

AFTERWORD



By Dr. John Hamm

Dr. John Hamm is the former chairman of the music department for Covenant College in Lookout Mountain, Tennessee and is the choral director for Christ Presbyterian Church in Marietta, Georgia. Dr. Hamm also served as a board member for the Church Music National Conference.

There have been a number of books written addressing the issue of worship in our churches, most of them attempting to establish a defense of a style, choice of music, format, liturgy, etc. What one finds only rarely is a discussion of how these choices affect the character, meaning and perception of the gospel and the nature of God. So it is refreshing to find a book in which the author has succeeded in making a non-confrontational appeal to reasoned consideration of the matter of worship and how we ought to choose the music we use for worship if we are to be consistent with the biblical directives we find in Holy Scripture.

LeVie is concerned primarily with music for *worship*. This needs to be made clear because many churches today do not make distinctions among the several legitimate and necessary activities of a congregation: Worship, evangelism, fellowship, instruction, and discipling ministry, to name a few. Music for worship is unique because in worship we gather as the Church to address God and make an offering of ourselves to him in praise, adoration and all that we are. However, it can also be argued that music for evangelism, instruction, etc. should have characteristics that are consistent with the nature of the gospel and the biblical record. That is, music based on a portion of scripture or that expresses a personal experience in the life of faith should have the characteristics expressive of eternal values. A text of great strength

and meaning requires music of substance. Otherwise the two are incongruous.

But the book is more than a treatise on worship music; it raises the consciousness of the reader to the importance of the architecture and art in the worship space, along with such questions as where the choir and pulpit are located, whether the design causes one to think vertically or horizontally, etc. The medium may not be the (complete) message but it affects our perceptions of the faith that is being expressed in the sanctuary (or worship space) in ways of which we are often unaware.

The essay on architecture is especially important because the subject is rarely addressed in books on worship. It should be read by every member of any building committee charged with the responsibility of overseeing the construction of new worship facilities. Considerations such as acoustics are rarely given sufficient thought even though they can be the determining factor in whether or not a congregation becomes a singing congregation. I recall worshipping in a church as a visitor one Sunday morning some years ago and as the magnificent pipe organ intoned the first hymn I began to sing with heart and voice only to realize quickly that I was the only one in the vicinity that was singing. The sanctuary, though beautiful, had very little reverberation. Consequently when members of the congregation joined in the hymn singing they became very self-conscious, (because a short reverberation time causes individual singers to feel like no one else is singing) and over time they just quit singing. Some years later, after there had been rather extensive work to correct the acoustical and other problems, I visited the same church and found that the congregational singing was strong with a large percentage of the worshipers participating. A significant factor responsible for the change was that the acoustics now reinforced the singing of the congregation so that they became a singing church.

Donn LeVie makes the appeal to the reader to apply spiritual discernment when making decisions about music for the worship service. As emphasized by the author, the question that requires an

answer is whether a particular piece of music is worthy to bring as an offering to the King of Kings, the Creator of the universe. In the case of sung music (for solo voice, choir or congregation), such discernment must first be exercised with regard to the lyrics. This is no small assignment that requires an understanding of what constitutes good use of language and poetry, and whether the lyrics are consistent with the biblical record. Then comes the even more controversial issue of the music. Here spiritual discernment requires some knowledge of music in order to recognize excellence and LeVie makes a good case for why this is important.

One matter that may cause confusion to someone who is not trained in music is how one determines excellence in music and how one identifies poor quality in music. Even among highly trained professional musicians one might find disagreement on which of two pieces of excellent music is the better. But that should not deter music directors from seeking the very best to bring before the throne of God as an offering to our Lord and Master.

This is a book that would serve well as a manual for a discussion group whose purpose is to explore the use music in worship and how one should go about determining what music is appropriate for use in worship for the 21st century church. One of the strengths of the book that makes it an excellent resource for group study is that the author poses many questions that can be used to stimulate discussion. May it be a help to many who are concerned for the Church and confused by the current trend to make worship a popular religious social event rather than what it ought to be - a service characterized by reverence, dignity, mystery and awe.

§§

IT'S ALL ABOUT HYMN: ESSAYS ON RECLAIMING SACRED AND TRADITIONAL MUSIC FOR
WORSHIP