

POST-MODERN EVANGELICAL WORSHIP

by D. G. HART

What do Billy Graham and Stanley Fish have in common? According to most assessments of the ongoing culture wars the answer would be an emphatic "not much!" With the exception of a few demographic details — both are older white men living in North Carolina — little seems to unite these two figures or the movements for which they have become figureheads. Graham is, of course, the patron saint of American evangelicalism, the one who as an object of admiration or scorn determines what it means to be an evangelical. And Fish, professor of English at Duke University of deconstructionist, post-modernist fame, has become one of the principal cheerleaders for efforts within the academy to make the literary canon specifically, and the humanities more generally, more inclusive and less oppressive. Identified in this way, the constituencies to which Graham and Fish speak would appear to be about as far apart as Newt Gingrich and Hillary Clinton.

James Davison Hunter, for instance, argues that evangelicals are a large part of the orthodox constituency that defends the traditional family, opposes political correctness and multiculturalism in the academy, and supports efforts to cut federal funding for objectionable art. This explains why they have lined up in bookstores across the land to buy and read to their children William Bennett's *Book of Virtues*. Thus, evangelicalism, at least in the common configuration of the ongoing culture wars, is the antithesis of the cultural left.

Why is it, then, that when evangelicals retreat from the public square into their houses of worship they manifest the same hostility to tradition, intellectual standards, and good taste they find so deplorable in their opponents in the culture wars? Anyone familiar with the so-called "Praise & Worship" phenomenon (so named, supposedly, to remind

participants of what they are doing) would be hard-pressed to identify these believers as the party of memory or the defenders of cultural conservatism. P&W has become the dominant mode of expression within evangelical churches, from conservative Presbyterian denominations to low-church independent congregations. What characterizes this "style" of worship is the praise song ("four words, three notes and two hours") with its mantra-like repetition of phrases from Scripture, displayed on an overhead projector or video monitors (for those churches with bigger budgets), and accompanied by the standard pieces in a rock band.

Gone are the hymnals that keep the faithful in touch with previous generations of saints. They have been abandoned, in many cases, because they are filled with music and texts considered too boring, too doctrinal, and too restrained. What boomers and busters need instead, according to the liturgy of P&W, are a steady diet of religious ballads most of which date from the 1970s, the decade of disco, leisure suits, and long hair. Gone, too, are the traditional elements of Protestant worship, the invocation, confession of sins, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, the doxology, and the Gloria Patri. Again, these elements are not sufficiently celebrative or "dynamic," the favorite word used to describe the new worship. And while P&W has retained the talking head in the sermon, probably the most boring element of Protestant worship, the substance of much preaching turns out to be more therapeutic than theological.

Of course, evangelicals are not the only ones guilty of abandoning the treasures of historic Protestant worship. Various churches in the ELCA and Missouri Synod have begun to experiment with contemporary worship. The traditionalists in Reformed circles, if the periodical *Reformed Worship*, is any indication, have also begun to incorporate P&W in their services. And Roman Catholics, one of the genuine conservative constituencies throughout American history, have contributed to the mix with the now infamous guitar and polka Mass. Yet, judging on the basis of worship practices, evangelicals look the most hypocritical. For six days a week they trumpet traditional values and the heritage of the West, but on Sunday they turn out to be the most novel. Indeed, the patterns of worship that prevail in most evangelical congregations suggest that these Protestants are no more interested in tradition than their archenemies in the academy.

A variety of factors, many of which stem from developments in post-1960s American popular culture, unite evangelicalism and the cultural left. In both movements, we see a form of anti-elitism that ques-

tions any distinction between good and bad (or even not so good), or between what is appropriate and inappropriate. Professors of literature have long been saying that the traditional literary canon was the product, or better, the social construction of a particular period in intellectual life that preserved the hegemony of white men, but which had no intrinsic merit. In other words, because aesthetic and intellectual standards turn out to be means of sustaining power, there is no legitimate criteria for including some works and excluding others.

The same sort of logic can be found across the country at week-night worship planning committee meetings. It is virtually impossible to make the case — without having your hearers go glassy-eyed — that “Of the Father’s Love Begotten” is a better text and tune than “Shine, Jesus, Shine,” and, therefore, that the former is fitting for corporate worship, while the latter should remain confined to Christian radio. In the case of evangelicals, the inability to make distinctions between good and bad poetry and music does not stem so much from political ideology (though it ends up abetting the cause) as from the deeply ingrained instinct that worship is simply a matter of evangelism. Thus, in order to reach the unchurched the churched have to use the former’s idiom and style. What is wrong with this picture?

