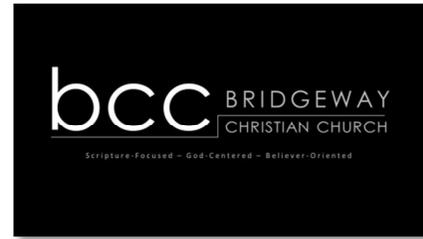


Pastor's Papers | Ronald H. Gann
Ministry/Church

Preaching vs. Performance

A Critical Assessment Of Church Ministry In America (Part 1)
(Extracted From *Fa\$T-Food Churchianity*; Ronald H. Gann [Aventine Press, 2009])

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Robin and I were married for less than six months when we had our first squabble over church ministry. It happened one Sunday morning as she was in the bathroom sprucing up her hair and makeup in a frantic race against the clock. I sat impatiently in the living room with my Bible in hand, peeking grudgingly at the clock while the car warmed up in the garage. We were both weary from the sleepless night before, but her blank expression told me that there was another story behind her doldrums. She was perturbed, that much was certain, but it had little to do with sleep deprivation. Usually an early riser with gallons of gusto, my wife went about this particular morning in a spell of listlessness. I tried to convince myself otherwise, but deep down I knew the culprit responsible for her dampened spirits was me. It would make for a long ride to church, to be sure.

The awkwardness of our morning was kick-started only fifteen minutes earlier when I approached her in the bathroom with a wily smile on my face and a hidden agenda up my sleeve. The bathroom was littered with makeup tackle, a wet bath towel and facecloth thrown about, crumples of Kleenex stained with makeup residue, and a flatiron simmering next to the sink. The room had all the trappings of womanhood scattered about the place. As a rule, I stayed clear from her estrogen lair on most mornings, fully convinced that it was a place where even angels fear to tread. But on this particular Sunday my instincts got the best of me. I had something important to discuss with my wife.

“Morning, hon,” I greeted.

She was ruffling through her cosmetics bag when I entered; her attention preoccupied with its contents more so than with me. “Good morning,” she said.

I tested the waters carefully. “Where do you want to go for lunch today after church?”

Our conversation gradually picked up from there. I listened with only one ear as she went on about our day’s agenda. She dabbed powder and paint to her cheekbones and talked endlessly about times and places, schedules and sporting events, as well as relatives we were inclined to visit. But I could have cared less. My nerves were restless. I pretended to listen studiously but all the while I was secretly negotiating how to broach the sensitive subject I had up my sleeve.

Finally, when it seemed as though she had spoke her mind, I rallied my courage. Looking over her shoulder and into the mirror, I began to rub her shoulders manipulatively: “Hon, I want to run something by you, if you have a minute.”

The mascara on the counter held her attention, but she responded politely; “Of

course.”

I knew all too well that tact and diplomacy were two shortcomings of mine for as long as I could remember so I fought hard to find the right words to disarm her. I waited until our eyes met in the mirror. “Robin,” I began solemnly, “I’ve been thinking long and hard about something and I want your thoughts on the matter. But just hear me out before you say anything.”

Seeing that I was serious-minded, her curiosity was piqued. “What is it?”

It wasn’t long before my tact soon gave way to a bungled tongue. I blurted abruptly, “I think we should consider finding a *new* church.”

Had it not been for the car’s engine choking in the garage, I could have heard a pin drop at that very moment. She was silent. What seemed like an eternity was, in reality, only seconds before she broke away from her mascara to collect her composure.

Find a new church? What’s wrong with our church? Her vacant expression spoke volumes of protest. In retrospect, I can’t say that I really blamed her.

What I was suggesting was, in her mind, virtually unconscionable. Essentially, I was asking my wife—a former Roman Catholic, born and raised—to forsake virtually the only evangelical church she had known since becoming a born-again Christian. I was suggesting that she forsake the church that had become her *fellowship hall* where she had established relationships with others long before I was ever a part of her life. I was suggesting that she forsake the church that had become her personal *concert hall* where she first fell in love with contemporary praise music. Alas, I was asking her to forsake the church that served as her *emotional clinic* during some of the most difficult and painful times of her adult life. And now there I stood, invoking my spiritual headship at the most inopportune moment, asking her to give all that up on a curious whim.

