, and Conflict

Singing Christian music, rather than bringing Christians together, sometimes drives them apart. Several commentators express this view. Martin Tel observes, “The new [church] divisions are based not so much on what we believe as on how we worship.”²⁸ A. Strawn de Ojeda remarks, “People who are certain that there is only one way to sing praises to God regularly criticize others who think otherwise.”²⁹ According to C. M. Hawn, most of the conflict in the church

²⁵Paul Tillich, *Writings in the Philosophy of Culture*, ed. Michael Palmer (Berlin: Evangelisches Verlagswerk, 1990); idem, *Theology of Culture* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 40-52.

²⁶Tillich, *Theology and Culture*, 42. Cf. idem, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3, *Life and the Spirit, History and the Kingdom of God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 157-61.

²⁷J. Maraschin, “Culture, Spirit and Worship,” *Anglican Theology Review* 82 (2000): 47-63.

²⁸Martin Tel, “Music: The ‘Universal Language’ That’s Dividing the Church,” in *Making Room at the Table: An Invitation to Multicultural Worship*, ed. B. Blount and L. Tisdale (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox 2001), 162.

²⁹A. Strawn de Ojeda, “Sing the Song of Gladness,” *Ministry*, September 1996, 5.

regarding worship and music style has to do with the tensions that exist between what he calls dominant traditional Euro-American cultural styles and other cultural groups.³⁰

It should be clear that Hawn's model is American-centered and although it can be generalized to non-American contexts it is presented from an exclusively American view. The possibility of universalizing Hawn's model is particularly appropriate since most missionary work to the world at large emerged from European and Euro-American roots. Therefore, even in places far from Europe and America, within Christian communities, the dominant patterns of worship and music are, by and large, traditional European and Euro-American ways.

Hawn describes the modern worship conflict as responding to a "center vs. periphery model."³¹ In Hawn's model the dominant traditional Euro-American cultural style and the group that promotes it (otherwise called Whites or European) see their styles of music and worship as normative, that is, outside cultural influences. This normative style is often in opposition to indigenous music and worship styles.

In Christian worship then, the normative culture (traditional European and Euro-American) occupies the center, and other types of contemporary or ethnic Christian music become peripheral. More than any other cultural product, music conveys and enflashes the uniqueness of a people.³² Music serves as a vessel that enables people of all cultures to pour out their feelings, emotions, traditions, tastes, spirits, and souls. Music serves as a text that community can read.

M. S. Hamilton points out that conflict over worship in general, and music in particular, is present in churches of every denomination.³³ For Pedrito Maynard-Reid the "debate is based on whether one is a high church liturgiologist or contemporary celebration-church liturgiologist."³⁴ He goes as far as saying that resolving worship style conflict within the church is more difficult than dealing with terrorists. "What is the difference between a liturgiologist and a terrorist? You can negotiate with a terrorist."³⁵ The fact that no negotiations are welcome and no

³⁰C. M. Hawn, "Worship that Transforms: A Cross-Cultural Proposal," *Journal of the International Theological Center* 27 (1999-2000): 111-33.

³¹*Ibid.*, 125-26.

³²Mark Bangert, "How Does One Go About Multicultural Worship?" in *Open Questions in Worship: What Does "Multicultural" Worship Look Like?* ed. G. Lathrop (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1996), 30.

³³M. S. Hamilton, "The Triumph of the Praise Songs," *Christianity Today*, July 1999, 28-35.

³⁴Pedrito Maynard-Reid, *Diverse Worship: African-American, Caribbean, and Hispanic Perspectives* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 14.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 13.

compromise is attractive comes from a “very dogmatic” understanding of worship and music.³⁶

Lillianne Doukhan puts the issue in bold relief when she says, “The value of the old [music] is associated with ‘tradition’, synonymous with stability and absence of change,” while traditional music “carries also the aura of being consecrated by the past.”³⁷ Traditionalists’ views of contemporary worship style and music seek to keep the worship experience holy.³⁸ “The ‘traditional’ stream finds the source of Christian worship in the historical shape of liturgy.”³⁹ What traditionalists often miss or ignore is the fact that throughout history music from secular sources has been brought into the church to be used in the worship service.⁴⁰ However, the scope of this article does not allow for a historical review of the secular origins of some Christian music and worship styles.⁴¹

Advocates of more contemporary music argue that “worship should speak (and sing) in a language that reaches today’s generation and that old structures are no longer relevant.”⁴² We argue that worship enfleashes itself within contemporary cultural patterns.

