



T. David Gordon, *Why Johnny Can't Sing Hymns: How Pop Culture Rewrote the Hymnal*. Phillipsburg: P&R, 2010. \$12.99. 189 pp. ISBN 978-1-59638-195-7

**\*\*NOTE:** Upon fruitful dialogue with T. David Gordon following the posting of this review, a few clarifications/retractions have been made to this review. This particular review version is dated **12/1/10**. To follow the evolution of the clarifications and retractions, please visit my blog at: <http://www.zachicks.com>.

## INTRODUCTION & APPRECIATION

If one had any inkling that the worship wars were over, look no further for evidence to the contrary. T. David Gordon has now established for himself an official “Johnny” series with this follow-up to *Why Johnny Can't Preach*, published also by P&R in 2009. Gordon is professor of religion and Greek at Grove City College (Pennsylvania), where he has, for over a decade, added humanities and “media ecology” to his list of fine accomplishments in teaching and writing. Once a pastor in the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) for nine years, the final lines of his bio make clear that he and his wife attend an Anglican church (where one can assume that high liturgy and traditional hymnody are practiced and sung).

T. David Gordon again shows himself to be a sharp and critical thinker when it comes to the intersection of culture and the church. Along with other voices like Neil Postman (*Amusing Ourselves to Death*), Kenneth Myers (*All God's Children and Blue Suede Shoes*), and Douglas Groothuis (*Truth Decay*), Gordon sounds the seldom-heard horn that the media of modern culture not only affect us in their message but by their very form. Such tools, he goes on to say, “both *reflect* our priorities and values and reciprocally *shape* our priorities and values” (p. 10).

Gordon begins his work by asserting that another book on worship music *is* in fact needed and that his humble contribution to the ongoing discussion would be to approach it from the “media-ecological perspective” (p. 9). His thesis is “we make song, and song makes us” (p. 10). The resulting argument: Pop culture’s textual expressions and musical idioms, which are standard fare in many American churches, are corrosive to both our faith and spiritual well-being. I agree with Gordon’s approach: “Every consideration regarding [worship music] should be undertaken in a manner that reflects Christian obedience.” In other words, we must employ careful biblical and theological reflection when it comes to worship music, and Gordon and I concur that not enough of it is being done among those in the “contemporary worship” camp (though, I observe that there is evidence that the tide is turning). The final paragraph of the introduction makes clear that Gordon has picked a side:

What follows is an extremely abbreviated list of the considerations that have caused me to be wary of using contemporary Christian music in worship services at all, to object to its common use, and to zealously oppose its exclusive use (p. 36).

So much of the criticism of modern worship has centered around the message of the content and not that of the form. While Gordon does address content, his primary focus is, in fact, form. Not enough people are addressing this critical issue, and I therefore commend Gordon for his unique focus. Chapter 8, “Contemporaneity as a Value,” up until p. 119, offers insightful cultural analysis; I would encourage every leader and proponent of modern worship to read it. Gordon excels at cultural analysis, and, especially if the idea of analyzing media-as-form is a foreign concept to the reader, this book is worth a look.

Several other insights are commendable and important for worship leaders and congregants to remember:

- The medium of music does, in fact, send “meta-messages” (Chapter 4).
- Congregational song is truly a form of prayer (Chapter 9).
- Worship should rightly engage the *whole* self, including the mind (Chapter 10).
- If lament is a rich expression in the Psalms, lament should find regular employment in our worship (pp. 135-138).
- The notion that “reaching people for Christ” (a.k.a. seeker-sensitivity) should be a top priority in critical thinking about worship should be challenged (pp. 149-158).
- The notion that considerations of youth culture should drive ecclesiastical strategizing also needs to be challenged (pp. 158-167).
- The assumed values of pop culture tend to resist beauty, foster consumerism, trivialize the serious, and dehumanize people (throughout the book, but summarized in Chapter 13).

These insights, and more, are commendable. Unfortunately, many of Gordon’s insights make huge, unqualified leaps when he attempts to bridge the gap between cultural reflection and analysis of contemporary worship. The analytical chasm between the former and the latter requires careful and nuanced bridge-building, and Gordon ultimately does not succeed in this task. Several problems stand in his way.