Her response was incredulous. She returned the mascara to her makeup bag and turned toward me hesitantly. “What do you mean? Are you serious?”

Sadly, I was.

Our church wasn’t a *bad* church, per se, and its leadership staff—particularly Pastor Hank¹—was far from ungodly. Taken as a whole, it was a good group of people to associate with every Sunday. Thus, I was under no illusion that Robin would embrace my proposition wholeheartedly and without objection.

I knew her thoughts before she could voice them. It stood to reason: If our church was basically a “good” church and its leaders worthy of respect, what then were the biblical grounds for me to take my family and run? Even worse, how would our leaving the church affect its standing in the eyes of others who regarded our opinion with great authority? Was I prepared to give a biblical defense for our decision which was sure to be perceived as divisive? Could I simply write-off our church as though it was expendable like a used car? Did I think I could just trade it in for a new one because I was bored with the ride?

Although the questions loomed in my wife’s mind, my confidence didn’t falter. My issue was not with Pastor Hank *as a pastor*, I assured her. Indeed, I found him to be an impressive gentleman whose love for the lost and personal holiness was virtually unparalleled among the local clergy. What’s more, I respected his no-nonsense approach toward leadership. He was practically a lone-ranger, as far as I could tell, responsible for shepherding a conglomerate of people and overseeing an imposing organization that saw countless individuals walk through its corridors each weekend; a man who was

compelled to wear several hats and have multiple pokers in the fire simultaneously. He was, for all intents and purposes, a pastor, an executive, a preacher, a missionary, a counselor, and a prophet, so to speak. And he performed his duties admirably for 24-hours a day and 365 days a year for over two decades without waver. And for that alone he had earned my high opinion.

Our church had a great story to tell as well, which made my proposal all that more difficult to consider. What originally started out as one married couple fresh off the plane from out-of-state twenty-five years earlier was now one of the largest and most well-known churches in the area, boasting somewhere in the neighborhood of over eight hundred attendees on any given Sunday. With its multimillion dollar property holdings and stock investments, including a thriving Christian school and a missionary program that spanned the borders of Eastern Europe, the church had become a booming bureaucracy. And Pastor Hank, the founding pastor, was largely responsible for it all.

So what gave me pause about the church? The answer is simple really. Notwithstanding my admiration for its business achievements and popularity, I had come to terms with the ugly realization that the church's philosophy of ministry was predominately entertainment-driven. In other words, it was a "performance church" where the production value every Sunday was as important, if not more so, as the preaching that came from the pulpit. Vanished amid the extravaganza of pop-music, guitar solos, commercial videos, soloists, and mime dancing was a theocentric atmosphere where the Word of God was elevated and proclaimed intelligibly. To my way of thinking, reverence and awe were sorely deficient in the service.

Moreover, sound theological teaching gave way to tickling but ineffective Bible-speak. Pastor Hank's preaching was largely inconsequential to the believer. To put it bluntly, it was insufferable. And I was not alone in my harsh criticism. It was not uncommon for many serious-minded Christians to leave the Sunday service scratching their heads in confusion, aimlessly speculating about the point of the message. Pastor Hank's teaching was often unstructured and discombobulated and, for lack of better words, virtually forgettable.² One individual confessed their frustration to me in terms that I will not forget: "There is no spiritual fertilizer sprinkled on the sermon to nourish one's passion for the Bible nor is there food for thought to feast on during the week." And I agreed with that sentiment. Surprisingly, the Bible seemed to be a postscript to the preaching; referenced merely in passing to borrow spiritual credibility or to liven up the PowerPoint slides.

I was left to my own devices to determine what it was that drove the people back again each Sunday. Was it the compulsion of the Holy Spirit that kept them coming? Perhaps it was the lasting friendships? I didn't think either was the case; for the Holy Spirit will not bless that which is not preached and simply saluting a familiar face out of a sea of hundreds in the church corridor is no substitute for genuine relationships. And this frustrated me to no end. What the church lacked in solid preaching and authentic fellowship I soon realized was compensated for with glitz and glamour that tickled the senses of its visitors. It was a glossy church, so to speak, rather than a traditional church. It was the vast production on Sunday morning with its goose bumps-inducing hubbub that kept the people returning *en masse*.

