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Reformation  
& Revival



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**R**ecently during the worship service, I moved from the piano bench over to the organ as I always do. It is a thirty-five-year-old Allen which still works ... more or less. The switch was in the "on" position; I am always careful to make sure of that in advance since this instrument takes at least a minute to warm up.

Instinctively, I glanced at the power light. It was not on. I thought, "Perhaps the bulb has burned out." So I pushed the preset buttons. They too did not light up. I knew then I was in trouble. (No doubt my Church of Christ non-instrumental and Covenanter brethren are enjoying delicious vindication in this account!)

There I was with one of my choir tenors, in the midst of a service, tracing wires. We were on our hands and knees, but not in reverence. Eventually we discovered that the circuit breaker had been inadvertently turned off. It was just one more experience underscoring a conviction which has been welling up in me for years: We in the church place uncritical trust in technology, and, in so doing, we not only expose the sacred regular assembling of the brethren to untrammelled innovation and disruption, but we alter the very message by which we are defined because of technological constraints. And it is this latter assertion which should cause Reformed people to reach for their Roloids.

We expend endless hot air and gas over the regulative principle while, at the same time, casually buying organs of all sorts, synthesizers, microphones, overhead screens, air conditioning, clip art, laser printers, et cetera ad absurdum. So while we are prosecuting our heady discussion, our congregations are gradually perceiving the whole message a little bit differently. The change creeps ever so slowly like those two other creeping things, heresy and serpents.

The process is subtle and not two-dimensional. In complaining about the effects of unquestioned technology, I am, nonetheless, mindful of its advantages. I would probably be

moved to similar decisions in a position of authority. What is problematic, however, is that we usually see the advantages without pondering the weaknesses the new technology will introduce. For example, church newsletters and bulletins sometimes spare us superfluous disruptions during the service, and this is to be applauded. On the down side, however, they allow us to stay abreast of what is happening in the congregation without being in direct contact with the believing community. We can be a part of a congregation without anyone knowing us all that well, allowing us to slip out from under the protective cloak of accountability.<sup>1</sup> God did, once upon a time, say, "It is not good for the man to be alone!"

Now, I will not be so rash as to assert that the epidemic of unchecked vices in the modern church is the result of the church's bulletins and newsletters. Still, it is one of the many freight carriers of modernity, and "modernity," as David Wells said, is "worldliness of Our Time."<sup>2</sup>

Imagine for a moment that you are going to church some mid-July Sunday at the comfortable time of eleven in the morning. It is hot outside, but the sanctuary is a pleasant seventy-five degrees. An usher with a full-toothed smile hands you a melon-colored bulletin, laser-printed on card stock. The font is smooth and soft, and the clip art is catchy. You walk down a pleasantly carpeted aisle to a padded pew, a piece of furniture which rivals your own couch for comfort. An eminently forgettable service proceeds, though we are not sure whether it is a valid service.

For you are already on Aldous Huxley's "Soma Holiday,"<sup>3</sup> as in so many churches we are singing "Give Him all your tears and sadness; give Him all your tears of pain, and you'll enter into life in Jesus' name."<sup>4</sup> During the service, a teenage girl outfitted with a hand-held microphone sings a piece of "special music," something about having "her Father's eyes." She is accompanied by an eighty-piece orchestra on a cassette tape. This is not disturbing, for the recording is pumped

through multiple speakers much like the "surround-sound" of movie theaters. The tape actually sounds louder and better than a live orchestra. Following the solo, there is a red-letter Scripture reading: "If any man wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me" (Luke 9:23).

Right at that moment, how many of us are ready to take up our crosses and follow Jesus? Or are we more like Lot, waiting in Sodom until the last minute? How many men are following the teenage girl? Is this a macabre picture? It happens every Sunday in many churches. The cognitive dissonance has not been delivered to us by bad theology, though, no doubt, plenty of bad theology abounds. No, the cognitive dissonance is the accumulated fruit of wares from technological Vanity Fare, the worldliness of Our Time, modernity.