Functions of Worship Music

Worship music should be viewed as “functional art” and judged by how well it fulfills its function.⁴³ The purposes of church music include both creating unity and cohesion.⁴⁴ In terms of the first, singing hymns, one of the few things people actively do together, is among the last vestiges in our culture of the sort of communal activity that has kept societies intact since the dawn of the human race. One reason people keep gathering to sing is instinctual: we have to sing together to be who we are. In terms of the second, the promotion of group identity provided by music is particularly crucial for migrants who find themselves to be minorities

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Lillianne Doukhan, “Historical Perspectives on Change in Worship Music,” *Ministry*, September 1996, 8.

³⁸Strawn de Ojeda, 5-7, lists three assumptions that traditionalists have about contemporary music in worship: (1) the majority of contemporary Christian music uses dance, jazz, or rock music with sacred words; (2) contemporary styles appeal to humans’ sensual nature and therefore cannot be from God; and (3) it is entertaining instead of uplifting.

³⁹Hawn, 113.

⁴⁰Strawn de Ojeda, 5-7.

⁴¹For a short bibliography on works that discuss the influence of culture in current traditional Christian European and Euro-American hymnody, see appendix A.

⁴²Hawn, 114.

⁴³Donald P. Hustad, *Jubilate! Church Music in the Evangelical Tradition* (Carol Stream, IL: Hope, 1981), 25.

⁴⁴P. Henry, “Singing the Faith Together,” *Christian Century* 114 (1997): 500.

in the midst of foreign languages and cultural realities.⁴⁵ Music can provide a worship experience that is “consecrated by the past.” However, one must ask, whose past?⁴⁶

Worship and the Holy

Worship music intends to convey the Gospel, inculcate Christian theology, and teach Holy Scripture.⁴⁷ Marva J. Dawn suggests that Christians can determine which music is appropriate for worship by following three criteria⁴⁸ as defined by three questions: Is the music making God the focus? Is it nurturing godly character? Is it promoting genuine community? The issue ceases to be whether or not the music is either traditional or contemporary.

Christian worshipers can use a wide variety of music, but for theological reasons, some songs are simply not appropriate. For instance, they may present doctrine in a way that is “muddled.”⁴⁹ Tel agrees, pointing out that worship music must convey “a Judeo-Christian understanding of God and the revelation of Scripture,” and if it does, it is “still viable for the church today.”⁵⁰ F. B. Brown puts it simply, yet straightforward, “Music is never the message. . . . Music is good if it conveys the gospel; it is bad if it does not.”⁵¹

Christ-Centered Worship

The Gospel of salvation by faith in Christ is to be central and supreme in the thinking and life of the Christian (Col 2:8-10).⁵² We should “welcome any worship music that helps churches to produce disciples of Jesus Christ. We need to

⁴⁵J. M. Spencer, *Sing a New Song: Liberating Black Hymnody* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), vi-vii: “Music . . . provides hope for oppressed strangers and aliens far from home.”

⁴⁶Doukhan, 8.

⁴⁷Oskar Söhngen, “Music and Theology: A Systematic Approach,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion Thematic Studies* 50/1 (1983): 1-19; Jan Overduin, “I Played My Best for Him: A High Purpose Calls for High Performance,” *Reformed Worship* 30 (1993): 38-39; Adela Yarbro Collins, “Psalms, Philippians 2:6-11, and the Origins of Christology,” *Biblical Interpretation* 11 (2003): 361-73.

⁴⁸Marva J. Dawn, “Beyond the Worship Wars,” *Christian Century* 114 (1997): 550-53.

⁴⁹Ibid., 552.

⁵⁰Tell, 163.

⁵¹F. B. Brown, “A Matter of Taste?” *Christian Century* 117 (2000): 905.

