

CAREFUL DISCRIMINATION OR CARELESS ACCOMMODATION

Music for the Christian

We concluded our April 26th editorial with the statement that "careful discrimination rather than careless accommodation is the hallmark of every Christian musician who seeks to glorify God, edify His people, and testify of Him to the world." (a) We made this concluding statement in our discussion on the power of music, and we emphasized that "music is not neutral, but has the potential to convey messages that are positive or negative." We said that "some music by nature inspires religious feeling, and some music degrades the soul... Rock music (which is not music RD) encodes emotions, feelings and moods that are unquestionably incompatible with the Christian message... Rock music communicates values that are unsuitable for Christian synthesis." Therefore, what is required of us, as Christians, is careful discrimination rather than careless accommodation.

In an article entitled "Antithesis and Synthesis", Rev. G. Ph. VanPopta notes that "the trouble with us people is that we try to synthesize things. We want to have the best of both worlds. We want to be Christians, but we also want to get in on all the goodies the world has to offer." Although he was not speaking exclusively about music, these words certainly have relevance for our discussion about "music for the Christian." "The world is full of ungodly music and songs which are absorbed by countless people to their detriment, but we are not of the world, although in it. Is the singing of God's praises not a good place to start in asserting the special style of God's people?" (b)

In the editorial "Heresy in Harmony: On Worshipping Our Emotions", (c) we discussed the unscriptural or non-Reformed content of many of the hymns used in the Christian Reformed Churches. We noticed that when we turn away from the Psalms to merely human expressions of religious sentiment, we immediately run the danger of descending to what Prof. D. Engelsma calls "another level of religious feeling, a level not nearly so much shaped by the Word of God itself." (d) That "descent" invariably leads to hymns that are doctrinally erroneous and spiritually misleading. And that "descent", as it took place in the Christian Reformed Churches, has opened the way to so called "Praise and Worship" music, Contemporary Christian Music (CCM), and finally to Christian rock or "gospel-rock" and the like corruption. And the sad truth is that the text (scriptural as it may be) has often been the ticket into church for music that would not be tolerated by any other audience.

What we are seeing today is an accommodation of current folk tunes and styles to Christian themes. Into many worship services have been introduced everything from slick commercial arrangements of country and western tunes in jog-along rhythms, to twanging amplified guitars, to the frenzy of so-called "Christian" themes set to rock or jazz rhythms. Laurie Vanden Heuvel, in her article "Church Music: Accommodation or Discrimination", notes that "an honest appraisal will have to concede that any person performing or participating in a jazz performance will, by virtue of his own intense, sensual, emotional, self-centered and personal involvement, find any serious contemplation of God or any of His works or attributes a feat of mental gymnastics which is

virtually impossible. Newspaper reviews often guardedly admit this when they describe congregational response to a religious jazz service as 'enthusiastic but shallow.'

Impressive predictions about the ability of folk, jazz and rock to communicate the gospel more effectively to today's world have already paled to the point where its advocates are urging a mediate program for the worship service: a little 'folk', a little 'rock', a little 'jazz', and a little 'tradition' - a sort of musical 'smorgasbord.' Such a proposal is inadequate...it seeks to accommodate the music of the church to the tastes of its members. It presupposes that such music is there to entertain rather than edify. Musical form becomes the object of praise, instead of the vehicle of praise, subordinate to and supportive of the all-important Bible-based words." (e)

Tony Parsons, pop music critic and writer, strikes a discordant note in his response to the so called "youth culture" evident in the worship services held at St. Austell, (Cornwall, South Wales) and Zoe Fellowship (a branch of the Shatesbury Society in Chiswick, and member of the Evangelical Alliance). "As someone who has spent much of his adult life around rock music and rock musicians... all these rocking Christian soldiers make me cringe... it is embarrassing and out of place. The wrong thing, done badly! Rocking and rolling for Jesus is not the way to win people back to the church. If they are not moved by a need for God, then they will be moved by nothing. They don't need sub-standard rock music to sugar the pill of faith..."

George Thomas, author of the article, "No Easy Listening" also comments on the idea of the church moving with the culture. He notes: "Once a church lets go of the unchanging Word of God and begins to base its worship on the ever changing winds of modern times and the ever-shifting sands of fashion, it has lost its bearings altogether. It is no longer able to make any clear and decisive pronouncements. The real question is why anyone would want to join a church which sounds exactly like what can be heard on half a dozen radio stations any hour of the day. When religion becomes so wedded to culture, its distinctiveness is ended. The salt has lost its savour. A congregation that merely reflects culture is without a unique message. It is only a mirror..."

