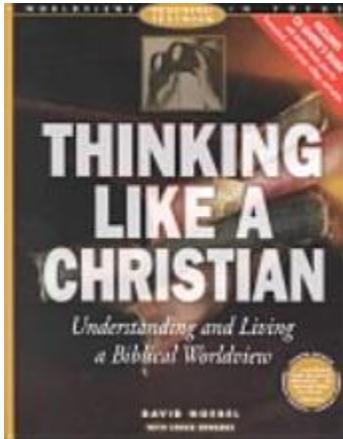


Thoughts on Christianity and the Church

June 29 2010: Worldview and Traditional Youth Ministry



A few weeks ago, I visited my sister and brother-in-law in Colorado. I found him studying materials and preparing lessons for a subset of youth in his church. Seems that his church (a rather large one) has a children's church, and teens are invited to serve as monitors or guides or supervisors to the younger children. Since this is a "ministry", it is open to unchurched or non-Christian teens. This is cause for some concern for parents of the children who attend the children's church, so a few sets of parents

have decided to teach *Christian Worldview* to these ministering teens, and they are using the [Thinking Like A Christian \[1\]](#) curriculum from Summit Ministries.

Hearty Approval From Me. Better if it pulls in parents of these teens, and becomes an ongoing focus, rather than a one-shot "Bible study" sort of thing, which almost never takes long-term root in student hearts.

When we returned from Colorado, we learned that my dad and step-mother are planning to put on a training series for their teen grandchildren, two of whom are preparing to go to university in the fall. They have decided to use material from [True U \[2\]](#), which is *Christian Worldview* training produced by The Truth Project. Teen grandchildren who are not yet graduated are invited, as are their parents, so I intend to attend and fully support my kids.



Hearty Approval From Me.

Now, I note that my brother-in-law's church has a very large youth

group. From what I'm told, most of the efforts of the youth ministry staff are directed to "entertainment", "evangelism", and maintaining a large crowd. Similarly, I know that the youth ministry in my dad's church is also structured along the traditional lines of "entertainment" and "crowd-building". In fact, I know the couple who were doing the youth ministry on a lay volunteer basis (like I was) very successfully, building relationships and trying to be intentional. This strategy was not producing results (in terms of numbers of attenders and baptisms) to suit the pastor, so he dismissed them and brought in someone who would run the ministry in a traditional fashion.

I note that my brother-in-law and his other parent partners are doing their *Thinking Like A Christian* project **OUTSIDE** the "official" youth ministry of his church. Of course, given the target audience of their own grandchildren, my dad and step-mom are doing their *TrueU* project **OUTSIDE** the "official" youth ministry of their church. I can also state, after having visited a number of churches recently and investigated their youth ministries, that *few to none* have intentional ministries of any sort, and **NONE** incorporate *Christian Worldview* training for the young people, much less for their parents.



I will note further that Summit Ministries and [The Truth Project](#) [3], a "subsidiary" of [Focus on the Family](#) [4], are both *Para-Church Ministries*, rather than church-sponsored or denominational productions. In fact, the TrueU program is not supposed to be a stand-alone, one-shot affair, but an introduction into the full-blown The Truth Project small-group study and accountability strategy. Yet in all of Tucson, there are... *two* The Truth Project small groups, and one of them is private to the "owning" church.

So the lesson is, if people are concerned about their teenagers, they have to look outside the youth ministries of their evangelical churches, to para-church ministries, and *do it themselves*. Not that there is anything other than plaudatory about doing it themselves, but... what is the church good for? Additionally, the churches just haven't figured out how important *Christian Worldview* training is for their adult members, much less for young people at risk for the ["Already Gone"](#)

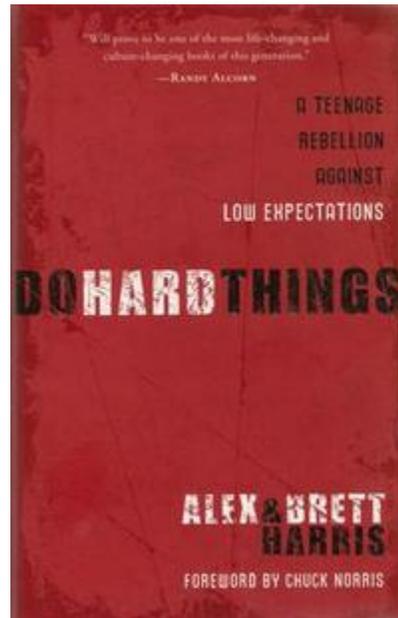
[phenomenon](#) [5].

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1. www.summit.org/curriculum/sunday-school/thinking-like-a-christian/
 2. <http://www.mytruthproject.org/truthproject/trueu/home.html>
 3. <http://www.truthproject.org/>
 4. <http://www.focusonthefamily.com/>
 5. www.wnd.com/?pageId=100324
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June 23 2010: Do Hard Things

Some time ago (while I was still playing the role of "youth leader", in fact), I became aware of Joshua Harris and read his book, [I Kissed Dating Goodbye](#) [1]. I very much appreciated his perspective on the "normal" course of interaction between young men and women, the "dating scene", and how it is quite problematic in spite of its being accepted, even encouraged, by the young people's parents and contemporary society in general. It seems that Joshua has two younger brothers, Brett and Alex, who have a similar perspective on the expectations that contemporary society places on young people. They have co-authored two books, including [Do Hard Things](#) [2], and set up a central web presence, TheRebelution.com, as teenagers to challenge teenagers to aspire beyond those low expectations of society.