"I don't understand," Robin said, appearing more upset than curious. Her voice wavered. "What's wrong with our church? Why do you want us to leave?"

I cleared my throat nervously. “I want you to think about it for second, hon. What is it that you like about our church the most? What draws you there?”

We both knew the answer to that question. “The worship,” she responded.

“Yes, the worship band, of course,” I said. “What else?”

Robin turned into a defense attorney before my very eyes and started pleading her case on behalf of the client. “The people,” she exclaimed.

“Yes, the worship band and the people,” I retorted. “Let’s talk about that for a second. During our worship service, Robin—when we’re supposed to be focusing our heart and minds on the adoration of God and preparing our hearts for the Word of God to come—where should my attention be?”

My wife became annoyed, as though I were insulting her intelligence. “On God,” she said. “We know that.”

“Then tell me,” I said, “why is the lead guitarist in our worship band allowed to perform a three-fingered Eddie Van Halen guitar solo during *How Great Thou Art*? Since when did guitar solos become suitable for church worship, let alone for centuries-old Christian hymns? Shenanigans like that make worship man-centered, Robin. It draws our attention away from the adoration and reverence of God and onto the musician showboating his talent. And the worst part about it all is that it’s deliberate! It’s an act purposely crafted by the service director to woo and awe the audience—an audience, I might add, that is more influenced by *American-Idol* than the Bible. It’s a distraction device meant to entertain goats, which robs God of His due glory!”

There was only silence on her end. She struggled to find another piece of evidence to point to that would contradict me. I waited a few seconds so as to not appear too aggressive and then finally interjected: “What happened to turning our hearts toward God and the exaltation of the *Bible*?”

She paused. “What about it?”

“Our church is popular, there’s no question about it,” I said cautiously. “But can you honestly tell me it’s a Bible church? Tell me what you have learned about God’s Word and Jesus Christ in the past six months since we’ve been married and attending this church. I’ll even settle for the last year. Tell me what you’ve learned about Jesus Christ that you haven’t already learned from me, or from your own devotional studies, or from others outside of the church.”

I knew she’d struggle with the challenge. I wasn’t hoping to win an argument inasmuch as I simply wanted to speak truth into her life as her husband. I’m thankful to have a wife who leans heavily on me as her personal pastor and for her spiritual edification. At the same time, I also recognize that not all of her spiritual nourishment can come from me, as limited as I am. Her growth must be mined from her own disciplines of study as well, and from the corporate setting on Sunday. And it was glaringly obvious to us both, whether she cared to admit it or not, that our current church was lacking horribly in this regard.

“Robin,” I said softly, returning my hand to her shoulder to comfort her. “I fear that you are attracted to our church because of the allure of the performance you enjoy every Sunday; the terrific music and the excellence of the presentation. But if we’re not drawing closer to Jesus through his Word, is that really the place we need to be? I guess what I’m saying is that our church—as comfortable as it is to us—is too performance-driven rather than Bible-driven. And if you’re as honest about it as I’m trying to be, I

think you'll admit the same. Instead, we both know that we attend for the very same reasons almost everyone else does; because our friends are there and because of the impressive show we get free-of-charge. Our church makes Christianity seem cool and contemporary. It tastes great, but it's spiritually less-filling."

My wife shot back, "What's wrong with going to a place where the worship is exciting and the people are friendly? There are prayer groups at church, mid-week worship and Bible studies, and weekly Communion services. Isn't that what church is all about, Ron?"

I paused briefly so as to not appear too anxious. I made every effort to appear even-handed. "Actually not entirely," I said, "That's only three of the four key ingredients that's listed in Acts 2:42. We're still missing *the most important one of them all.*"

My wife grew increasingly perturbed. "I don't know what you're saying."