George Thomas asks: "What has happened to the professing church? In the absence of the Spirit of God from our services, everyone offers his own opinion. Since music is a subject about which we all have likes and dislikes, who dares to prescribe standards?" In response Thomas writes that "our approach must be utterly different. We dare not center our worship on the world's tastes. We must ask questions such as, what kind of hymn book does the Bible itself contain in the 150 psalms? What are we told about how we will worship God in heaven? Does the music tend to give you a greater concept of the glory of God? Does the music produce a repentant view of man's depravity? Does this kind of music encourage you to disciplined godly living? ...

It seems that those questions are never asked in the big get-togethers; if they were they could never allow such anti-Christian music to dominate their gatherings. Such occasions promote mindless addiction to emotional entertainment... Their organizations are equating self-fulfillment and self-actualization with spiritual renewal and then boast 'revival.' The masses are being coddled with 'contemporary' Christian music: they are not confronted with the necessity of thinking rigorously scripturally." ("No Easy Listening" by Geoffrey Thomas)

Unlike some of the Christian Reformed Churches, we as Canadian Reformed Churches have not introduced "current folk tunes and styles" and so called "Christian themes set to rock and jazz rhythms" into our worship services. We still abide what is stated in Article 55 of our Church Order. There we read that "in the worship services the Psalms will be sung in the rhyming adopted

by general synod and the Hymns approved by general synod." We may thankfully note that at least in our worship services we have not yet abandoned the singing of the Psalms or the use of our Anglo-Genevan Psalter (Book of Praise). However, the same cannot necessarily be said for our homes and schools. It was the introduction of CCM and so called "Christian" rock into "Praise and Worship" evenings, school assemblies, Christmas/Easter programs, music evenings, etc., that initiated much of the discussion on the subject of "music for the Christian."

In many of our homes and schools we have already "descended" to what Prof. Engelsma calls "another level of religious feeling, a level not nearly so much shaped by the word of God itself." And when we, in our homes and schools, no longer let our songs of praise be shaped exclusively by the unchanging Word of God, we will continue our inevitable "descent" to hymns and songs that are doctrinally erroneous and scripturally misleading. Furthermore, when we, in our homes and schools, begin to base our choice of music for our songs of praise to our God "on the ever changing winds of modern times and the ever-shifting sands of fashion" (George Thomas), then we open the way to "Christian" rock or "'gospel' rock and the like corruption." (Prof. D. Engelsma's words RD) These developments in our homes and schools will have definite consequences for the music of the church. Our unwillingness to exercise careful discrimination will inevitably "descend" or lead to careless accommodation.

Let me repeat an earlier quote. "We want to synthesize things. We want the best of both worlds. We want to be Christians, but we also want to get in on all the goodies the world has to offer." There is then no longer a good understanding of and appreciation for the Reformed tradition of psalm singing both in church and at home. And since there is little room for critique of the text (or rhyming) of the psalms, the criticism is focused on the Genevan tunes. We can then hear remarks such as: "They are too difficult." "The young people don't like them." "They don't move me emotionally." "They are not biblically mandated." "We should not let non-essential matters - such as the way we sing - create an impediment to our efforts to unity with other churches." "We should not make the Genevan tunes a stumbling block to those who prefer alternatives."

The well known Dutch organist Dirk Jansz. Zwart, on his recent tour through to the Fraser Valley (April /97) gave his views on the singing of Psalms during our worship services and the development of the Genevan tunes. He reminded us of the fact that "to John Calvin, the well known reformer, style was important... Calvin determined the following criteria: no folk tunes, but melodies which are pleasing to God and the angels. These melodies must also measure up to high musical standards, and everyone must be able to sing them... This was the great challenge: to find songs which were not meant for cheap entertainment, but which were directed to God's honour..."