No place is this debacle more evident than in the church music. When the psalmist said, "Shout joyfully to the Lord" (Ps. 98:4), he most certainly did not mean, "Turn the volume knob to the right," and yet that is now our normal application. There are some services in which the sound man is at least as important as the preacher and the musician(s). Indeed, the sound man is now sometimes regarded as a musician, though my own experience over the years has led me to suspect that a person who is a wizard with wires is probably aesthetically challenged, all the more so because he is affirmed by his skill with the flowing electrons, a regrettable deception. And, of course, most of us have weathered embarrassing moments when the tape machine malfunctioned and feedback splits our heads like cordwood. We've endured all manner of sound technology snafu messes during services. How shall we view this in light of the demand for orderliness in 1 Corinthians 14?

My purpose here is not to malign the Sunday morning sound engineers of America. They are not villains, but they are a manifestation of a larger trend. Why did we "need" sound systems in the first place? The answer is at least five-fold and

far more telling than a mere taxonomy of church technology foibles.

First, we have forgotten why we gather. The church is the only institution on earth commissioned to deal with sin. I think we could make this statement universally regardless of theological persuasion. For this reason, church architecture must have its basis in the Word and the sacraments. It must allow for clearly audible preaching and reading of the Word as well as powerful congregational singing. If a physical structure absorbs the primary reflections of sound waves, congregational singing will die. The parishioner in the pew will not feel that he is all alone, neither “teaching and admonishing,” nor being “taught and admonished” (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16). The dead sound will intimidate him. All those pleasing features of the modern church building—carpeting, padded pews, the competing sound of air circulating systems, low ceilings—they run directly afoul of more important acoustic concerns.<sup>5</sup>

Second, the modern world has been wall-papered with ambient sound, most it the fruit of mechanization.

I once attended a performance in Budapest in a concert hall built in 1905, a lovely building with excellent acoustics. For all its fine qualities, however, the audience often lost the music. The noise of street cars and traffic outside was too strong. The East Block did have a love affair with ugly proletarian technology. Still, this is not unique.

At the Carnegie Hall premiere of John Cage’s “Four Minutes and Thirty-Three Seconds”<sup>6</sup>—that piece which Francis Schaeffer sorted out for special criticism—the audience was treated to a sound almost never heard in that space, rain on the roof. In the same way, one can seldom see the stars with any definition in Los Angeles at night. What can an Angelino think when he reads, “The heavens are telling the glory of God; and their expanse is declaring the work of His hands” (Ps. 19:1)? The Great Creator is still an artist, but the modern world aggressively competes for attention.

Ambient noise is a presupposition which makes much of the Scriptures and ancient worship patterns seem irrelevant today. The old Anglican liturgy opened with the words of Habakkuk, “But the Lord is in His holy temple. Let all the earth be silent before Him” (2:20). The modern world is one of high anxiety and deep foreboding as evidenced by the plethora of dispensational end-times speculations. Martin Luther lived with considerable anxiety, turning often, in consequence, to Psalm 46. We would do well in our time to have intimate acquaintance with that Psalm, and yet its words are incongruous with our modern worship practices. We are so busy whipping ourselves into a festive froth with “Shine, Jesus, Shine,” that we hardly hear the words, “It is good that he waits silently for the salvation of the Lord” (Lam. 3:26). How different would our worship spaces be if the words up front said, “Apart from Me, you can do nothing” (John 15:5)? Our architecture must reflect the reality that God is in charge. We come only as receivers of His grace, some of which might include the pain of chastisement and conviction of sin.

Third, ambient noise and sound technology development encourage individualistic audience deportment antithetical to the orderly worship of “one body.” In my childhood (which wasn’t so long ago), the pastor was unamplified. The congregation arrived early and waited quietly. In recent times, by contrast, I have seen pastors speaking to groups of fewer than fifty, nonetheless amplified, and this they needed to be heard over the din. What happened?

The answer lies in what I shall call “the trivialization of aural stimulus.” Ed Sullivan spoke to us but we didn’t have to listen. Chet Huntly and David Brinkley conversed in our living rooms interrupting our conversations, or was it I who interrupted their conversation? We heard music broadcast everywhere and at all times but with no expectation that we should pay attention to it. Then as we gathered in crowds, we continued to kibitz because we knew the person with the microphone

could talk over our small talk. As the noise grew louder and louder, our ability to listen decreased proportionately. This tempts me to hyperbolize: I might assert that our inability to listen is the greatest crisis in the modern world, for man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. Will we hear those words?