## SIX PROBLEMS WITH GORDON’S ANALYSIS

### **Problem #1: Lack of Musical Knowledge**

Gordon makes an early admission, which is prophetic of where this book will fall short. He admits that his expertise is in the arenas of biblical studies and media ecology, not music: “Although I can read music, I do not currently play a musical instrument, have never played piano (a serious liability if one is to understand the properties of music),<sup>1</sup> and have not formally studied music history or theory” (p. 19). Unfortunately, Gordon’s lack of qualifications in these areas is precisely the reason he falls into so many fallacies throughout the book in his analysis of music. One further gets the sense that, throughout his analysis of so-called popular music, he is relying on second-hand information rather than careful research and patient, discerning, open-eared listening.

Popular music today stands within the family of rock and roll, which in turn is rooted in blues, gospel, country and western, and African American spirituals. The more one is aware of these historical nuances, the slower one becomes in dismissing pop music wholesale, for one starts to develop the ears through which one hears the artistry of continuity and discontinuity, preservation and innovation, technical skill and nuanced arranging. Similar to how my own appreciation of classical music skyrocketed upon taking music theory and history courses, one needs a base of knowledge to appreciate the subtlety within the simplicity of the rock family. Rock is not the high art that classical music is. Its forms are more restricted because of its inherited instrumentation, chord structure concepts, and song-form models. Still, even amidst the musical simplification, it is unfair and misleading to advocate that artistry cannot be discerned in pop music,<sup>2</sup> or that such artistry can be discounted because the form itself is so laden with problems.

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<sup>1</sup>It is surprising that Gordon makes this parenthetical statement and then proceeds, for not a small part of his book, to discuss properties of music (without much referencing when he does such analysis).

<sup>2</sup>One will notice that I am using the terms “rock” and “pop” interchangeably. It will become clearer later why I do that (see “Problem #6”), but suffice it to say that I believe it is fair to do so because Gordon seems to approach all “contemporary music” with one broad brush.

Gordon's brush is too broad, and one gets the sense from him that all popular music is a soul-killing wasteland. He does say, "I think contemporary worship music is often of a lesser literary, theological, or musical quality than most traditional hymnody" (p. 15). While he is careful to qualify himself with the word "often," one strains in the book to find any sympathy or appreciation for any modern music that does not employ the instrumentation and expression of classical music. Consequently, a more robust understanding of the nature and history of pop music is something of which Gordon makes no mention or acknowledgement. Because of all this, I am skeptical that Gordon can approach an analysis of popular music from a fair and educated perspective. Gordon can wax eloquent on the philosophical underpinnings of how popular music, as a medium, may negatively condition culture, but his lack of musical awareness does not allow him to nuance and qualify this discussion, largely to his argument's demise. He ends up placing the whole of contemporary worship into one irredeemable hand-basket known as pop music. Much of the argumentation of this book, then, fails because he is dealing with and reacting to an unfounded generalization—a kind of meta-straw-man.

### **Problem #2: Conflation of Music and Text in His Understanding of "Hymns"**

What becomes clear fairly early is that Gordon is arguing in favor, not of hymnody broadly, but of hymnody in traditional, classically-influenced musical forms. This exposes another error—the conflation of music and text in the terms "hymn" and "hymnody." While this book, in design, layout, and length, is obviously intended for a popular readership, it is a confusing simplification (especially given that the focus of argumentation is on hymnody itself) to use the word "hymn" to refer to both text *and* music, when a hymn, technically, is text. Gordon's oversimplification of this term results throughout this book in a domino-effect of confused argumentation and false conclusions. The starkest example of this is in his statement, "The question is whether as a genre contemporary worship music is superior to hymnody as a genre" (p. 49, n. 7). In a discussion like this, "hymnody" cannot be used so generally without engendering false assumptions. Such assumptions would be: (a) contemporary worship *is not* producing anything definable under the category of "hymnody;" (b) "hymnody" is definable as a single genre (as though there aren't a multiplicity of styles associated with the corpus of historic Christian hymnody); (c) "hymnody" always refers to music. None of these assumptions are true, and this confusion emerges again and again throughout the book.