The traditionalists are of no help here. Rather than trying to hold the line on what is appropriate and good in worship, most of those who are devoted full-time to thinking about liturgy and worship, the door-keepers of the sanctuary as it were, have generally adopted a “united-colors-of-Benetton” approach to the challenge of contemporary worship. For instance, a recent editorial in a Reformed publication says that the old ways — the patterns that used Buxtehude rather than Bill Gaither, “Immortal, Invisible” rather than “Do Lord,” a Genevan gown instead of a polo shirt — have turned out to be too restrictive. Churches need to expand their worship “repertoire.” The older predilection was “white, European, adult, classical, with a strong resonance from the traditional concert hall.” But this was merely a preference and reflection of a specific “education, socio-economic status, ethnic background, and personality.” Heaven forbid that anyone should appear to be so elitist. For the traditional “worship idiom” can become “too refined, cultured, and bloodless . . . too arrogant.” Instead, we need to encourage the rainbow coalition — “of old and young, men and women, red and yellow, black and white, classical and contemporary.” (What about vegetarians and red-meat eaters?) And the reason for this need of diversity? It is simply because worship is the reflection of socio-economic status and culture. Gone is any conviction that one liturgy is

better than another because it conforms to revealed truth and the order of creation, or that one order of worship is more appropriate than another for the theology that a congregation or denomination confesses. Worship, like food or clothes, is merely a matter of taste. Thus the logic of multiculturalism has infected even those concerned to preserve traditional liturgy.

Yet when one looks for genuine diversity in worship, multiculturalism — again, the great leveler of tradition and cultural standards — offers up a very thin band of liturgical expression. Advocates of diversity don't seem to be very interested in the way "the people" have worshipped in the past. Is there, for instance, any real effort among the various experiments in worship to recover the psalm-singing of the Puritans, the simple and spontaneous meetings of Quakers, the hymnody of German pietism, the folk traditions of the Amish, the revival songs of Ira Sankey and Dwight L. Moody, or the spirituals of African-American Protestants? The answer, of course, is no. For these expressions of Protestant piety, even though originating from some groups that would hardly qualify as elites, are no better than the liturgies from the Lutheran, Anglican, and Reformed establishments. What the P&W crowd really want is a very narrow range of musical and lyrical expression, one that conforms to their admittedly limited worship "repertoire."

Indeed, contemporary worship — and church life for that matter — depends increasingly on the products of popular culture, from its musical mode of expression, the liturgical skits that ape TV sit-coms, and the informal style of ministers that follows the antics of late-night TV talk-show hosts. Thus, just as the academic left advocates including Madonna and *Leave it to Beaver* in the canon, so the evangelical champions of contemporary worship turn to popular culture — primarily contemporary music and television programming — for the content and order of worship. This is remarkable for a Christian tradition that once found its identity in avoiding all forms of worldliness and that continues to rail against the products of Hollywood and the excesses of the popular music industry. Yet, as in the case of the cultural left, we are seeing a generation that grew up on TV and top-40 radio stations now assuming positions of leadership in the churches. And what they want to surround themselves with in worship, as in the classroom, is what is familiar and easily accessible. Rather than growing up and adopting the broader range of experience that characterizes adulthood, evangelicals and the academic left want to recover and perpetuate the experiences of adolescence.

In fact, what stands out about P&W is the aura of teenage piety. Anyone who has endured a week at one of the evangelical summer youth camps that dot the landscape will be struck by the similarity between P&W and the services in which adolescents participate while out of their parents' hair. The parallels are so close that one is tempted to call P&W the liturgy of the youth rally. For in the meetings of Young Life, Campus Crusade for Christ, or Bible camp are all the elements of P&W: the evangelical choruses, the skit, and the long talk by the youthful speaker calling for dedication and commitment to Christ. While these youth ministries are effective in evoking the mountaintop or campfire-side experience, they rarely provide the sustenance upon which a life of sacrifice and discipline depends. Yet, P&W is attractive precisely because it appears to offer weekly the spiritual recharge that before came only once a year. Consequently, many megachurches that follow the P&W format thrive because they help many people recover or sustain the religious experience of youth.

Some may wonder what is wrong with assisting adults to perpetuate the emotions and memories that sustain religious devotion. The problem is that such experiences and the worship from which it springs is concerned primarily with effect. One searches in vain through the praise songs, the liturgical dramas, or the sermon/inspirational talk for an adequate expression of the historic truths of the faith. It is as if the content of worship or the object that elicits the religious experience does not really matter. As long as people are lifting up and swaying their arms, tilting back their heads, and closing their eyes, then the Spirit must be present and the worship genuine.