⁵²Hamilton, 9.

welcome the experimental creativity that is always searching out new ways of singing the gospel.”⁵³

Donald P. Hustad proposes that all Christian music must promote the gospel and express the best Christian theology.⁵⁴ The pinnacle of Christian worship and worship music must be to glorify, describe, promote, and otherwise communicate the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This is the foremost test of anything that is worthy of being a part of worship. Paul says it best:

When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, so that your faith might not rest on men’s wisdom, but on God’s power. (1 Cor 2:1-3)⁵⁵

According to R. H. Mitchell, music for worship functions as commentary, the exposition of the Word of God.⁵⁶ Music is a means of exhortation; the experience of the interpreter exhorts the listener to enter into a similar experience. Mitchell also points out the mystical, revelatory function of worship music. He proposes that music is a means of revelation. God will be encountered “as God’s Spirit brings revelation to our human spirit.”⁵⁷

Musical pieces for worship have been judged and assessed for the propriety of the words used in them and for their coherence. Dawn suggests that “sometimes liturgies or songs are unsuitable because they trivialize God.”⁵⁸ Music is a means of evangelism as well as Christian formation. Daniel Zager sees these two functions as potentially different and conflicting in that music may be seen not only “as a participant in theological proclamation” but also “as a tool for outreach and numerical growth in church attendance.”⁵⁹

⁵³Ibid., 35.

⁵⁴Hustad, 10 ff.

⁵⁵Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the NIV.

⁵⁶R. H. Mitchell, *Ministry and Music* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 11-12: “Every pastor can expect to be involved in church music. . . . Every church musician can normally expect to be involved in ministry.”

⁵⁷Ibid., 91.

⁵⁸Dawn, 551.

⁵⁹Daniel Zager, “Cultures, Chorales, and Catechesis,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 64/2 (2000): 105.

Music, Excellence, and Worship Styles

As part of divine worship and praise to God, worship music should demonstrate excellence. It should be of high quality and be well presented. A song used in worship should be among the best in its genre. Dawn believes a song should be rejected for a worship service if for a musical reason it is “not appropriate.”⁶⁰ The criteria put forth by Dawn include various layers of excellence. “Music should be rejected if it uses forced or awkward harmonies, grating rhythms, boring repetition, phrases that don’t go anywhere, predictable musical clichés, clumsy part-writing, or musical discourse that is too rapid or otherwise unsingable.”⁶¹ She also mentions incongruity or a mismatch between words and music.⁶² Dawn urges attention to the following features of musical performance: “skillfulness, aptness, and consistency of style, clarity of intent, melodic and rhythmic interest, harmonic appropriateness and craftsmanship.”⁶³ Tel insists that Christian music for worship should be excellent.⁶⁴ Hustad argues that worship should show creativity.⁶⁵

Worship Music and Enfleshment

Worship music should involve the whole person of the worshiper in response and praise to God. Mitchell points out that music establishes a mood and appeals to the feelings, emotions, and ideas of the people.⁶⁶ Hustad also insists that Christian music should speak to the whole person.⁶⁷ Tel says that the music for worship should have “relevance” and that “all music, including music from another culture, must have significant meaning for those who are worshipping.”⁶⁸

Worship music should create meaning and significance and must be authentic. It must resonate with the experience of the believers. Roberta King believes that worship should be a spiritual journey home:

God is not limited to any one style of music. Neither is He limited to only one spoken language. He is the Creator of the world. He knows the music that speaks to us. He works within our musical styles so that we know He cares for us. There is no musical style that is Christian or

⁶⁰Dawn, 550.

⁶¹Ibid., 552.

⁶²Ibid.

⁶³Ibid.

⁶⁴Tel, 108-27.

⁶⁵Hustad, 9.

⁶⁶Mitchell, 79-80: “Participation in congregational music can encourage the worshiper to be truly what that term implies—one who worships.”

⁶⁷Hustad, 25.

⁶⁸Tel, 164.

non-Christian. He is pleased with His creation, including various musics [sic], and chooses to communicate with us in a loving receptor-oriented manner. He uses our musical languages to speak to us. He is the one and only caring God who is concerned about our needs. He communes with us through the music we know and love.⁶⁹

Our motives are more important than the kind of music or any certain style of worship. One expert says, "What needs to be questioned is our motive for singing or listening, not the melody, beat, or instrument."⁷⁰ Another comments, "Worship music ought to be judged not by the songs themselves but by the people who sing them."⁷¹ Will Eva asserts that "we are all looking for meaning and life, for significance and authenticity in our worship experience."⁷² He believes that "the essence of the relationship between music and worship has to do with the heart of God and the heart of the worshiper."⁷³