### **Problem #3: Historical Confusion and Unfounded Instrumental Favoritism**

Throughout the book, the argumentation Gordon employs lends itself to the conclusion that the pinnacle of Christian worship is to be found in organ-and-choir-led music<sup>3</sup>—classical instrumentation and classical forms. The first line of questioning, in response, is: What, then, of Christian worship music pre-Bach? Was plainsong chant always an inferior expression, awaiting its eschatological realization in the high Western art it would eventually birth? Was first-century Jewish music (which would probably have been shocking to Western classical ears) an artistic offering of lesser value, awaiting consummation in the redemptive days of Buxtehude and Beethoven? Were the lute-driven Lutheran bards God's musical "Plan B" until the pipe organ would come into widespread use?

Rabbit-trailing down this last question for a moment: Gordon traps himself in his own argument when he advocates for the traditional rendering of "A Mighty Fortress is Our God." He says, "We

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<sup>3</sup>In a subsequent conversation with Gordon, he felt this was a misrepresentation of his position. He was clear that he does not favor the organ, and he pointed out that he actually sees deficiencies in the organ as an accompanying instrument. I still believe, however, that the logical conclusion of his argumentation lends itself to favoring that instrument in worship. I also still believe that *Why Johnny Can't Sing Hymns* does contain an unfounded bias toward classical instrumentation.

simply cannot accompany Martin Luther's 'A Mighty Fortress is Our God' successfully with guitar" (p. 99). Ironically, the song (including its tune, albeit with a more challenging rhythm) was first composed for the guitar's predecessor, the lute. In fact, one could argue that the chordal and rhythmic complexity (signs of so-called "high art") were lessened and simplified when it was pressed into its quadruple-metered, block chord, organ-friendly form. Before "A Mighty Fortress" was a stately pipe organ hymn, it was a whimsical, rhythmic troubadour song, accompanied on sixteenth-century guitars by the "rock stars" of old.<sup>4</sup>

The historical confusion continues:

The fair question is how the *form* of contemporary pop music shapes the *content* of what is placed in it... Would it make sense, for instance, to take the lyrics of something like "O God, Our Help in Ages Past" and put it into a contemporary-sounding musical form? I suspect not; the form would make the content a different thing, and create a kind of dissonance (p. 60).

This reasoning, from a historical perspective, is not carefully thought out. At one point in history, this hymn *was* composed in its own contemporary-sounding musical idiom! Watts wrote it in 1719, and the music ("St. Anne") is attributed to William Croft in the same part of the same century. At one time, "O God, Our Help in Ages Past" *was* sung in its own contemporary idiom, and I suspect its original hearers did not pause puzzled at the juxtaposition of contemporary music with a message about God's past faithfulness. Gordon is simply trying too hard here. To the contrary, what a more beautiful picture of the church can you have than to employ old hymn texts sung to new music (especially for this particular hymn)? There, you have the church across generations joining hands, creatively interweaving its now-ness and past-ness through the marriage of music and text. One wonders whether churches that *never* sing hymns and songs in contemporary idioms truly have a sense that they are to be a church engaged in twenty-first century culture.<sup>5</sup> Gordon's broader point (that form and content *should and do* speak to one another) holds, but one is able to root out in his argumentation that he is using this principle to defend his own biases rather than arrive at thoughtful, logical conclusions. Gordon would probably use this principle to discount all efforts at retuning old hymn texts into the modern musical vernacular,<sup>6</sup> but it simply does not follow that because hymn texts are written in and about the past that such texts suffer from being wedded to modern music. I would argue that the evaluation of a given pairing of text and music must be made more on a case-by-case basis and with a fair understanding of the genre and what is being communicated musically *within the parameters of* that genre.

Gordon goes on to advocate that guitars are poor accompanying instruments for congregational singing; they are so poor, in fact, that Gordon sees little value in their use whatsoever:

There is no good musical reason to insist on accompanying congregational song with the guitar; it is poorly suited to the task (p. 99).

In fact, Gordon mocks the guitar (and, by implication, guitarists):

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<sup>4</sup>The *Presbyterian Hymnal* (alongside its traditional setting) offers "A Mighty Fortress" in an arrangement (by Hans Leo Hassler) of what would have been its more original tune-setting (Hymn #259).

<sup>5</sup>I am connected to many churches that only employ traditional and historic forms of worship and *are* engaged with culture. But should that cultural engagement be somehow musically reflected in our worship? I tend to think so; Gordon definitely thinks not.

<sup>6</sup>Gordon takes issue with the way I am using the term "vernacular" in his discussion on Luther (p. 46), but I disagree with his argumentation there.