The first part of the book is an assessment of "adolescence" and "teenager", concepts that appeared only in recent times. Historically, responsible adulthood began as soon as childhood ended. It's not for nothing that the "coming of age" for Jewish boys is at age 12. In the modern era, with child labour laws coming out of the Industrial Revolution and lengthening state-imposed education requirements, "childhood" stretched into the late teen years. Now, of course, with

college attendance being broadly expected and treated pretty much like an extension of grade school, and the phenomenon of "Baby-Boomer" parents coddling their children, "adolescence" can now last into the mid-twenties, or even the thirties, as otherwise adult children still live with their parents, have their living provided, and are free to pursue childish activities like video games, parties, and of course drug use and liquor. So the case that the Harris brothers are making for *teenagers* like themselves can be applied to the larger category of "delayed adolescence".

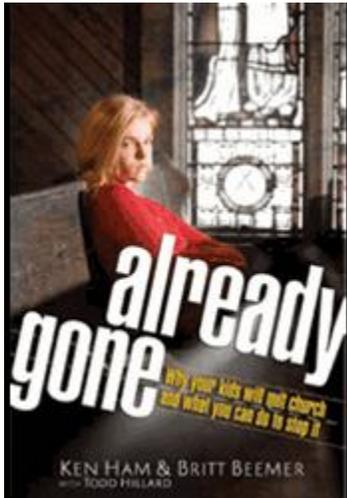
The point is, society has adopted the expectation that adolescents (even old ones) don't have the time or training or maturity to do anything more than *have fun* and *spend money*. Brett and Alex point out that, historically, **this isn't true**, and they give examples of young people such as George Washington, David Farragut, and Clara Barton, who took significant responsibilities in their teen years. More recently, in our visit to Colorado and Pikes Peak, we learned that Zebulon Pike, after whom the mountain was named, was given important assignments as a teen-age United States Army officer.

The book goes on to identify five kinds of "Hard Things" that young people can aspire to:

1. **Things outside your comfort zone** - the "big things"; Brett and Alex' book is filled with examples of teenagers who go beyond what they think they can do.
2. **Things that go beyond what is expected or required** - reject complacency and the low level of "your best" that teachers and other authorities place on you. Do things that are hard for you (go beyond your personal specialties), be known for what you do (rather than for what you don't do), and pursue excellence (not making excuses).
3. **Things that are too big to accomplish alone** - They make a big thing of *collaboration*, particularly of building functional networks of teenagers through the Internet.
4. **Things that don't earn an immediate payoff** - Accepting "small" hard things that build character and experience, even if they aren't "important" or "glamorous" or "visible".
5. **Things that challenge the cultural norm** - taking a stand against a culture that has adopted wrong values and beliefs, even when it risks rejection or injury (or worse).

Some Criticisms

I thought this was a *great* book. I intend to have my children read it. In fact, if I were still a church youth leader, I would be pushing the book and the whole "Rebelution" concept on my young people. The problem is, we as a "youth group" would be acting in opposition to the culturally inculcated "low expectations for teenagers" mindset held by the young people's parents, the rest of the adults in the church, and the ordained pastoral staff.



I've been there. I believe that the "Do Hard Things" movement is a reaction to the ["Already Gone" phenomenon](#) [3]. I have presented this problem, and the proposed solutions, to my church and was effectively dismissed with a yawn. Brett and Alex Harris target their own age peers with this message, which is necessary, because they probably won't get a hearing in an adult setting that is already fixed in their ideas of "how things should be done" and "what teenagers are like".

The book has an appendix, in which Alex presents the Gospel and recommendations for a new believer. One of these recommendations is "Find a church". Unfortunately, the likelihood of any such church having a culture, particularly in the youth ministry, of low expectations for teenagers, is very high. Now, I have some young acquaintances, and I know they need to be in supportive Christian peer groups, that is, a church youth group, and almost *any* such peer group is better than none at all. I just think it's a terrible shame that churches are so closely aligned with the surrounding culture on this "low expectations" issue. And with so many others.

The second point of concern reflects my own long-lived personal dilemma of "How Do You Serve God?" Do you:

- Strike out boldly on a plan of action, and ask God to bless it, or
- Wait on God in prayer for a vision or guidance, and then move out boldly on the assurance that it is God's direction and not merely your own invention

Almost all the examples and counsel of this book adopts the first path. In fact, other than "serving God" in some compassionate or religious capacity, there is no indication that a "hard thing" that a teenager should do is inquire fervently of God for what He wants him or her to do. It seems to be mostly adopting projects based on an emotional reaction to some encounter (e.g., pictures of starving Africans in a World Vision mailout).

But these minor observations aside, I thought that the book (and the website) are great resources, and I look forward to seeing where the Rebelution goes!

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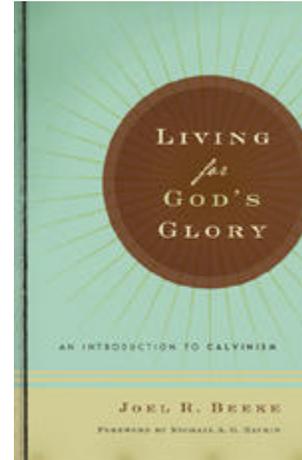
Turns out that Josh, Brett, and Alex Harris (and other siblings) are part of a *homeschool* family. No surprise. And the father, Gregg Harris, has done a Hard Thing of putting together a [nationwide seminar \[4\]](#) for helping adults, especially parents of teens, lead teenagers to Do Hard Things. I think that's a step in the right direction. We still have the disconnect between the homeschool world (adults who are most likely to attend, or even be aware, of a seminar like that) and the rest of the evangelical world.