Good worship music must be a means for believers to give self-expression, a way for them to proclaim their beliefs and ideas, while at the same time, reinforcing and celebrating their values and identity. Erik Routley notes that when a congregation sings a hymn, "they are not far from saying, 'we think this', 'this is our own idea'."⁷⁴ Hamilton agrees, asserting that "when one chooses a musical style today, one is making a statement about whom one identifies with, what one's values are, and ultimately, who one is."⁷⁵ He continues, "The advantage of multiple expressions of Christianity—whether they are based in doctrine or based in worship—is that there is an expression for everyone."⁷⁶

Worship music is a two-way means of enculturation because "music shapes identity."⁷⁷ Worship music has been used as a means for enculturation, a process by which persons learn the rules of society through its symbolic systems. According to Ronald L. Grimes, the process of enculturation is how we are programmed or biologically mapped. This includes an interchange between the dominant and receptor cultures. Music serves as a means for enculturation and as a channel to transmit values, traditions, and beliefs.⁷⁸

⁶⁹Roberta King, *A Time to Sing* (Nairobi, Kenya: Evangel Publishing House, 1999), 79.

⁷⁰Strawn de Ojeda, 29.

⁷¹Hamilton, 33.

⁷²Wil Eva, "Worship and Music: Natural But Uneasy Mates," *Ministry*, September 1996, 4.

⁷³*Ibid.*, 4.

⁷⁴Erik Routley, *Hymns Today and Tomorrow* (New York: Abingdon, 1964), 21.

⁷⁵Hamilton, 30.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, 33.

⁷⁷Spencer, vii.

⁷⁸Ronald L. Grimes, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1982).

Good worship music must be attentive to details of rhythm and must employ this to good advantage. Mark Taylor emphasizes that in the worship experience it is necessary to embrace rhythm, not only in theory but also in practice. He urges the church to embrace “a polyrhythmic sensibility” and to welcome a diversity of rhythms⁷⁹ especially since they play an important part in people’s lives and appeal to their emotions and feelings. Taylor also finds it appropriate in worship for people to embody rhythm “by clapping hands, stomping feet, nodding the head, swaying, dancing, processing into, during, and after, worship ceremonies.”⁸⁰ In fact, as Strawn de Ojeda points out, in biblical times the music was “sometimes loud, accompanied by common instruments.”⁸¹ She insists that “the act of praise is more important than the method one uses.”⁸²

⁷⁹Mark Taylor, “Polyrhythm in Worship: Caribbean Keys to an Effective Word of God,” in *Making Room at the Table: An Invitation to Multicultural Worship*, ed. B. Blount and L. Tisdale (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox), 124. The musical options listed by Taylor are not meant to be all encompassing; they represent examples of diversity in musical venues within the American musical scene.

⁸⁰Ibid., 125.

⁸¹Strawn de Ojeda, 6.

⁸²Ibid. When describing the dancing of David and the response his wife had to his showing off his body before the people of Israel (2 Sam 6:12-23), E. G. White makes this very argument. It is not about what your worship looks like or what others can see beneath your garment, it is about the way God sees you (1 Sam 16:7). See Ellen G. White, *The Story of Patriarchs and Prophets: The Conflict of the Ages Illustrated in the Lives of Holy Men of Old* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1908), 711:

Thus musing, David turned toward his palace, “to bless his household.” But there was one who had witnessed the scene of rejoicing with a spirit widely different from that which moved the heart of David. “As the ark of the Lord came into the city of David, Michal Saul’s daughter looked through a window, and saw King David leaping and dancing before the Lord; and she despised him in her heart.” In the bitterness of her passion she could not await David’s return to the palace, but went out to meet him, and to his kindly greeting poured forth a torrent of bitter words. Keen and cutting was the irony of her speech: “How glorious was the king of Israel today, who uncovered himself today in the eyes of the handmaids of his servants, as one of the vain fellows shamelessly uncovereth himself!”

David felt that it was the service of God which Michal had despised and dishonored, and he sternly answered: “It was before the Lord, which chose me before thy father, and before all his house, to appoint me ruler over the people of the Lord, over Israel: therefore will I play before the Lord. And I will yet be more vile than thus, and will be base in mine own sight: and of the maidservants which thou hast spoken of, of them shall I be had in honor.” To David’s rebuke was added that of the Lord: because of her pride and arrogance, Michal

Good worship music must promote successful and enjoyable group singing. Albert Boehm argues for the supremacy of congregational involvement as a measure of successful worship experience, and that to promote singing by the people, all styles of music, all types of instruments, and all resources need to be used.⁸³ He believes that people must use new methods to promote singing. Boehm quotes the Catholic authority, the Congregation for Divine Worship, which states that new forms should be used that are adapted to differing mentalities and modern tastes.⁸⁴ Mitchell agrees that music brings to worship an opportunity for participation; it frees the congregation to sing and worship.⁸⁵