The guitar is not a new instrument. Why have classical musicians not frequently employed it to accompany choral music, and why have our better-known sacred musicians, from J. S. Bach onward, not written sacred music for it? I'm not a musician, so I don't know the answer to that question, but I suspect that the guitar just can't do it well. The guitar's timbre limits it to less significant things; it is like Tom Cruise standing in the courtroom before Jack Nicholson, who says: "You can't handle the truth." Maybe the guitar can handle a little truth, but it can't handle much (p. 98).

The instrument, again, is lambasted in a move of guilt-by-association, as he throws the instrument into his list of the vices of pop culture: "Johnny has been so swallowed up in a contemporaneous, casual, trivial, youth-centered, guitar-playing pop culture" (pp. 173-174). However, it is clear that Gordon knows very little about guitars and guitar-playing when he says: "Because the guitar is strummed, it is far more at home with duple meters than triple meters" (p. 100). Where did he come up with this? As a guitar teacher, I know that strum patterns in triple meters are just as easy for students to learn as strum patterns in duple meters. This makes no sense, and it appears that Gordon is grasping at the wind in search of arguments to support his theory that the guitar is probably an inferior instrument for making "serious art" and most certainly an inferior instrument to accompany congregational song.

Unfortunately, unfounded instrumental favoritism and bias appear to be driving Gordon's conclusions more than any credible argumentation. In his mentioning and discussion of high, classical art and music, it is obvious that he favors the instruments most readily associated with that genre. His lack of any critical understanding of modern music results in an inability to see the ways a song accompanied by the guitar might artistically enhance and amplify a hymn text, in some circumstances even in ways a pipe organ, for example, cannot. For instance, an organ can only go so far in rhythmic excitement,<sup>7</sup> from which some hymn texts would truly benefit.<sup>8</sup> Sonically, an organ cannot compete with the percussive nature of a well-strummed acoustic guitar. Of course, an organ can do many things a guitar cannot (although electric guitars plus effects considerably narrow many of those gaps), but the point is that one cannot make blanket statements that guitars are inferior and unsuitable as accompanying instruments for congregational singing. It depends on the musical setting and the goals set forth in the intersection of music and text.<sup>9</sup> Still, on instrumentation, Gordon insists:

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<sup>7</sup>Gordon does mention the percussive nature of the piano, but even it cannot match that same ability in an acoustic guitar. Oddly, Gordon also makes the comment, "The guitar accompanies a single voice, or a duet or trio, very well (hence its use in folk music); but it simply does not have the percussive properties of a piano, for instance, which strikes the strings and then the sound falls away" (p. 100). It is hard to understand the point he is making here. An acoustic guitar is equally as percussive in this sense. Does he mean "*dynamic* properties," rather (i.e. volume range)?

<sup>8</sup>For example, I have found that the joyful nuances of George Matheson's great hymn, "O Love That Will Not Let Me Go," are so much more easily grasped in Indelible Grace's musical setting (to a rhythmic, bluegrass backbeat) than in its more romantic-styled traditional setting by Albert L. Peace ("St. Margaret"). My point in this is not necessarily to say that the former tune is better than the latter, but to argue that what emphasizes the joyful current in the text is the rhythmic vibrancy brought forth by the guitar. Even with a different tune, I don't know that an organ can convey *that* kind of joy.

<sup>9</sup>This is an interesting point worth exploring further. Many have experienced what I have in this area, namely, that one "hears" a hymn-text in a totally different way when a new tune and/or instrumentation is affixed to it. It often brings out other facets of the hymn that one could not as easily see in its other setting. I experienced this when, after growing up with Hastings' beautiful tune to Toplady's "Rock of Ages," I sung the hymn afresh with James Ward's 1984 tune (both tunes are set side-by-side in the *Trinity Hymnal*, #499 and #500). I believe that this is some of the mystery of the way music and text interact, especially in Christian hymnody. This mystery is part of what Jeremy Begbie explores in his concept of "surplus of meaning" (*Resounding Truth: Christian Wisdom in a World of Music* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007], 50).

No one has ever written a requiem, for instance, to be accompanied by three people playing guitars. Why? Because death is still (for some of us, anyway) a fairly serious matter, and guitar-playing just doesn't sound serious; it sounds like casual amusement (p. 61).