Fourth, sound technology debilitates our capacity to make music. As broadcast and recorded music has waxed, our ability to make music has waned. It is no accident that musical skill took a precipitous fall with the advent of rock 'n roll, a musical medium which, I am convinced, would not exist in the absence of broadcasting, magnetic recording, and large quantities of watts. Suddenly, a person who had mastered a half dozen chords on the guitar could be considered an "artist." And perhaps most illustrative of all is that "rap" would not have been considered music in anyone's mind a mere twenty-five years ago. No, it would have been regarded as a clever limerick accompanied by a drum machine. It's a tired and well distributed joke that the way you make an electric guitarist and a drummer play softer is to put music in front of them.

True musical skill takes hundreds and thousands of highly disciplined hours to attain. We're naturally lazy. If someone else can do it for us, why should we do it for ourselves? Why should we develop skill? The answer to these questions is astonishingly simple: We should develop musical skill because the Lord expects it of us.

All acoustic instruments in the world can be classified into four categories: (1) chordophones: instruments with strings; (2) aerophones: instruments through which we blow; (3) idiophones: instruments of elastic resonant material such as xylophones and bells; (4) membranophones: instruments whose resonating material is a stretched skin.

In Psalm 150 we are commanded categorically to praise the Lord. Then to make the point doubly clear, the psalmist makes a comprehensive list of the known instruments to be used.

The harp is a chordophone. The trumpet is an aerophone. Cymbals are idiophones. Timbrels are membranophones. All four categories of known acoustic instruments can be found in the Psalm. They all involve skill in real time (which, by the way, is always risky, much like the life of faith). All of them display a one-to-one correspondence between the loudness produced and the effort exerted by the player.

In this latter sense, electronic and digital music are a radical departure from the biblical picture. In electronic music, more power is available to the player than the musician is bodily able to produce. In digital music, more skill is available to the player than he is able to possess. In short, someone else is bringing our sacrifice of praise when we resort to these musical media. It is as though we paid someone to take our offering up to Jerusalem for us because we were too busy. Will God accept that?

There is yet a more ominous side to the music technology. Commercial entities have a vested interest in keeping us satisfied with these technological modes of music making. When we are acculturated to them, then we expect that sort of music in the church, and the church is an enormous market, demanding music every seven days. The scope of this article is inadequate to expose this situation thoroughly. For the moment, suffice it to say that publicly held stock market companies are the pervasive beneficiaries of the contemporary Christian music business. They do not want us to be musically competent, for if we were, we would not need to buy their music. There is no conspiracy here, just good old worldliness. We all like it the way it is: It feels good. Unfortunately, the heart is desperately wicked and deceitful. We should be suspicious of our habits and tastes, and yet the design of these musical media discourages the reflection necessary to view the situation clearly. This brings me to my fifth and final point.

**Sound Technology Debilitates Our Capacity to Think**

Music, in its barest definition, is merely the design of time, and as such is the most abstract of arts. For what can be more abstract than time. Indeed, it is a verb tense, I Am, which most profoundly separates the Creator from the creature. Jehovah stands outside of time.

All the most important things in life are abstract, such as love, justice, mercy, faith, hate, etc. I suspect that Levitical musicians in David's time were a major component of the teaching apparatus because their medium was specifically suited to hardening the muscles of abstract thinking. Think how cryptic the Psalms sometimes are. They possess abrupt discontinuities which are only resolved with deep and time-consuming meditation. They are not in the easily digested narrative forms of the historical books, nor are they discursive, line-upon-line reasoning, like Paul's epistle to the Romans. They demand powerful abstract thinking which will lead to firm, concrete conclusions, and in so doing, they shape the whole person—heart, soul, mind, and strength.

In our national consciousness, we are finally beginning to see that welfare begets welfare; assistance begets dependence. This same principle holds true for the making of church music. It used to be that Aunt Milicent played the piano or organ, albeit not very well. We have used recorded and broadcast music like a recreational drug for so long that we no longer have Aunt Milicents available. In this crisis, we once again turn to technology. Concordia Publishing House now offers 180 hymns as well as liturgical responses on CD.