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1. www.joshharris.com/i_kissed_dating_goodbye.php
 2. www.therebelution.com/books
 3. www.wnd.com/?pageId=100324
 4. dohardthingstogether.com
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June 12 2010: Calvinism

After maybe a year, with many distractions and priority realignments, I have finally finished this book, [Living for God's Glory](#), an Introduction to Calvinism [1]. I've been aware of the "Five Points of Calvinism", certainly knew that John Calvin was an enormously influential figure in Reformation Europe, and I've been hearing (statistics? research?) that younger people today are looking for a doctrinally robust faith to claim. Most significantly, R. C. Sproul, a prominent reform theologian of our day, has a radio program, [Renewing Your Mind](#) [2] in the morning, which sometimes I manage to catch; I greatly appreciate the clarity and precision that Dr. Sproul brings to his topics. I responded to the radio offer for this book.



As part of this "looking into Calvinism" effort, I discovered that there is a fellowship in Tucson that claims to be reformed or Calvinist. Now, I know there are many "reformed" churches in Tucson, including our neighborhood church, Rosemont Community Church, but they are "reformed" in the same way the PCUSA is - "reformed from reformed", and predominantly liberal. So I visited this fellowship and found that they are truly Calvinists - and in fact several have Dutch surnames. They are at the point of launching a church start... but, given what I have learned, while I wish them the best, I don't think I will be participating.

Calvinist Doctrine

I have been a Southern Baptist all my life, as were my parents, and nearly all the fellow Christians I have hung around. I suppose that Southern Baptists would be more associated with the Arminianist doctrine, since (from what I've seen) there is tremendous emphasis on evangelism with a view to getting someone to "make a decision". The general teaching I've received is that God has given us a free choice, that any constraint on that free choice would conflict with the willing love that God seeks from us. The doctrine of Atonement I've received is that Christ died for all, but this gift of His sacrifice is effective only for those who act to receive it.

Of course, these are propositions that Calvinists would reject. The difference is, I was offered these teachings as a matter of traditional Southern Baptist theology, *not* as a rejection of an alternative interpretation. The first section of this book is explicitly *that*; the Calvinist doctrines of

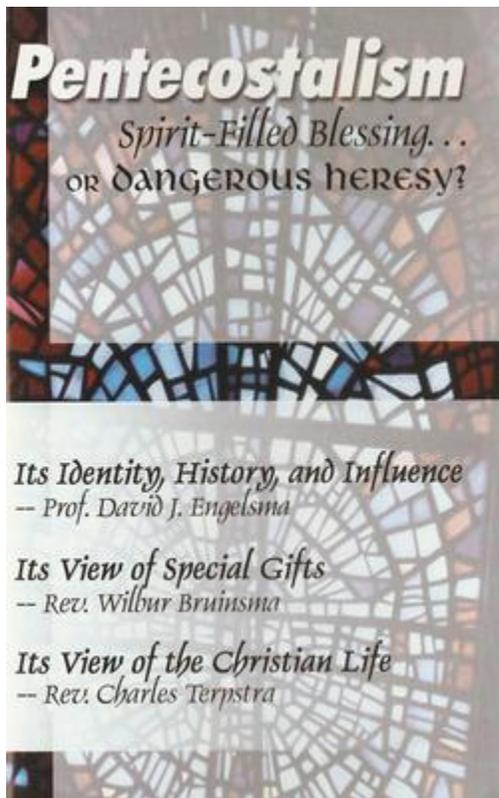
- Total Depravity
- Unconditional Election
- Limited Atonement
- Irresistable Grace
- Perseverance of the Saints

are presented *along with* arguments that Arminianism must be incorrect. It's like the Calvinists are still stuck in the theological arguments of the 1500s! And some of the arguments seem a bit specious. For instance:

Conditional election...robs God of His absolute sovereignty and glory. If we are as depraved as the Bible says we are, our salvation cannot originate with us. (p. 61)

Yet I can't imagine any Arminianist claiming that a person's exercise of free will is the "origin" of his salvation! If we are Christians, we understand that Christ is the originator of our salvation. This is setting up a strawman. In another place,

But if God can only do so much and not everything, then the person who completes the bridge gets at least some glory. (p. 84)



It seems that God has reached out light years with an offer of eternal life and joy, and man reaches out half an inch to accept it. The division between Arminianism and Calvinism comes down to that half inch - is it there, or isn't it. My problem with this situation is that I can see support for either position in Scripture, and I am willing to extend the concession of "maybe you're right". I want to focus on Christ and His finished work, not on whether half an inch of human free will is there or not. But some Calvinists are not willing to return the favour. I got [this little booklet](#) [3] about Pentecostalism from the little Calvinist group I visited, mostly because the mother of some of my young people is inclined that way, and wanted to take her kids to a United

Pentecostal Church (she is now rethinking that move, after encountering the attitude of "if you are really saved, you will speak in tongues"). The little booklet makes these statements:

This one fact, namely, that Pentecostalism is the development of Arminian theology and is itself consciously, avowedly, and thoroughly Arminian - this one fact all by itself conclusively proves that the entire Pentecostal/charismatic is not of God and of Jesus Christ. (p. 16)

If the gospel of Scripture is the message that man must save himself by his free will, Pentecostalism may possibly be a genuine movement of the Spirit. If the gospel of Scripture, however, is the message of sovereign grace - Calvinism - Pentecostalism is a spurious religious movement. Since the gospel is, in fact, the good news of grace, Pentecostalism is exposed as part of the great apostasy at the end of history that unites all the false churches and leads to Antichrist (p. 17)

What this says to me is that for Calvinists, some of them at least, it isn't

"believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved", it is really "believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and the teachings of John Calvin and you will be saved". To turn belief in the existence of a half-inch of human free will into the division between heaven and hell goes way past the clear teachings of Scripture and turns the "reformed" church into an exclusive cult.