This furthers my belief that either Gordon has not heard beautiful, musical guitar-playing, or he does not have the musical awareness to identify such artistry when it is apparent. His footnote to the above comment qualifies that "classical guitar is a notable exception" to his statement, but this only furthers the reality that Gordon has an unfounded bias toward classical music and instrumentation. Gordon's attempt is to make the guitar a scapegoat for popular culture, placing the hand of pop music on its head and imputing all pop's vices onto it. This is truly unfortunate.

#### **Problem #4: Misrepresentation of Contemporary Worship**

Here is an example of how Gordon, throughout his book, erects contemporary worship straw men:

Proponents of contemporary worship music, for instance, don't assert that the older hymn-writers wrote bad hymns (though some atrocious old hymns were indeed written), hymns that were theologically, literarily, or musically defective or perverse. They don't debate Paul Gerhardt's *theology* (the way many Calvinists debated the theology of Charles Wesley's or Fanny Crosby's hymns); they just dismiss his hymns as good hymns "for their time," and therefore *necessarily* unsuited to ours. A contemporaneist would no more sing Paul Gerhardt's hymns than dress in seventeenth-century German garb (p. 119).

I do not deny that there are individuals in the contemporary worship camp who would be comfortable with this representation of our perspective, but that this is representative of contemporary worship at large is entirely disingenuous. I know too many exceptions to feel comfortable that this is even a fair representation, *even if* Gordon's statement here were qualified as a generalization (of which Gordon does not grant his opponents the courtesy). Gordon doesn't footnote his reference. Perhaps he does not feel he needs to, given his perception of the ubiquity of this perspective. This, furthermore, is one of those places where Gordon's conflation of text and tune in the word "hymns" unhelpfully serves to make his argument too simplistic. I do not know of any so-called "contemporaneists" who have led Gerhardt's hymns in a stylistically modern setting. But I *do* know plenty of such folks who have done so with contemporaries of Gerhardt, particularly using the English translations of seventeenth-century German hymns graciously given to us by Catherine Winkworth. One example is my own re-setting of Johann Rist's text, "All Ye Gentile Lands Awake." Now Gordon would not accept this as a counter-example, because his conflation of text and tune into the term "hymn" leaves no room for re-tuning in the vein Indelible Grace, Red Mountain Church, Sovereign Grace Music, and other artists in the [hymns movement](#).<sup>10</sup>

Another misrepresentation:

[Pop music broadcasters and advertisers] produce music that does not require concentrated effort to appreciate, preferring instead music that is fairly simple and straightforward (p. 67).

Is this fair? Is immediacy of apprehension necessarily exclusive of profundity? Barber's "Adagio" and Vaughan Williams' "Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis" are pieces I can readily appreciate without much concentrated effort. Can not music engender in the listener both immediate, effortless appreciation and inquiry toward greater artistic depth? Within the pop genre, there are more than a few examples of songs which have both an immediacy and an ability to withstand careful scrutiny.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup><http://www.zachicks.com/the-hymns-movement>

<sup>11</sup>Two examples: (1) I've recently come across the band No More Kings, whose album *And the Flying Boombox* employs creativity and skillful guitar- and keyboard-playing, all within (and expanding upon) the pop-rock genre; (2) I've

I submit to Gordon that he has not listened to enough music in the pop family, or else he has not listened *carefully* enough to such music. If he did, he probably still would have made claims such as that above, but he would have made his points with much more qualification, precision, and generosity.<sup>12</sup>

The mark of good critical scholarship has always been fair representation of one's opponents. Gordon does not come close to this mark. He has indicated that not much has been written which winsomely advocates for the merits of contemporary worship (e.g., p. 25), and while this is true to a degree, one does not get the sense that Gordon went to *any* lengths to do the responsible work of seeking out, as scant as it may be, the credible voice of contemporary worship proponents. John Frame's *Contemporary Worship Music*<sup>13</sup> (from the same publisher!) receives little mention.<sup>14</sup> Kevin Twit's articles published online and in journals are not referenced.<sup>15</sup> Jeremy Begbie's important reflections in *Resounding Truth* are never cited.<sup>16</sup> The spirit of generosity encouraged by Ron & Debra Rienstra in *Worship Words* is never summoned.<sup>17</sup> Gordon, again and again, generously footnotes his allies, while his opponents are represented, un-referenced, through his own biased and critical grid. Straw man argumentation permeates this book (e.g. pp. 47, 48, 55, 60).