These are "designed for missions and small parishes."<sup>7</sup> The Lutherans are not alone in this innovation. *The Broadman Hymnal* has been available in this form for some time, not to mention praise and worship choruses from Integrity's Hosanna Music, "America's Number One Producer of Praise and Worship Choruses." When will we realize that we think we're rich, but in truth we are very poor?! What comes next, a digital

baptistery if your congregation has not been able to call a pastor?

What shall we do? First off, crying out for mercy is probably a good start. We could make the case that all our technological development has had in its fabric the desire to make us the master of our own destiny, in short, to become independent of God. I have noticed a universal principle: The greater the risk is, the more we will tend to depend on God. That is why it is often said that there are no atheists in foxholes.

By the same token, it is breathtaking how technique-oriented those twin sisters, the Church Growth Movement and contemporary Christian music, are. In the case of church growth, I have read books that all but guarantee results without ever wondering if the Holy Spirit will cooperate, and, of course, contemporary Christian music (CCM) is famous for its manipulation of the emotions. Indeed, virtually nobody analyzes CCM, or, for that matter, any pop/rock music, from an aesthetic perspective. There is simply nothing but emotional engineering there to analyze. We would be vexed by neither of the sisters were it not for unquestioned technology within the four walls of the church. Please notice once again, the technology is not the sin. However, in the hands of persons with a low view of our depravity, almost anything is likely to occur during our regular assembling together.

I am sorely tempted to find everything technological in the church, throw it in my '65 Chevy truck, and haul it to the county dump forthwith. But then, I heat my house with wood, grow great raspberries, and drive an old car. God's servant must not strive, and recognizing that gentleness is a component of the fruit of the Spirit, we should proceed cautiously and slowly with our emancipation from technology, even if our efforts are unsuccessful. Jesus said He would build His church, and that promise holds firm even if our own local congregation's candle is blown out.

At a minimum, however, it would be wholesome to ask

questions of all our interfacing with technology. Such a discipline might expose previously unnoticed problems in congregational life.

It would be wise to throw away all junk mail coming into the church office before looking at it, almost as if it were pornography.<sup>8</sup> If your congregation needs the advertised piece of technology or CCM, you will discover a means of finding it without junk mail. Remember: No man can serve two masters. It would be best not to have the thing suggested to your mind by a peddler. Covetousness operates at many levels. I recognize that this will hamper the operations of some conscientious non-profit ministries, but God will provide their daily bread.

I think if we keep the chief mission of the church before us at all times, we will be in a strong position to withstand the encroaching worldliness technology so easily facilitates. But since the church's mission on earth is to deal with sin, our wicked and deceitful hearts will always stand in the way. We die daily because we rebel daily.

#### Endnotes

1 See David F. Wells, *God in the Wasteland* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 10

2 *Ibid.*, 29

3 Huxley, Aldous. *Brave New World* (New York: Harper and Row, 1946). "Soma" was a recreational drug for reducing anxiety. It dealt with felt needs.

4 John Wimber. *Spirit Song*, Maranatha! Music, copyright 1979.

5 Anyone considering erecting a new church building or altering an existing one should consider Scott R. Riedel's *Acoustics in the Worship Space* (St. Louis, Concordia, 1986).

6 In this piece, the performer walks up to the piano, covers the keys, sets a kitchen timer for the specified period of time, then receives applause at the conclusion. Igor Stravinsky said,

"Now that he has mastered this technique, we look forward to pieces of greater length."

7 *Lutheran Worship Notes*, 32:11.

8 I received a promotion in the mail recently from Benson Music Company. They promised to reward me with a free wristwatch if I diverted a certain amount of my church music budget their way. We revile politicians who succumb to this tactic! How much more despicable this is in the house of God!

#### Author

Dr. Leonard R. Payton is a composer and church musician with a Ph. D. in music composition and theory from the University of California at San Diego. He is a frequent contributor to *Reformation & Revival Journal* as well as other publications including *Modern Reformation* and *Crossroads*. He has contributed a chapter to the forthcoming book, *The Coming Crisis in Evangelicalism*, John H. Armstrong, ed. (1996). He is music director at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church, Yuba City, California, and lives in Paradise, California, with his wife and children.