"Let me explain," I defended. "In Acts 2:42 the Bible says that the early Church '*devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.*' In other words, we learn from this text that Bible study, fellowship, the sacraments, and prayer and worship are to comprise the universal philosophy of ministry for any church. I admit to you that our church meets most of that criterion. But the first and most important component in the sequence is missing, specifically 'the apostles' teaching'... *Bible study!*"

It was at this juncture that my wife's uncanny silence set in and our morning turned helter-skelter. But I continued my fight: "Hon, if we don't get the 'apostles' teaching' every Sunday, but only treated to a musical concert, is it therefore so unreasonable to conclude that we're not being fed appropriately? We're starving for a steady diet of meat, and instead all we're getting is two-percent milk dressed in a lightshow and fireworks."

My wife stood at the bathroom sink in abject silence, signaling that our conversation had come to an end, at least for the time being. And I respected her wish. I returned to the living room where I waited patiently for her to finish her makeup.

I had been reticent to share my concerns with her early on in our marriage, or with anyone else for that matter, on account that we were still settling in to our new lives. Having relocated to her neck of the woods from across the country only eight or nine months earlier, I felt that I had little right to upend her world more than I already had. But it was my church now and, as her newlywed husband and the high priest of the family, I had a responsibility to guide us where I felt God was leading. Moreover, I had a responsibility to be honest to myself.

Robin continued to struggle with my proposal for the next few months before eventually having a change of heart—a decision, I might add, that she arrived at entirely on her own through prayer and study. God guided her through a marvelous transition concerning church life where she eventually came to differentiate between the performance-driven church and that which is Bible-driven. To her, the proper worship of God and the need for in-depth Bible teaching became a must-have for the corporate setting. Before long, she saw our church for what it was: A group of godly people whose demotion of the Bible and promotion of performance gave us biblical cause to move on.

Preaching vs. Performance

No *natural* hallucinogenic proves more effective in manipulating the human psyche than the art of music. Recent clinical studies demonstrate that music is an ideal stimulant for the mentally disturbed which can bridge the psychological gap between reality and fantasy. Similarly, to the mentally depressed, it is often a prescribed opiate that balances one's frame of mind.³ Not surprisingly, nearly all colleges and universities today offer degrees in *music therapy*, and most hospitals employ a *music therapist* on staff. It seems that even when minds are closed to all else, music can break down the emotive barriers of even the most hardened mind.

In the simplest terms, music is seductive. It compels us to laugh or cry, to reflect upon the past or to dream into the future, to spark feelings of terror or serenity, to fight or make love, to fantasize or arouse, and often gauges our emotional temperature. Music can usher in tranquility with a sympathetic note from the violin or whip us into an emotional foot-stomping frenzy with the beat of a drum. To the old, it can trigger feelings of nostalgia and melancholy; to the young an adrenaline-packed rush of excitement. And, when used appropriately, music can be a powerful tool in governing our hearts toward God in worship. Martin Luther observed the following:

Beautiful music is the art of the prophets that can calm the agitations of the soul; it is one of the most magnificent and delightful presents God has given us ... Next to the Word of God, the noble art of music is the greatest treasure in the world.⁴

The Bible is unambiguous concerning music's importance. It is recognized as a means for praise (Acts 16:25; Rom. 15:9), expressing joy (James 5:13), thanksgiving (Psa. 92:1-3), sorrow for sin (Isa. 16:10), prayer (1 Cor. 14:15; Psa. 72:20), and is also a conduit through which spiritual truths are to be taught (Col. 3:16; Eph. 5:19). The Psalter alone yields an impressive collection of melody and song which serve historically as a hymnal to observant Jews and the Christian Church alike. In the Old Testament, David calmed a restless King Saul by playing the melodic harp. In the New Testament, the Church is commanded not merely to worship in prayer, but to uplift her voice "with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs" (Col 3:16; Eph 5:19).

Not surprisingly, music's ability to hypnotize human emotions is not lost on Purpose-Driven and seeker-sensitive pastors. They recognize that it is the essential ingredient in attracting an irreligious audience infatuated with the trappings of pop-culture. It is of little wonder, then, that many churches today mimic *MTV* or *American Idol* on Sunday morning rather than the New Testament Church as described in Acts 2.