What is ironic about contemporary worship is that its form is almost always the same even while claiming that older worship is too repetitive. Another standard complaint about "traditional" worship is that it is too formal. Evangelicals believe that God is never limited by outward means. Believers who rely upon set liturgies or who repeat written prayers, some criticize, are merely "going through the motions." Real faith and worship can not be prescribed. Yet, for all of the attempts by the practitioners of P&W to avoid routine and habit, hence boredom, contemporary worship never seems to escape its own pop-culture formula. Again, the songs are basically the same in musical structure and lyrical composition, the order of the service — while much less formal — rarely changes, and the way in which people express their experience demonstrates remarkable unity (e.g., the arms, the head, the eyes). This hostility to form and the inability to think about the ways in which certain habits of expression are more or less appropriate for

specific settings or purposes is what finally puts evangelicalism and the academic left on the same side in the culture war. For the idea that the autonomous individual must find his own meaning or experience of reality for himself ends up making such individuals unwilling to follow and submit to the forms, habits, and standards that have guided a community or culture. Besides the fact that the radical individualism of modern culture has bred as much conformity as human history has ever known, evangelicals and the academic left continue to buck tradition in the hope of finding the true self capable of experiencing religion or life at its most genuine or authentic.

What evangelicals who prefer P&W to older liturgies share with academics who teach Louis L'Amour instead of Shakespeare is an inability to see the value of restraint, habit, and form. Evangelicals and the academic left believe that we need to be liberated from the past, from formalism, and from existing structures in order to come into a more intimate relationship with life or the divine. This is really quite astounding in the case of evangelicals whose public reputation depends upon defending traditional morality. Yet, the effort to remove all barriers to the expression and experience of the individual self is unmistakably present in the efforts to make worship more expressive and spontaneous. This impulse in evangelical worship repudiates the wisdom of various Christian traditions that, rather than trying to liberate the self in order to experience greater intimacy with God, hold that individuals, because of a tendency to sin and commit idolatry, need to conform to revealed and ordered patterns of faith and practice. The traditions that Presbyterians follow, for instance, are not done to throttle religious experience but rather, as the prescribed means of communing with God and his people. These means were not arbitrarily chosen by John Calvin and John Knox. Rather, Presbyterians have conducted public and family worship in specific ways because they believe worship should conform to God's revealed truth. But just as the academic left has abandoned the great works of Western civilization because of a desire for relevance in higher education, so evangelicals have rejected the various elements and forms that have historically informed Protestant worship, again, because they are boring to today's youth.

Antiformalism also explains the stress upon novelty and freshness so often found in P&W. The leader of worship planning at one of the dominant megachurches says, for instance, on a video documenting a P&W service, that she is always looking for new ways to order the mid-week believer's service so that church members won't fall into a rut. She goes on to say that people are often tired, having worked all

day (an argument for worshiping on Sunday) and need something that will arrest their attention and put them in a proper frame of mind. This perspective, however, fundamentally misunderstands the relationship between form and worship. C. S. Lewis had it right when he said that a worship service “works’ best when, through long familiarity, we don’t have to think about it.” “The perfect church service,” he added, “would be the one we were almost unaware of; our attention would have been on God. But every novelty prevents this. It fixes our attention on the service itself; and thinking about worship is a different thing from worshipping. . . . ‘Tis mad idolatry that makes the service greater than the god.’ A still worse thing may happen. Novelty may fix our attention not even on the service but on the celebrant.” But this is precisely what has happened in P&W, where the service and elements are designed to attract attention themselves rather than functioning as vehicles for expressing adoration to God. Lewis knew that repetition and habit were better guides to the character of worship than novelty and manipulation. In fact, one doesn’t need to be a rocket scientist to sense that the idiom of Valley Girls is far less fitting for a believer to express love for God than the language of the *Book of Common Prayer*. Such an instinct only confirms the wise comment of the Reformed theologian, Cornelius Van Til, who while preferring Presbyterian liturgy, still remarked that “at least in an Episcopalian service no one says anything silly.”