Dr. G. van der Leeuw, a well known professor, wrote about the rhymed psalms, "This psalter contains a treasure of melodies of immeasurable value. These melodies have shaped a church, throughout the centuries and still today. They gave the Reformed churches their distinct and dignified character.' The psalm melodies functioned as the "shibboleth" (typical characteristic) for the believers who confessed the truth of God's word... The beauty of the psalm and hymn melodies is not solely determined by the fact that they have historical value. Their beauty lies in the choice of tones and their progression. Many Reformed masters have shaped them. They are of the classical caliber that lasts... It is a matter of style to have respect for the Book of Psalms. All the melodies deserve it to be learned and performed, at home and in the church. Not one melody is weak. They all excel in beauty and style... (f)

Some questions can be raised: What are we doing with this monument of word and sound? Are we busy building a heritage or providing entertainment? "Why do we experiment with and discuss endlessly the merit of music which is far inferior in quality and very likely also spiritually damaging? What kind of music do we have in our homes? What do we listen to during the week and on Sundays? Are we giving good training in this respect? It is a matter of up-bringing, of learning. And that's where parents play a key role. It is too bad that the influence of the world is so strong in many of our homes. Here too, we must not be conformed to the world but transformed by the renewing of our minds (Rom. 12:2)." (g) As Christians we must exercise careful discrimination rather than careless accommodation in the use of God's gift of music!

Ron Dykstra

- (a) (e)Church Music: Accommodation or Discrimination, Laurie Vanden Heuvel, Outlook, April 1982.
- (b) Editorial, "Family Singing", C Van Dam, Clarion.
- (c) Heresy in Harmony: On Worshipping our Emotions, Ron Dykstra, Reformed Polemics, June 21, 1996.
- (d) Music in the Church, Prof. David Engelsma, Standard Bearer, May 1, 1995.
- (f) About Psalms Melodies and Church Organs, Dirk Jansz. Zwart, Information, May 17, 1997.
- (g) Learning to Discriminate Between Music, J Tuininga, Outlook, Jan. 1983

Before You Use Birth Control, Consider...

By Dr. James W. Scott

Why do we talk about "birth control"? This expression is a euphemism given to us in 1914 by Margaret Sanger, the leader of the birth control movement and the founder of Planned Parenthood. The real subject is contraception - that is, preventing conception.

We don't have space here to sort out all the theological arguments about marriage, sexuality, procreation, and human responsibility that pertain to contraception. But there are several texts in the Bible that may directly refer to contraception.

What Was Onan's Sin?

The first text is Genesis 38:6-10. Onan agreed to sexual relations with his deceased brother's wife, Tamar, in order to raise up offspring for him. However, Onan prevented conception from taking place by withdrawing from her at the last moment. But "what he did" angered God, who slew him.

What was Onan's sin? Some have said that he sinned by refusing to carry out his duty to his brother. But this 'duty' was merely a social custom (called levirate marriage), not part of God's law. Even under Mosaic Law, a man could refuse to follow this custom and escape with only a bad name (Deut.25:5-10). So if Onan had refused to have anything to do with Tamar, God would not have slain him.

But Onan was quite willing to have sex with Tamar. That would have been fine, if he had not prevented her from getting pregnant. It was his prevention of conception - his spurning of God's design for human sexuality - that made his sexual involvement with Tamar sinful.

What Is Pharmakeia?

In the Greco-Roman world of the first century, sensuality, preservation, and general decadence reigned supreme (often in connection with worshipping false gods). As a result, contraception (usually the drinking of potions to achieve temporary sterility), abortion (including the drinking of potions to destroy fetuses), and even infanticide ("exposing" infants to the elements and wild beasts, drowning them, etc.) were wide-spread, facing little moral objection.

The apostle Paul condemned the immorality of his day. But he was strangely silent, or so it may seem, on the subjects of contraception, abortion, and infanticide. The reason for this apparent silence may be that these specific practices are included in broader categories. Surely infanticide and at least late-term abortion are included in his condemnations of murder. Does contraception likewise come under a broader category?

In this regard, we need to rethink Paul's condemnation of pharmakeia in Galatians 5:20. Most Bible scholars have uncritically assumed that this Greek word means "sorcery" or "witchcraft" (as translated in English Bibles). But pharmakeia (from which our word pharmacy comes) originally referred to use of potions, drugs, and often poisons, generally for evil purposes. Since these concoctions were often thought to have magical properties, the word developed the secondary meaning "sorcery." Both meanings were current in Paul's day; which one fits better in this text?