There many things to admire about Calvinism, but this isn't one of them. I can't support a church that takes this attitude. It's supposed to be

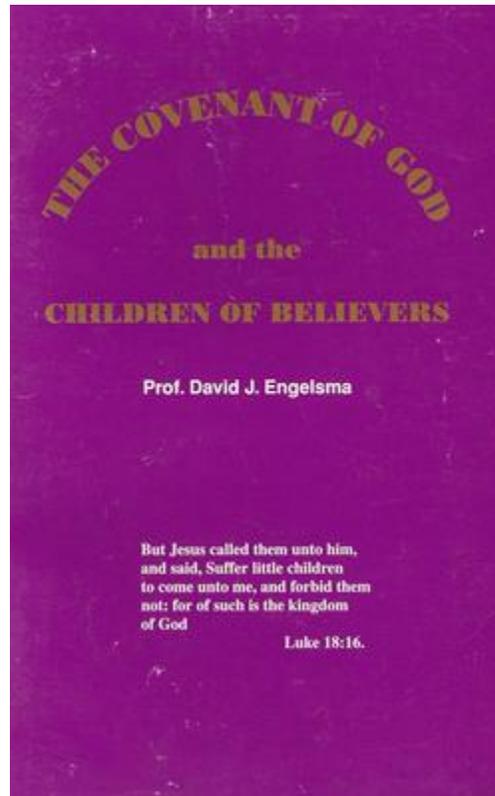
In the essentials, Unity
In the non-essentials, Liberty
In all things, Charity

Calvinist Extrabiblical Teaching

As a Southern Baptist, I am aware that some of our traditional teachings are extra-Biblical. Specifically the prohibition on alcohol. I think it is an excellent covenant as a church with each other to "refrain from the sale and partaking of intoxicating beverages". I think it is *WRONG* to read this into Scripture as a *sin*, and a point of judging others, and twisting Scripture to support this position, such as "Jesus didn't really drink wine, He just drank grape juice".

But we are finite human beings, prone to error. While I am calling BS on some church teachings I encounter (like the alcohol-is-sin business), I am sure I am infected myself. I am pretty sure that there are problems with my bitterness against the traditional church and its perceived ineffectiveness.

At the same time, it is amusing to see a movement like Calvinism, which prides itself on "Sola Scriptura" and "The Regulative Principle of Scripture" (don't do it if it isn't commanded), doing the *same thing* with infant baptism. Hey, I get it: The catholic church of Calvin's day baptized babies to keep them from Limbo should they die before being Confirmed - I'm sure Calvin's parishioners were similarly concerned for their children. But Scripture doesn't command infant baptism! So Calvinism takes Old Testament covenantal principles about newborn sons and applies them to children of church members. This in spite of the recognition that not all the children of church members will be elect; some will reject Christianity, in which case the baptism into the covenant means nothing [4].



As a Southern Baptist, I accept the clear teaching of Scripture that baptism is a conscious act of obedience to Christ and a celebration of His burial and resurrection - things impossible for infants. However, I regard this teaching as *non-essential*, and I'm not going to write off as a heretic any Catholic or Presbyterian or Calvinist if they believe otherwise yet demonstrate a sincere love for Christ and a pursuit of holiness.

Now, another section of the book treats historic Calvinist positions on "worship" practices such as music styles, singing hymns versus psalms, and preaching. Again, they take very dogmatic stances on these issues, but I am not going to write them off for these stances - only for the extent that they themselves write *other* traditions off for not upholding their interpretations of Scripture.

Calvinist Worldview

Now - the best of it.

I am a firm believer in worldview - both that everyone has one and lives it out unconsciously, and that people ought to consider their worldview assumptions and implications and live it out *consciously*. The one great tradition of Calvinism that I admire is their *intentionality* of living out their worldview. In fact, if the Calvinist tradition extended anything near the effort and influence on other Christian traditions in the cause of *Practical Application of Worldview* as they do for *theology and doctrine*, the overall state of the Christian Church would be much better.

The last section of the book explains how Calvinism applies a Christian Worldview to

- Marriage - the purpose of marriage, the selection of marriage partners, partnership and duties in the marital relationship, and, of course, sex - which denies the usual association of Puritans with "prudishness"
- Family - chain of authority and child-rearing goals and practices
- Vocation - the "Protestant Work Ethic", and how there is no division between "sacred" and "secular" vocations
- Civic Duty - the right way to be politically active
- Ethics - Application of God's Law and the place of individual conscience

While I don't necessarily agree with all these historic Calvinist positions on Worldview, I certainly applaud their recognition that Christianity has to affect one's life beyond Sunday Morning. I believe that the greatest contribution of Calvinism to the Church and indeed the world is not so much the theological doctrines about total depravity and unconditional election and limited atonement as it is the *commitment reinforced by pastoral teaching and the covenant of the church to live one's life consistently with the Truth*. This is perhaps the greatest need for the Church and Christians in the West today.