But even to criticize contemporary worship, to accuse it of bad taste or triviality, is almost as wicked as smoking in public. Arguments against P&W are usually taken personally, becoming an affront to the feelings of contemporary worshippers. Which is to say that the triumph of P&W, like the ascendancy of the cultural left in the academy, is firmly rooted in our therapeutic culture. The most widely used reason for contemporary worship is that it is what the people want and what makes them feel good. Again, just as there are no intellectual standards for expanding the literary canon to include romance novels, so there are no theological criteria for practicing P&W. But there are plenty of reasons that say that if we give people what they are familiar with, whether sitcoms in the classroom or soft rock in church, they will feel comfortable and come back for more. As Phillip Rieff has noted, the connections between the therapeutic and the market are formidable. So if we can expand our worship or academic repertoire to include the diversity of the culture, we will no doubt increase our audience.

This is why P&W services are also called “seeker-sensitive.” They are part of a self-conscious effort to attract a larger market for the

church. Yet, while evangelicalism may have a large market share, its consumer satisfaction may also be low, especially if it deceives people into thinking they have really worshiped God when they have actually been worshiping their emotions. Thus, once again, evangelical worship turns out to be as deceptive as the academic left, which tells students that the study of Batman comics is just as valuable as the study of Henry James.

Of course, anyone who knows the history of American evangelicalism should not be surprised by P&W. In fact, Billy Graham's recent inclusion of Christian Hip Hop and Rap bands in his crusades is of a piece with evangelical history more generally. (It also differs little from his efforts in the 1970s, seldom remembered, to appeal to the Jesus People. With lengthy locks, an inch over the shirt collar, and long sideburns, Graham said, playing off Timothy Leary's famous psychedelic slogan, "Tune in to God, then turn on . . . drop out — of the materialistic world. The experience of Jesus Christ is the greatest trip you can take.") As R. Laurence Moore argues in *Selling God*, since the arrival of Boy George in the American colonies, George Whitefield that is, evangelicals have been unusually adept at packaging and marketing Christianity in the forms of popular culture. The intention of Protestant revivalism was "to save souls, but in a brassy way that threw religion into a free-for-all competition for people's attention." Revivalism, in fact, according to Moore, "shoved American religion into the marketplace of culture" and became "entangled in controversies over commercial entertainments which they both imitated and influenced."

Seldom have evangelicals recognized that this commitment to making the gospel accessible deforms and trivializes Christianity, making it no better than any other commodity exchanged on the market. As H. L. Mencken perceptively pointed out about Billy Sunday, evangelicalism "quickly disarms the old suspicion of the holy clerk and gets the discussion going on the familiar and easy terms of the bar-room." Mencken went on to remark that evangelicalism is marked "by a contemptuous disregard of the theoretical and mystifying" and reduces "all the abstrusities of Christian theology to a few and simple and (to the ingenious) self-evident propositions," making of religion "a practical, an imminent, an everyday concern." Thus, the pattern of evangelical practice shows a long history of being hostile to the more profound liturgies, prayers, and hymns that God's people have expressed throughout the ages.

The reason for this hostility, of course, is that these traditional forms of expressing devotion to God are not sufficiently intelligible to out-

siders. But in an effort to reach the unchurched, just as the university has abandoned its mission in order to reach the uneducated, evangelicals have reversed the relationship between the church and the world. Rather than educating outsiders or seekers so they may join God's people in worship, or rather than educating the illiterate so may join the conversation of the West, we now have the church and the academy employing as its language the idiom of the unchurched and undereducated. In effect, through P&W the church is becoming dumber at the same time that multiculturalism is dumbing-down the university. In the case of P&W the church, by embracing the elements and logic of contemporary worship, has abandoned its task of catechesis. Rather than converting and discipling the seeker, the church now uses the very language and methods of the world. So rather than educating the unbaptized in the language of the household of faith, the church now teaches communicants the language of the world.

Hughes Oliphant Old in his fine study of worship concludes with a reflection about mainline Presbyterian worship that applies well to what has transpired in contemporary evangelical churches. "In our evangelistic zeal," he writes, "we are looking for programs that will attract people. We think we have to put honey on the lip of the bitter cup of salvation. It is the story of the wedding of Cana all over again but with this difference. At the crucial moment when the wine failed, we took matters into our own hands and used those five stone jars to mix up a batch of Kool-Aid instead." Such is the state of affairs in contemporary evangelical worship. The thin and artificial juice of popular culture has replaced the finely aged and well-crafted drink of the church through the ages. Aside from the merits of the instant drink, it is hardly what you would expect defenders of tradition and the family to choose to serve at a wedding, or at the banquet supper of our Lord. And yet, just as evangelicals in the nineteenth century substituted Welch's for red wine, so a century later they have exchanged the superficial and trivial for the rich forms and elements of historic Protestant worship.



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