Model for Worship and Music

In order to promote healthy church relationships between members and groups that represent a diversity of views, there is a need to “cease to promote our own concerns or simply tolerate one another’s viewpoints.”⁸⁶ Instead, the church should “rediscover and reinstitute the fabulous Christian art of defending the special interests of one another rather than our own.”⁸⁷ Because worship music combines the human element and the divine presence, it is necessary to ask what God thinks about our music for worship.

Asking God for wisdom has been the biblical model for the church from its birth. The wisdom of God should come to the church through a process where all debate their divergent views until consensus is reached, with the result of this

“had no child unto the day of her death.”

The solemn ceremonies attending the removal of the ark had made a lasting impression upon the people of Israel, arousing a deeper interest in the sanctuary service and kindling anew their zeal for Jehovah. David endeavored by every means in his power to deepen these impressions. The service of song was made a regular part of religious worship, and David composed psalms, not only for the use of the priests in the sanctuary service, but also to be sung by the people in their journeys to the national altar at the annual feasts. The influence thus exerted was far-reaching, and it resulted in freeing the nation from idolatry. Many of the surrounding peoples, beholding the prosperity of Israel, were led to think favorably of Israel’s God, who had done such great things for His people.

⁸³Albert Boehm, “Let the Congregation Sing Out,” *America* 186 (2002): 22-24.

⁸⁴Ibid., 22: “All means must be used to promote singing by the people.”

⁸⁵Mitchell, 91.

⁸⁶Eva, 4.

⁸⁷Ibid. Eva’s argument for prioritizing the other, instead of self, accords with Paul’s advice to the Ephesians: “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Eph 5:21).

being blessed by the Holy Spirit.⁸⁸ John Suggit provides a detailed description that is worth contemplating for purposes of how to make decisions about music that is to be used in church:

So it was that the decisions of the council of Jerusalem (Acts 15) were seen to be the decisions not only of the assembled apostles and presbyters (which they assuredly were), but also the judgment of the Holy Spirit, who is here considered in personal terms, rather like the description of wisdom in Wisdom 7:22–8:1. No distinction is made, for Acts 15:28 really means “The Holy Spirit and we resolved. . . .” The translation of the RSV—“It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us . . .” is too weak. The expression was regularly used to denote resolutions of an assembly, especially of a legislative assembly. . . . Similarly Acts 15:22 means “The apostles and the presbyters resolved, together with the whole congregation. . . .” “Here was truly synodical resolution of the church at Jerusalem. The actions of human beings and of the Spirit are inextricably intertwined, so that when the members of the community of the Holy Spirit meet together their decisions are those of the Spirit. Although this is especially the emphasis of Acts, the same idea is expressed by the other evangelists in different ways. Matthew, for example, reports the words of Jesus (18:20), “Where two or three are met together in my name, there am I in their midst.” In Acts the presence of the risen Lord is mediated through the Holy Spirit, who is present not only with each member of the church through baptism, but also with the church as a whole meeting in the Lord’s name.⁸⁹

Suggit provides a good summary of the workings of consensus in the early church and how this process was blessed by the Holy Spirit as a member of the community working through the body of the whole church and not only through a selected few or appointed leaders cloistered by themselves.

The proposed model of the working of the Holy Spirit as the church today selects its worship liturgy, rituals, and music is based on the principles already outlined.

⁸⁸The book of Acts presents several examples of a consensus process for resolving conflicts. The conflict registered in 6:1-7 was based on ethnic and language differences and was resolved when the general assembly nominated new leaders. The conflict in 15:1-35 was based on a doctrinal and administrative divergence of viewpoints and its resolution was also achieved by way of public debate and approved by all: “Then the apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to choose some of their own men. . . . It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” (15:22, 28).

⁸⁹John N. Suggit, “‘The Holy Spirit and We Resolved . . .’ (Acts 15:28),” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 79 (1992): 44-45.

The Attitudinal, Personal Intangible,
Immeasurable Spiritual Test

This is related to Step I in the chart below: “Supremacy of Christ—Personal: Is the worshiper living a Christ-centered life?” Two important factors are worth considering here:

1. Since God looks at the heart of the believer, the sincerity of purpose and motivation of the participant in worship (whether participating in the Lord’s Supper, singing, or any other liturgical part) must be judged individually, not communally (1 Cor 11:26-28).