Summary

The book was hard reading; it was not "Calvinism for Dummies", but it wasn't the full-blown *Institutes*, either. This book, along with the encounter with living Calvinists, leaves me in the position of rejecting historical "reformed" Calvinism but being open to a modified, updated, "tolerant" Calvinism. I think I could accept the tenets of Calvinism

(i.e., "TULIP") with the understanding that, while consistent and a good basis for a healthy Christian fellowship, they are nonetheless *non-essential* teachings that true Christians can reasonably disagree over. I think we could throw out traditions and reactions such as infant baptism and "worship" practices and remain faithful with a "Sola Scriptura" guiding principle. And I think I would *jump at the chance* to be part of a church that *PRACTICES WHAT THEY PREACH* in maintaining a consistent and thorough-going Christian Worldview!

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1. www.ligonier.org/store/living-for-gods-glory-an-hardcover/?gclid=COOnRtLirm6ICFZdL5Qod032Wwg
 2. www.ligonier.org/rym
 3. www.prca.org/pamphlets/pamphlet_91a.html
 4. www.prca.org/pamphlets/pamphlet_51.html
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May 15 2010: Church Music

When we first joined Central Baptist Church, they had a choir. Didn't have robes like this choir, of course, but it did what church choirs do - special music, with the audience passively listening. In other words, *entertaining*. For the first (and probably last) time in my life, I voluntarily participated in the choir. Looking back, it *was* a "worship"



experience to some extent - at least emotionally; I "felt" closer to God, even at choir practice. It seems that now, I am more inclined to a sterner analysis, although not necessarily condemning the "church choir" phenomenon.

As we are visiting other area churches, we find that almost none have choirs. The rule is now, "praise teams", consisting of contemporary instruments (which means, no organs) and a group of singers on the

stage, each with their own microphone, with no obvious attempt at vocal harmonization. However, Central Baptist migrated this same way (particularly after the "Element" startup attempt was folded into the legacy Central operation), and once again, briefly, I was part of the "praise team" by playing piano. I say "briefly" because my original intent in music was (a) a point of shared activity in the youth ministry that was focused on God, and (b) praising God ourselves, as musicians. I knew that once we started performing in the "worship service", I would be back in the mode of *entertainment*.

And worse, *enabling a shallow church-centric complacency*, or even tacitly endorsing it. By this I mean:

We may be losing younger and middle-age families, we may be seeing our teenagers fall away from our faith and values, we may be incapable of reaching our neighborhood and we may not have seen a baptism in years, we may be theologically and historically illiterate (except in our own indefensible denominational prejudices), and our lives may not reflect a Christian worldview during the week, but we still get together on Sunday Morning, we have a great praise team and a moving music service, our pastor reliably delivers a quality sermon every week, and we pull in enough money to pay the bills and salaries, so *all is right with the world*, and we don't need to be concerned about how our church is going, certainly not to the point of praying about it.

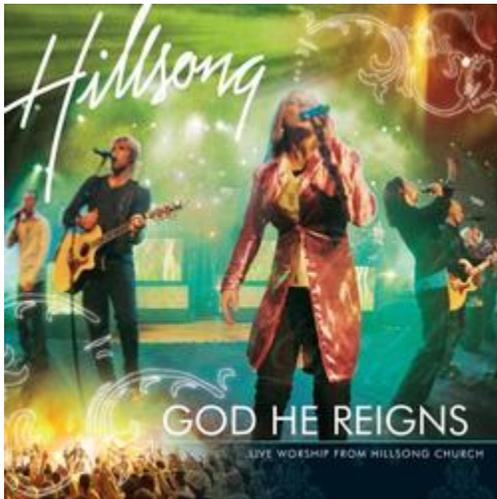
Last month on the [linux4christians](#) [1] mailing list, we had a discussion about finding hymn music on the internet, since the contemporary music in churches and the radio was so vapid and uninspiring. Even bluegrass is preferable to modern "worship" songs. I will also note that some of the ones taking this position of "hymns are superior" also make the off-topic conservative political posts to the list. I will also point out that the old accusation of "hymns are theologically deep and contemporary songs are so shallow" cannot be sustained given a comparison of Third Day's [Creed](#) [2] and the old hymn [I Come To The Garden Alone](#) [3]. But all that is beside the point, which is, people who express a preference for hymns over contemporary songs fail to recognize:

- Their choice reflects *what they like*, what they prefer, what *entertains* them, not what serves God's kingdom, or what

missionally connects with the surrounding culture

- Once upon a time, *those hymns were contemporary songs!* And they reflected the culture of the time - probably because Christianity influenced the culture more than it does now.

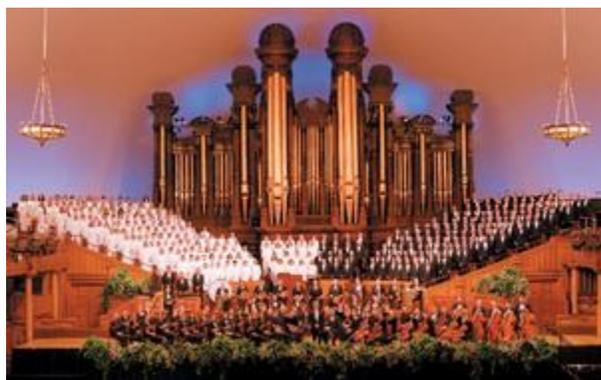
This, of course, is *precisely* the problem - Christianity does not influence the culture's music. All the influence is from the outside in, which perturbs the traditionally-minded. Praise teams are all and exclusively about the church worship service. They don't get outside.