Pop-worship performed by professional musicians who showboat their guitar and drum solos has, in some cases, supplanted our age-old hymns and our corporate chorus of praise. It's not unusual for some church services to morph into a rock concert where ostentatious worship is the end result. A growing appetite for glitz and glamour and adrenaline worship has given rise to the entertainment-driven church; the opium for

Fast-Food Churchianity. In the name of modernity, seeker-sensitive worship has become cutting edge where loud music, mime dancing, and the performance arts—not biblical preaching—receive top billing on Sunday morning. And sadly, the trend is only on the increase.

Who Does Performance-Worship Glorify More: God Or The Band?

In an effort to sway those who are adverse to the traditional church atmosphere—particularly its so-called antiquated music—Purpose-Driven and seeker-sensitive pastors have remodeled the Sunday service to accommodate that which their target audience demands. Thus, no longer is traditional music that teaches theological truth the order of the day; rather in its place is a commercialized set list that befits Top-40 radio. Performance-driven pastors know all too well that it is this hip component that first and foremost sells their church to the culture.

They have done their homework on the latest clinical data. Modern researchers delving into why and how music affects our minds and bodies have come up with some startling facts. For instance, we're told that music sparks changes in metabolism, circulation, blood volume, pulse, blood pressure, and our moods. Doris Soibelman, author of *Therapeutic and Industrial Uses of Music*, claims that nearly every organ in the body responds to music.⁵ Researchers have also found that lively music can be effective in activating a slow pulse and that soothing music can sometimes have a calming effect on an overactive heart. Noting music's medicating effect, many church pragmatists make a quantum leap in their thinking: If music can have this kind of upshot on the human psyche, why not use it to the Church's advantage on Sunday morning and package it in such a way that appeals to the psyche of the unchurched?

But is the purpose of worship music to bait unbelievers with entertainment in effort to whet their appetite for church life? Or is worship meant to invite *believers only*, who are of one mind, to come together and extol corporately the object of their worship? It would seem that the answer is obvious to the informed Christian—namely, that praise and worship is to be practiced by, and celebrated among, God's people. Some evangelicals, however, argue that both the adoration of God *and* the evangelism of unbelievers should play joint roles in the worship service. *But is this divided approach toward praise and worship acceptable to God?*

Interestingly, Rick Warren, the architect behind the Purpose-Driven philosophy of ministry, agrees that church worship should be directed toward God alone. But his line of reasoning is not without spin. He implies that worship music, if conducted shrewdly, can also have “evangelistic power” that “becomes a powerful witness” to the unchurched.⁶

On the surface, I agree with Warren's seemingly orthodox take on the influence of worship music (cf. 1 Cor. 14:25). But I fear that his use of the phrase “evangelistic power” is slippery and comes dangerously close to endorsing evangelism-worship—namely, that worship can be strategically primed to attract unbelievers. Given that he is the author of the best-selling book on how to grow a church by wooing the unchurched, his intent here is suspect. I am therefore forced to surmise that when he states that

worship is a “powerful witness” what he really means is that it is a “powerful *tool*” to attract the unbelieving masses.

Thus, it is here that the Purpose-Driven and seeker-sensitive trap is laid. In their muddled approach toward worship, their worship service becomes man-centered (evangelistic). It is often performed with one reverential eye on God and one evangelistic eye on man. Ignored in this dual-purposed approach, however, is the fact that when we praise God corporately as a body of believers we’re expected to have *both* eyes on Jesus. We are, in a manner of speaking, to “Set [our] minds on things above, not on earthly things” (Col. 3:2). When God competes with unbelievers for the attention of the worship band, His glory is shared with another—an act of which He takes a very dim view (Isa. 42:8).

To the Purpose-Driven and seeker-sensitive mindset, the veneration of God through spectacle and art is a means to an end; it’s a device meant not only to win the lost but to expand church membership. It’s evangelistic in nature, as Warren suggests, rather than sacramental. And while there is certainly nothing wrong with praying for and working toward church growth, our worship is blasphemous, if not idolatrous, if we have any target audience in mind other than God alone.