2. The church will judge the obvious and follow a strict system of checks and balances. No single individual, only a community vote, may exclude someone from participating in the religious life of the church (Matt 18:15-20).

The Theological, Biblical, Foundational Test

There are two important points to consider in this matter:

1. Christ must be glorified as the center of all worship experience. Salvation clearly communicated must be a central test of the propriety of all parts of worship (sermon, hymns, liturgy). Text and message must be Christ-centered (Col 2:8-10). This is related to Step II below: “Supremacy of Christ—Collective: Is this music Christ-centered?”

2. The worship experience needs to conform to all biblical teachings; whatever part of the worship experience contradicts the Bible must not be retained (Phil 4:7-8). This is the gist of Step III below: “Supremacy of the Bible: Is this music doctrinally sound?”

The Cultural Metaworship, Enculturation,
Contextual, Enfleshment Test

To understand this, we must consider the following factors:

1. Worship presented to God must be executed in the most perfect fashion humanly available. Only our best can be acceptable to God. It must be recognized that there are universal elements for determining excellence, and relative, taste-based elements for determining what is excellent. Each community, with its culturally established and recognized patterns, must determine the best genre, sermon, reading, ritual, and so forth, that individuals and that congregation can present as part of the worship experience (Col 3:23-24). This is important to Step IV below: “Excellence for God: Is this music in the best possible fashion?”

2. The worship experience, being a human-divine activity, must appeal to the humans that are partakers. Enfleshment of the worship experience demands that all parts be culturally grounded. This means that worship must be specific to the particular human culture. There is no universal Christian or biblical culture;

therefore, when selecting the worship experience (liturgy, message, rituals, and so forth), the language, feelings and styles of the local culture should be celebrated and embraced. Obviously, not all aspects of any human culture are acceptable or appropriate for the worship of God, but the Holy Spirit and the congregation must make decisions together regarding excellent worship. This will be a contextualized, localized decision of the church, not a top-down decision of the hierarchy (be it local, national, or worldwide). This is the New Testament model. Church members should all be able to declare, "The Holy Spirit and we resolved" to use this as part of our worship experience (Acts 15:28).⁹⁰ This is central to Step V below: "Supremacy of the Community: Is this music a reflection of the community?"

The model may be presented graphically:

A MODEL FOR WORSHIP ENFLESHMENT

"The Holy Spirit and we resolved..." Acts 15:28

V.	SUPREMACY OF THE COMMUNITY Is this music a reflection of the community?
IV.	EXCELLENCE FOR GOD Is this music in the best possible fashion?
III.	SUPREMACY OF THE BIBLE Is this music doctrinally sound?
II.	SUPREMACY OF CHRIST-Collective Is this music Christ-centered?
I.	SUPREMACY OF CHRIST-Personal Is the worshiper living a Christ-centered life?

⁹⁰Ibid., 44.

This inverted pyramid characterizes the process of enfleshment of the worship experience. Since worship encompasses many aspects and not just one, the model uses music as an example. The same questions apply to all other aspects of the worship experience. The inverted triangle is a good symbol because from the monolithic, universal reality of Christ as personal Savior and Redeemer (Acts 4:12), the model moves to broader, less specific, and diverse culturally-bound aspects of worship. God created all human nations, languages, and peoples for them to all worship Him as the only true God, each in their own way. Paul was correct in his anthropological doctrine that all cultures can worship God and reach out to Him from the specificity of their cultural context:

From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring'.
(Acts 17:26-28)

Conclusion

The hermeneutics of proper worship decor and music style are crucial for the church today. As we worship God and develop a proper liturgy, we must both reach out in an enfleshment mode in order to make worship meaningful for the particular contexts of all believers, and at the same time reflect the glory and sanctity of God. The two objectives *can* and *must* be kept together in functional dynamism. The church cannot afford otherwise. This methodology is presented in a spirit of humility and praise to God, who is the center of worship. A multicultural, multinational church *must* address the realities of enfleshment in order to assure serving all groups, regardless of racial, ethnic, language and cultural factors. Such must be the case because God created us all.

Appendix A

Short Bibliography on the Influence of Culture in Current Christian European and Euro-American Hymnody

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