For instance, Hillsong is the praise team for Hill Church in Sidney, Australia. It is a tremendous production. Hillsong produces CDs and live videos that are sold in Christian bookstores all over the English-speaking world, and maybe beyond. But it is *Christian* focused, it is set in a *church worship service*, and while most in the Christian subculture may know what Hillsong is and who Darlene Zschech is, few to none outsiders will.

Choirs, on the other hand, are distinctively "Christian", and some do have some influence on the larger culture. The robed choir above is part of [Knox Presbyterian Church \[4\]](#) in New Zealand. They advertise in their community for people who may want to participate, and they televise specials in New Zealand and the BBC. Now, their repertoire is old stuff - classics and sacred music - so one could argue that they are just appealing to the Christian subculture and traditionalists, just like Hillsong does in their own way. But they at least have a mind to the world beyond Sunday morning.

On the other hand, there is the Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir. They *don't* do old stuff or traditional sacred music, and their styles mesh closely with the cultures represented in New York City. They perform in public, and I've seen their CDs at Walmart. Doubtless the Choir "performs" in the Sunday morning "worship service", but now (if not at first, perhaps, and as a result of God's blessing rather than human intentionality) they have popular and cultural influence beyond.



Similarly, the Mormon Tabernacle Choir is practically iconic in American culture. Not popular culture, to be sure; popular culture is not too taken with choirs (and thus the limitation on the usefulness of the church choir), but traditionalists and audiophiles are certainly aware of this world-famous

operation. The LDS is very good at image and cultural influence; too bad about the validity of their truth claims. If the Christian church could mix the truth of the Gospel and the apply the Christian Worldview regarding cultural influence... well, I would be writing a doxology right now, not a critique!

Now, missionally speaking, it is the Wrong Idea to try to polish up our little subcultural expression on Sunday morning in order to entice outsiders to come in - although that is exactly what we are trying to do with our "praise team" concept. Rather, we need to understand the culture in which we live and meet them there musically; or, better, encourage and equip believing representatives of that surrounding culture to do it "organically". It certainly won't work if we try to force the surrounding culture into our mold of "appropriate" hymns and whatever was actually culturally relevant 100 years ago or more.

Okay, that might be "missional", or outward focused. Does music play

no part in our own worship, to build up believers already in the church? Certainly it does. However, we need to be wary of a few things:

- Worship is more than Sunday morning. If a thirty-minute dose of God-honoring music is good, how much more a steady diet during the week? The effort should not all go into a *entertainment performance* activity on Sunday morning; the church should push resources and encouragement for week-long lifestyle application.
- Hymns are good. I've got some favorites myself ("Beneath the Cross"). But let's be honest in recognizing personal preference and nostalgia. The "hymns are superior" position is just as legalistic as the "King James Version only" position. As Christians who should be living out our Worldview to participate in the larger culture, we should not be isolating ourselves into our own peculiar little subculture. What styles *are* the taste of the culture that surrounds us?
- Music isn't just for consumption, but for production. Developing an instrumental or vocal talent is perhaps more powerful in praising our God and conforming to His image than just listening to the radio or CD player. Furthermore, if it is just for our family, or our smallgroup, and we aren't anxious about performing before large groups, then our focus is more on God and less on ourselves. Plus, our neighbors are more likely to hear it!

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I know it isn't music, but my family went to see a play by [Waypoint Theatre \[5\]](#), a Christian drama company in Tucson. It started as the drama ministry in a major church, but emerged into activity beyond the Sunday morning service. Drama is a tremendous means of approaching the culture, especially in a drama-aware culture like Tucson's. Yes, they are small, and most of the people in the audience were older, "church" people, but that can change with financial support, opportunity, leadership, and (most importantly) prayer and God's blessing. If



Waypoint becomes as well-known in Tucson as the Gaslight or Invisible Theatre or the Arizona Theatre Company, I would like to have been part of that! Furthermore, not all their efforts are put into their productions; they work with schools and youth organizations around the city. Very interesting. Very encouraging.

Of course, what I could say about hymns and praise teams could apply to church orchestras, which we have observed at some of the larger churches. These little orchestras currently exist purely for the entertainment of the Sunday morning crowd, and/or as part of a Big Show to impress unbelieving visitors. How much better if a staff music leader could set aside the traditional focus on the Sunday morning service and put together an orchestra drawn from the talents of the broader Christian community across the city, and perform classical or otherwise Christian Worldview-affirming popular selections at the Convention Center, or better, at the Reid Park Bandshell with free admission? Wow... let's influence our city for God, and honor His name among the people, rather than just try to entice them into "our" church service!