To be clear: I am a proponent of most contemporary worship and praise music and do not object to its usage in the worship service. I accept the insinuation found in Matthew 13 that blending traditional worship with contemporary music is tantamount to “the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom *new* treasures as well as *old*” (v. 52, emphasis added).

Moreover, I concede that I am, in many ways, a product of my environment and generation. But what I strenuously object to, besides the improper focus of evangelism-worship, is the way in which many megachurches *package* worship music. It’s not uncommon for showmanship to ride shotgun to sound Bible teaching in seeker-sensitive and Purpose-Driven churches. And when worship becomes performance-driven, it becomes man-centered (evangelistic) and no longer authentic worship (God-centered). The object of our adulation tends to change from God to the performance music itself (catered to man) or to the artist mastering his craft so impressively under pulsating stage lights. In short, we run the risk as a Church of losing sight of the object of our worship when we permit the glitz and glamour of performance-worship (and evangelism-worship) to infiltrate our ranks.

Corporate worship, in its truest form, is meant to glorify God *and to prepare worshippers for the preached Word to come*. To design a worship program that tickles the fancies of the worshipper rather than for the glory of God is a blasphemous error that risks the judgment of a jealous God. Again, my objection is not with contemporary worship music itself but rather with the way in which many megachurches showboat it. To use the performance-driven model as a means to titillate and seduce the unchurched (by way of entertainment) ultimately prostitutes our worship and robs God of His due honor.

Am I suggesting that all churches that showcase a high production value and a dynamic worship band in the church service undermine biblical ministry? No, of course not. Indeed, I’ve attended a number of churches, particularly in the Pacific Northwest, where major emphasis is placed on the production and performance of worship while simultaneously an even greater emphasis is placed on the biblical exposition that

follows. In some of these churches where worship is loud and contemporary the difficult truths of Scripture are never silenced nor are so-called seekers pandered to. While these churches mirror the performance-driven church in their production value, they are nevertheless Bible-driven and theocentric. The sad truth, however, is that these types of churches are fast becoming extinct.

Is All Worship Acceptable To God?

The unsatisfactory worship practiced today in many churches does not go unnoticed by even the most culturally-sensitive but orthodox pastors. When asked in a recent magazine interview whether he viewed the recent trends in church worship as positive or negative, Mark Driscoll, the grunge pastor of the controversial Mars Hill Church in Seattle, answered: “I’ll be happy when we have more than just prom songs to Jesus sung by some effeminate guy on an acoustic guitar offered as mainstream worship music. Right now most worship music is still coming from the top down through such things as Christian radio and record labels.”⁷

What Driscoll means by “prom songs” can also be understood as pop-worship that counters the biblical prescription for worship.

Often times the casual reader of Scripture fails to heed the implication found in Hebrews 12:28 concerning proper worship and the sanctity that is supposed to accompany it. There the writer charges his readers to “...be thankful, *and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe ...*” (emphasis added). Similarly, the apostles Paul and Peter refer elsewhere to *acceptable* sacrifices made by worshipful Christians (cf. Php. 4:18; 1 Pet. 2:5). In Psalm 4:5, the writer cautioned his Hebrew kinsman to “Offer *right* sacrifices.” In these passages it is imperative that the reader give notice to the words “acceptable” and “right,” and to worship that is offered with “reverence” and “awe.”

If there is a form of worship and sacrifice that God deems as *acceptable* in Hebrews 12, Psalm 4, and in the epistles of Peter and Paul, then it stands to reason that there is also a form of worship and sacrifice that God considers *unacceptable*. In other words, there are only two kinds of worship the Bible acknowledges: that which is honorable and that which is not. It is therefore incumbent upon a Bible-driven church to accurately deduce what is and what is not prescribed in Scripture as biblically honorable.⁸

Acceptable worship results in blessing, but unacceptable worship results in curses. To the point, Scripture declares that Abel worshipped God in a way that befit His honor, earning God’s favor and eternal blessing, whereas his brother, Cain, worshipped God dishonorably. His objectionable sacrifice resulted in divine cursing and permanent exile (Gen. 4:10-11).