Galatians 5:19-21 presents a long list of "the deeds of the flesh." These are personal vices, which would be common in the general population. But sorcery was the craft of a sorcerer, not really a common personal vice. The use of potions and drugs for evil purposes, however, was widespread. It makes more sense to find such "drug abuse" listed alongside such things as immorality, idolatry, jealousy, and drunkenness, than to find sorcery on such a list.

This view is strengthened by the position of pharmakeia on the list. Between sexual sins (vs.19) and sins involving disputes (vs.20) we find "idolatry" and pharmakeia. Since pagan temples featured "sacred" prostitution, we should think of "idolatry" as attached to the first group of sins.

That leaves pharmakeia. It obviously does not belong with the sins involving disputes, but it, too, can reasonably be attached to the first group. What would then be in view is the evil use of potions and drugs, especially in connection with sexual practices. That would refer to the potions and drugs used to prevent contraception and destroy fetuses.

Interestingly, the early third-century theologian Hippolytus, in the first clear reference to contraception made by a Christian in a work that has survived, condemns certain women who are "called believers," and yet use "drugs for producing sterility" (atokiois pharmakois, in *The Refutation of All Heresies*, 9.12.25).

The same term is used by the early second-century physician Soranos of Ephesus, in his book *Gynecology*, to refer to both contraceptive and abortive potions. And the first-century biographer Plutarch mentions pharmakeia (without any qualification) alongside other practices

(furtive child substitution and adultery) by which a woman might thwart her husband's obtaining of a legitimate heir (Romulus, 22.3).

Thus, there is a good reason to think that pharmakeia in Galatians 5:20 refers to the evil use of potions and drugs, especially contraceptive and abortive agents.

There is likewise good reason to find condemnations of contraception (and abortion) in Revelation 9:21, 21:8, and 22:15. In 9:20-21 people are said not to have repented of their idolatry, murdering (including abortion and infanticide), pharmakeia, immorality, and thievery. Once again we find pharmakeia in a list of popular vices centering around sexual immorality. And again we say, this arguably includes the use of contraceptive drugs. The same analysis would be made at 21:8 and 22:15. (At 18:23 there is probably a reference to sorcery, since the passage is not listing personal vices, but describing the evil influence of "Babylon" on the world: cf. Isa.47:9, 12).

What Has the Church Taught?

God has been teaching his church down through the ages. He has endued generation after generation of His people with wisdom. We should therefore respect the long-standing wisdom of our Christian heritage. We should depart from it only if Scripture truly forces us to do so.

It is therefore highly significant that the church down through the centuries - Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant alike - held one view on contraception with remarkable unanimity until just recently. It was condemned in strong terms, and contraception was often made a criminal act.

The Westminster Standards do not address the matter, but the early laws of Presbyterian Scotland punished with death "the taking of potions to cause abortion" and also punished "the using such means ... to hinder conception."

However, under the influence of increasingly degenerate secular culture, the largely apostate Protestant mainline churches gradually embraced contraception, especially in the second half of this century. This was not an isolated development. The birth control movement was an integral part of a general cultural movement away from traditional Christian morality. In the pursuit of pleasure without consequences, moral objections to contraception, abortion, homosexuality, etc., had to go.

This historical context alone does not prove that contraception is wrong. However, should we expect an immoral and hedonistic society to come up with genuine moral insight, contrary to nearly two millennia of consistent Christian teaching?

From New Horizons, the official OPC magazine

OTHER NEWS:

The meeting on April 8 and 9 in Kalamazoo of Classis Midwest of the United Reformed Churches spent much of its first meeting in organizational business and in the examination of two candidates for the ministry. Most of the first day of classis focused on the ordination exams of Phil Vos, pastor of Covenant URC, and of Steve de Boer, pastor-elect of Eastmanville (MI) URC. However, much of the classical debate on the second day focused on a single overture: a proposal from Oak Glen Covenant Community Reformed Church in Lansing, Illinois, urging classis to "pursue the establishment of fraternal relations" with seven conservative Reformed denominations. The Oak Glen overture specified the Canadian Reformed, Free Reformed, Orthodox Christian Reformed,

Orthodox Presbyterians, Presbyterian Church in America, Reformed Church in the United States, and Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America as denominations with which the classis should pursue fraternal relations. A subsequent amendment added an eighth denomination: the Protestant Reformed Churches.