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1. www.thelinuxlink.net/pipermail/linux4christians/2010-April/007816.html
2. ["www.lyricsmode.com/lyrics/t/third_day/creed.html](http://www.lyricsmode.com/lyrics/t/third_day/creed.html)
3. www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/i/t/g/itgarden.htm
4. www.knoxchurch.net/Choir.html
5. www.waypoint-theatre.org

May 1 2010: Parachurch Ministries



Jerri and I recently attended a marriage and parenting conference presented by Dr. Randy Carlson of Family Life Communications and [Intentional Living \[1\]](#). The conference was pretty good, both from a marriage (why we went) and a parenting (we are almost done with that, in the "young children" sense that was

presented) perspective. It was also very well attended; Christ Community Church has a very large auditorium, and it was packed out. It also had fruit beyond the marriage and parenting emphasis; at the end, Carlson made what amounts to an "altar call", and a fair number responded.

Of course, there were lots of resources for sale, and brisk business during breaks and lunch. The website is fairly good... except I note that "Intentional Living" includes several categories - Family, Finances, Work, Health, and Faith - but none of this appears on the website (unlike the purposedrivenchurch.com site which at least explains what Purpose Driven Church is about). In fact, probably the next thing Intentional Living could do is organize a network of local affinity groups, to practice the Intentional teachings together and hold each other accountable, and that sort of thing. You know, *small groups*, to put a practical impetus behind the speaking and the writing and the videos.



Afterwards, I was reflecting that there are other family or marriage or parenting ministries, like Focus on the Family and Marriage Savers. In

fact, there are a number of parachurch organizations like this that specialize in areas of Christian life and work, such as

- Music/Worship (recording houses, bands, radio stations or networks)
- Service (Samaritan's Purse, Habitat for Humanity (well, at least formerly), rescue missions)
- Missions (Wycliffe, Overland Missions, Global Mission Fellowship)
- Apologetics (Probe, Answers in Genesis, Stand to Reason)
- Prison Ministries (Prison Fellowship, International Prison Ministries)
- Collegiate Ministries (Campus Crusade, Fellowship of Christian Athletes)
- Youth Ministries (Young Life, Youth With A Mission, Teen Challenge)
- Children's Ministries (Child Evangelism Fellowship, AWANA)
- Discipleship (Navigators, The Truth Project, Centurions)

And so forth. From one point of view, these ministries start up in response to a crisis, a problem that the traditional church, or local church, or denomination is failing to address. For instance, it is established that divorce is just as prevalent within the Christian church as outside, in spite of sermons and Bible studies and Sunday School lessons for decades, and Dr. Carlson and Dr. Dobson have started ministries to address this issue. Or, from another point of view, these ministries represent *specialization*, individuals with a passion and a gift joining together across church or denominational lines to do more than any individual church could do. In which case, the best thing that a given church could do is recognize and catalog these ministries and promote them and encourage members to utilize their services and participate in their ministries if they are so led.

Some churches do this, to an extent. The fact that Christ Community Church hosted the conference indicates that the pastoral staff recognizes the value. First Southern Baptist once hosted a (much smaller) Marriage Savers conference. Most churches, however, *don't do this*. In most cases, the ministry has to contact the church and *ask* that their services be mentioned. In most cases (so far as I've seen), the pastor doesn't bother. Maybe he's too busy preparing his sermons and lessons. Maybe he doesn't want to be "ecumenical" or cooperate with other churches who might "steal" his members. Maybe he just doesn't think the ministry is valuable or his members have a need for

it. Maybe he thinks the sermons and Sunday School lessons are all his members need for life and practice (in spite of evidence to the contrary). All I know is, in churches that I've been in, or speaking with other Christians in other churches attempting to do the same thing, when we approach the pastor with an opportunity, such as a concert or a conference or a lecture or whatever it may be, the best we get is "post it on the bulletin board", or "you can make an announcement".

So if the local church is not succeeding in making disciples - retaining young people in the faith, reinforcing struggling marriages, teaching believers to live out a Christian Worldview - and in fact these activities are being performed *better* by parachurch ministries, what is the institutional church good for? Is it just Sunday Morning Religious Entertainment, and an exercise in comfortable old denominational traditions?

Now, I note that "The Church" - the Body of Christ - is not identical with "the institutional church". Those parachurch ministries? Yep - part of the Body. Part of the CHURCH. Serving the Lord Jesus, in most cases more intentionally and more effectively than what we have come to identify as "the church".

Tithes and Offerings: Which gets me to another line of thought: If the parachurch ministries are being more effective than the local church, where should my charitable contributions be directed? From the point of view that my tithes and offerings (even granting that "tithes" is appropriate in a New Testament context, which is *not* certain) are *investments* in eternity, what is the best investment I could make? Is it to pay salary and benefits for a full-time staff at a church and amortize and maintain a building and property, or a set of specialized ministries whose areas of service I understand (and perhaps am gifted in) and my research demonstrates a proven track record of effectively producing life-change in believers and unbelievers?

I know our evangelical "rule of thumb" (for which I see little Scriptural support) is to give a tithe to my local church, and then gifts and offerings beyond the tithe to whatever charities to which I am led. Now, I am reconsidering that cultural upbringing, in light of my exposure to ministries like Intentional Living and Young Life, which are doing things that my local church cannot - or will not - do.

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April 3 2010: Easter Service Motives

Tomorrow is Easter.

Christian churches all over America will be doing something special; a big flashy service, and perhaps a "dawn" service out somewheres. Some have already held special services, likely a Good Friday service.

More people will attend church services on Christmas and Easter than any other time. The church doesn't mean anything to them the rest of the time, but they make the effort on Easter.

Why?

Tradition: Maybe those C&E "christians" feel the need to affirm their "christian" identity. Maybe churches that have held elaborate Easter services since always think they always have to. Or they find comfort and satisfaction in doing things like they have always been done.