Moreover, by way of the Samaritan woman in Sychar, Jesus rebuffed the Samaritan people because they worshipped God unintelligibly, that is, in ignorance (John 4:22). Nadab and Abihu, the priestly sons of Aaron, were assassinated by God outside the Tent of Meeting for conducting an unauthorized worship service (Lev. 10:1-2). Uzzah, a contemporary of David’s, met the same fate for his “irreverent act” of

touching the Ark, the focus of Israel's worship (2 Sam. 6:7). Likewise, the apostle Paul rebuked the Corinthians for their sacrilegious service, which he maintained was the root cause for many inexplicable deaths in the congregation (1 Cor. 11:30). According to the apostle, the Corinthians' misuse of sacramental worship was disgraceful and ultimately did "more harm than good" (1 Cor. 11:17).

In contrast, we can therefore deduce that acceptable worship is to be intelligent, sacred, authorized (biblically prescribed), and reverential. How we worship, where we worship, and who we worship are all ingredients that determine whether or not our worship is *acceptable* to God. This is something Cain came to lament, the Samaritan woman sought forgiveness for, and certain Corinthians—together with Nadab, Abihu, and Uzzah in the Old Testament—paid for with their lives. The performance-driven church should take note of this stark reality.

Christians are called to pay homage to God as the Supreme Being of the universe. He is first and foremost the Creator and Law-Giver, *not* our "buddy" or personal life-coach who sits in wait hoping for the verbal affection of believer and unbeliever alike. He is a "consuming fire" (Heb. 12:29) who lives in "unapproachable light" (1 Tim. 6:16) and who calls for the surrender of our hearts. He therefore demands our respect, reverence, and awe when we worship "lest he be angry" (Psa. 2:12). We are called to cast ourselves down in humility before Him in complete surrender, full adoration, and total obedience. Only then can we offer our worship and present our requests to Him as the Lover of our souls.

Does this reverent attitude describe the performance-driven church where guitar solos, mime dancing, and chaotic lightshows are promiscuously used during the worship service for the purposes of wooing the lost?

Does God Accept The Worship Of A So-Called Seeker?

Scripture alone reveals what true worship is. Thus, to the degree we are ignorant of Scripture our worship will be unacceptable to God. What entertainment-driven churches miscomprehend is that the very seekers they are trying to entice by their fashionable music concerts are the very people the Bible says are *incapable* of worshipping God passably. Until the Holy Spirit applies salvation to an elect sinner by regenerating his heart to respond to the gospel, they remain under Satan's dominion. They can offer worship suitable only to the Prince of Darkness (2 Cor. 4:4 cf. Rev. 9:20). Stated more directly, their worship is ultimately "unto devils, after whom they have gone a whoring" (Lev. 17:7, KJV).

By definition, a "seeker" is merely one who demonstrates a curiosity about religion. Yet the Bible explains that a so-called seeker is not really seeking God at all, but burns with enmity against Him. It is only when God seeks a person out, opens that person's eyes to the truth of the gospel, and reconciles that person unto Himself (on the basis of faith in and commitment to Jesus Christ), can that person then worship the God of the Bible. Until then, the seeker's worship is mere vanity. The apostle Paul summed it up most succinctly when he wrote: "No one can say 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:3).

The capacity for man to worship is ultimately an act performed by God in the heart of man for His own self-serving good pleasure. Worship that is satisfactory to Him can only be offered by true believers in “spirit and in truth” (John 4:24). A *bona fide* worshipper cannot be merely a seeker, but must be “born again” (John 3:7) so that Christ is “lifted up” (v. 14). Many churches today who hold to the Purpose-Driven and seeker-sensitive model discount this criterion altogether. As evidenced by their doing away of traditional hymns, they cater their worship service specifically to the contemporary tastes of unbelievers (who attend for the show) rather than to believers (who attend to glory in their God).

When a church designs its philosophy of ministry around secular principles and a secular audience their worship ultimately falls on the offended ears of a holy God. How many times did Israel attempt to sacrificially worship God, but their hearts were far from Him? Worship offered by supposedly a “seeking heart” is perfunctory at best. To the superficial Israelites God lamented:

“I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps” (Amos 5:21-23).