### **Problem #5: No Redemptive Hope**

Again and again, Gordon makes the claim that the very nature of pop music is so debauched, so commercially-driven, so entertainment-oriented, that it cannot possibly have any merit worth appreciating or redeeming:

Indeed, since contemporary pop music has been developed for commercial reasons, and is almost exclusively associated with fairly superficial amusement, one must raise the question whether a musical form so associated with such superficial amusement is ever an appropriate vehicle for a religion that requires repentance, sacrifice, obedience, and selflessness (pp. 60-61).

It is not that Gordon's analysis is entirely false. But is pop music (as Gordon so sweepingly defines it) all baby-less bathwater? Gordon believes so and does not have the discerning ear to distinguish throw-away pop from redemptive attempts of true artistry within this broad genre. Perhaps, then, Gordon and I are operating from a fundamentally different starting place on Niebuhr's Christ-and-culture spectrum.<sup>18</sup> Gordon espouses a "Christ against culture" model, while I believe "Christ

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posted on a the creative use of the pop-disco genre (in order to make an eschatological point) by the David Crowder Band in their latest album *Church Music*: <http://www.zachicks.com/blog/2010/9/27/david-crowder-exhibit-a-on-why-pop-rock-can-be-legitimate-ar.html>.

<sup>12</sup>Does Gordon realize that his criterion for music articulated above would exclude music made by the ancient Israelites and the worship of modern Africans in rural Ghana? He would retort that I have conflated pop and folk music, but I will address that below.

<sup>13</sup>John M. Frame, *Contemporary Worship Music: A Biblical Defense* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1997).

<sup>14</sup>The two times Frame enters into the dialogue aren't even in the text proper; they are relegated to footnotes (p. 49, n. 7; p. 77, n. 2).

<sup>15</sup>E.g., Kevin Twit, "Criteria for Judging Rock Music," available at:

[http://thirdmill.org/newfiles/kev\\_twit/PT.Twit.Rock.pdf](http://thirdmill.org/newfiles/kev_twit/PT.Twit.Rock.pdf); and "Some Thoughts on Musical Style as it Relates to Worship and Hymns (Revised)," available at: <http://www.igracemusic.com/resource/articles/musicstyle.htm>.

<sup>16</sup>Begbie isn't necessarily a proponent of contemporary worship, but his observations seem to poke holes in the woodenness of "use/receive" construction first put forth by C. S. Lewis (*An Experiment in Criticism*), re-contextualized by Myers (*All God's Children*), and proffered again here by Gordon (at least as the foundation underneath his arguments). Cf., esp. *Resounding Truth*, 42-46.

<sup>17</sup>Ron & Debra Rienstra, *Worship Words: Discipling Language for Faithful Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009).

<sup>18</sup>H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1956).

transforms culture.”<sup>19</sup> This distinction, I find, is at the heart of many of my conversations with pure traditionalists—we launch from different pads in the Christ-and-culture debate. Ultimately, for Gordon there is no redemptive hope for pop music, no common grace (to use a phrase from our shared Reformed tradition) worth identifying in pop artists.

### **Problem #6: The Hyper-Distinguished Categories of High, Folk, and Pop Culture**

Gordon devotes Chapter 6, “Three Musical Genres,” to re-articulating Ken Myers’ now influential taxonomy of “High,” “Folk,” and “Pop” music.<sup>20</sup> I simply want to point out here that any educated study of pop-rock<sup>21</sup> forces you to see the lines between what is defined as “folk” and what is defined as “pop” as extremely blurry. The lines are so blurry, in fact, that I do not think such hyper-distinguishing of “folk” and “pop” can produce the type of *conclusive* analysis that thinkers like Myers and Gordon make with such surety. It would be better to analyze pop songs piece by piece. Some, perhaps many, would prove to be ephemeral, trivial, non-serious throw-aways. But others would yield artistry on the level of Gordon’s and Myers’ descriptions of “high” culture and expressions commensurate with their descriptions of “folk” art. These categories (especially “folk” and “pop”) either need serious further nuance, or they need to be jettisoned in the enterprise of musical analysis.