Wherefore the Lord said, Forasmuch as this people draw near me with their mouth, and with their lips do honour me, but have removed their heart far from me, and their fear toward me is taught by the precept of men.

Isaiah 29:13

I hate, I despise your feast days, and I will not delight in your solemn assemblies.

Amos 5:21

Tradition is the worst possible reason for doing anything. Doing the right things for the wrong reason is worse to God than not doing them at all.

Liturgy: Perhaps a church believes that doing things in a formulaic or liturgical manner benefits the celebrants. We recently attended a "reformed" church in which the pastor wore a robe and supplice, the music minister played the organ, and people addressed us with "Peace be to you" and other phrases that they would not use in normal life or even outside of the service. In some churches, "prayers" are canned, and read out of a book. Liturgy is similar to tradition, but I think it is different in that the practitioners want to honor God, and they think doing things in this traditional way honors God. I get the same thing from Baptist churches who think you ought to dress up on Sunday to "honor God". But I would say that doing things for this reason is not as good as repentance and conforming ourselves to God; that is, *actually* seeking and honoring God, and not just doing things that we think or hope or have been trained to believe honor God.

Besides, it runs the risk of doing things because it bestows a sacred or spiritual *feeling*. Yes, we are to worship God with our hearts (emotions), but to worship *God Himself*, not some gooey sacred emotions that we desire.

Evangelism: With all those people who don't usually come, pastors of evangelical churches want to take advantage of the opportunity to try and win some souls. In fact, members are encouraged to bring unbelieving friends and neighbors to the Easter service. A lot of the special pageantry of the bigger-than-usual Easter service is intended to impress unbelievers with... something about God.

It's hard to knock an evangelistic emphasis at Easter. This is, after all, even more than Christmas, the **HEART** of the Christian faith. All the same, I wish we could make an evangelistic case without turning it into a sales job. Many (most?) evangelical church services are sales jobs for unbelievers. Make the case, teach the lesson, make it clear, and move on. Let the Spirit do the convicting work, not the orchestra or the 110-voice choir in their blue robes or the dancing clowns. Besides, if the unbelievers don't see the Truth active in the lives of the friends who brought them, it is unlikely they will be more impressed by the Sunday morning show.

So I believe (again, from a discipleship point of view) that Easter activities, even with unbelievers present, should be geared to confirming the truth of Easter for the *believers*, to encourage them to

Live It during the week, after the big show on Sunday Morning is over. The first Easter was an event for the *believers*. The unbelievers got their serving a few weeks later at Pentecost. From the transformed believers.

Acquire Members: Again, with all that fresh blood in the audience, I think churches often put on a special show to entice visitors to come back. Which, when you think about it, is kind of self-defeating. So if you get someone to come back, and you don't put on an equally big show next time, don't you think they will feel bait-and-switched?

I'm getting less favorable toward "worship services" all the time. As we visit churches in the area, they put on a big show on Sunday Morning, and then we get people coming up to us afterwards saying, "thanks for visiting, I hope you *enjoyed* the service." To which I want to now say, if *our enjoyment* was the purpose of what we just did, then we totally missed the point, didn't we?

I also can't help the impression I get, when we visit a church service, that because we Americans or Westerners have the idea that "Success = Numbers", we will be successful if we get more joiners. The greeters and the pastor smile and shake our hands and engage in a bit of obsequious small-talk, rather than seriously ask why we came, what we are after, and what membership in this church really means (versus how it could *benefit me*). I really appreciate the tiny minority of churches who give us a useful information packet or invite us to an orientation meeting (a la Purpose-Driven 101) where we can learn more about what the church *is* than some post-entertainment emotional impression after the Sunday Morning service.

(On the other hand, I don't at all appreciate being virtually ignored as a visitor. Not much says "religious club" more than a fellowship that is only marginally interested in your presence. We've seen a few like that so far.)

Grow Closer to Jesus: This is what it's about, isn't it? More than an intellectual response to a sermon which will fade within hours of leaving - which isn't any different on Easter Sunday than on any other Sunday. Certainly much more than the emotional high which will pass as soon as you get home afterwards: "Ah, that was a great service, wasn't it? Now, where's my chocolate bunny...". Rather, the equipping of a decision to live to please God, to sacrifice my own interests to

serve His, to live even just this week, until next Sunday, with a Christian world-view.

But how to do that? I'd say, if it isn't *designed* to be entertaining, if it involves some discomfort or sacrifice such that it really is focused on serving God, not ourselves, if there is an effective teaching, if there is a vehicle for commitment, then it has the best shot.

By these criteria, the "dawn" service is the clear winner. Got to get up early, skip breakfast maybe. Stand in the cold morning breeze on a hilltop somewhere, or a damp graveyard. No instruments, no gimmicks.

Last year, Central Baptist held a dawn service at Eastlawn Cemetery. Except for the trumpet player and the refreshments provided by the Eastlawn staff (as free advertising - why else would a funeral home have printed cocktail napkins?), it was pretty good. I can't say that only those church members who were serious about Jesus bothered to come, but it was definitely a small group that included the "core".

Beyond that, I would say that Holy Week "services" are potential, as long as the temptation to formalize them (into liturgical observances) can be resisted. I think some emerging churches have got the right idea; meet in a home, have a teaching or discussion about what the day means, make some commitments, have a Good Friday communion meal.

So I really don't think the Big Show Sunday Morning Easter Service is good for much. But I'm sure we will go to one.