My issue with Pastor Hank and his performance-driven approach toward church ministry is that far too often the reverence and awe of God are replaced with *adrenalin worship* (or performed worship). A unhealthy emphasis is placed more on the production value and on impressing the audience by way of an upbeat tempo rather than on pleasing God with broken and contrite hearts (Psa. 51:17). Lost in translation is the biblical purpose of worship: namely, to delight in God (Psa. 16:11; 27:4) so that He will delight in us (Zeph. 3:17); to draw near to God (Heb. 4:16) so that He will draw near to us (James 4:7-8); to minister unto God so that He will minister unto us (cf. 1 Cor. 14:26); and to glorify God for all His splendor, majesty, and lovable grace (Josh. 7:19; Isa. 24:15; Jer. 13:16).

To abandon biblical principles in our worship is ultimately to dance with the devil in our church service. In fact, I attended one seeker-service where *The Police’s* inapt 1979 hit “*Message in a Bottle*” closed out the worship service in peculiar fashion and with very depressing lyrics. The song, written by a new age artist and performed by a famously secular band, spoke of spiritual isolation and emotional loneliness and neither mentioned God nor paid tribute to the Christian faith. Yet this was the song of choice that a Christian worship band chose to close with. In that particular worship setting the church had become the world. *Was God glorified in their rendition of a pop song? Were the saints edified?*

Enabled by the Holy Spirit, we are called to worship God in spirit and truth (John 4:24). Moreover, the Scriptures reveal Jesus Christ as the truth (John 14:6). Therefore there is no honorable and *acceptable* worship devoid of the Holy Spirit and the Person of Christ. Any church philosophy that minimizes the triune God in worship bastardizes biblical worship. We are created for God’s glory (Isa. 43:7) where He is always to be the object of our praise—not the performance of worship music itself. God will not give His

glory to another (Isa. 42:8), and this includes the talented worship band that people flock to see. All other forms of worship that seeks to woo the seeker and unbeliever is idolatry. In fact, God will not even accept Christian worship if it consists only in mere ritualism or performance. God requires those who come together to extol Him to do so with contrite spirits (Psa. 51:17) and reverent fear (1 Pet. 1:17).

As believers, let us fall down and worship God acceptably. Let us honor Him with God-glorifying prayer, God-glorifying singing, and God-glorifying preaching. Let us believe the Word proclaimed and surrender to His holy will. Let us worship Him by repenting and confessing our sins. Let us also worship by being baptized in His name and by participating intelligently and reverentially in the Lord's Supper. Let us worship Him by giving an acceptable offering of our money, and finally, by receiving His benediction of peace. This is what the Bible qualifies as acceptable worship.

—Ronald H. Gann

¹ I have opted to use "Pastor Hank" as a pseudonym to respect his identity.

² Lest the reader think I'm too bold and critical of my former pastor, it should be noted that Pastor Hank acknowledge to me in private, as well as to a group of men in public, that he was a deficient teacher.

³ Mary A. VanDerWeele "Staying in tune with music - impact of music on mental & physical health - includes related article on music and appetite". Vibrant Life. . FindArticles.com. 25 Dec. 2008.

http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0826/is_n4_v8/ai_12426666

⁴ www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/m/martin_luther.html

⁵ Mary A. VanDerWeele "Staying in tune with music - impact of music on mental & physical health - includes related article on music and appetite". Vibrant Life. . FindArticles.com. 25 Dec. 2008.

http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0826/is_n4_v8/ai_12426666

⁶ As cited by Rick Muchow, Worship Leader at Sattleback Church; www.ccli.com/WorshipCorner, February 27, 2009.

⁷ Cited by Todd Rhoades at www.mondaymorninginsight.com; *Mark Driscoll on the Trends in Worship Styles*; Originally published on Tuesday, January 30, 2007 at 7:43 AM.

⁸ Much of the content contained in this chapter around acceptable and unacceptable forms of worship is derived from the online article by P. G. Mathew entitled *Acceptable Worship: Hebrews 12:22-29*; 2005; Grace Valley Christian Center; Davis, CA.