## **FINAL QUESTIONS & REMARKS**

### **Where Does the Gospel Fit into This Discussion?**

I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you, my true companion, help these women since they have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel (Phil 4:2-3, NIV).

When Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray...I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel (Gal 2:11-14, NIV).

For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility (Eph 2:14, NIV).

You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other (Gal 5:13-15, NIV).

Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ (Gal 6:2, NIV).<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>Put through an eschatological-soteriological lens: Christ saves culture by replacement, or Christ will save culture by redemption, respectively. Notice that the former tends to be the type of thought that accompanies those who hold to a sharp sacred-secular distinction, which Gordon appears to do.

<sup>20</sup>Kenneth A. Myers, *All God’s Children and Blue Suede Shoes: Christians and Popular Culture* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1989), 120.

<sup>21</sup>Such as: Joe Stuessy and Scott Lipscomb, *Rock and Roll: Its History and Stylistic Development*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2008).

<sup>22</sup>See also Col 3:12-13; Eph 4:2-3; Rom 15:5-7; Phil 2:4, 14; 1 Cor 13:2. Anne Ortlund provides a similar list in her terrific primer on worship: *Up with Worship: How to Quit Playing Church* (Nashville: B&H, 2001).

These verses all teach us something about the nature of the church when the gospel takes root. We are predisposed to unity, even if it hurts.<sup>23</sup> If the gospel compels us to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Christ, how would such good news shape this discussion? Chiefly, it would form the optimistic conviction in our hearts that, in the midst of such divisive matters, a middle road is both possible and desirable. The gospel would predispose us, in such discussions, to question whether dying to self is absent in our vigorous attempts to advocate for a very one-sided position that attacks and alienates not a small part of Christ's church. There are certainly times to hold ground on one side. Sometimes, the *via media* means deadly compromise (which is obviously Gordon's perspective). But I wonder whether a gospel-driven generosity, on the front end, would not have caused Gordon to exchange his sword for a magnifying glass in his analytical approach. Many of Gordon's helpful and penetrating insights would have been more effective if he had restrained his rhetoric and off-hand remarking.<sup>24</sup> Statements that lack generosity<sup>25</sup> unnecessarily hurt and divide. There were many points in the book where I observed that a more gospel-driven generosity would have compelled Gordon to rephrase certain criticisms or hold his tongue at times from proffering them at all. Gordon's gifting is obviously of a prophetic makeup, and prophets will always struggle with seasoning their forth-telling with grace. The gospel compels us to look at Christ's bride as the Bridegroom Himself does:

I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one (John 17:20-22, NIV).

So, when prophetic voices are compelled to speak out against the ills and idolatry of Christ's bride, the gospel doubly compels us to do so in meekness and love.

### **A Fairer Approach Proposed**

When I first saw the title and subtitle, *Why Johnny Can't Sing Hymns: How Pop Culture Rewrote the Hymnal*, I immediately formed a set of expectations that I was going to thoroughly enjoy and appreciate this book. However, I was sorely mistaken. Here I offer what I was hoping to hear from Gordon. So, why can't Johnny sing hymns?

1. **Thanks in part to things like the hymns movement, Johnny *is* singing hymns!** Now, according to Gordon's definition of "hymns" (old hymn texts coupled with their traditional/classical musical setting), Johnny isn't singing them. But according to most standard definitions, Johnny is—just not in the way that Gordon would prefer.
2. **Johnny struggles to sing hymns because pop culture did indeed rewrite the hymnal.** Pop culture *does* value contemporaneity (pp. 103-128), and this "now-ism" *does* foster an unbiblical bias against hymns and their original musical settings. Gordon and I agree that this must be challenged if the church is to truly be the church.
3. **Because of the dominance of the value of contemporaneity, a generation of evangelicals has grown up never knowing hymns.** In other words, as Gordon points out, part of the reason Johnny can't sing hymns is because Johnny is ignorant that hymns

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<sup>23</sup>On p. 170, Gordon expresses his dislike of divisiveness, but obviously he feels that it is more important that his message must be heard and heeded by the church.

<sup>24</sup>Several places within the book, the author is downright snide and sarcastic (e.g., pp. 61, 98, 122). Given the sensitive nature of the subject-matter, the brazen rhetoric seems doubly insensitive and inappropriate.

<sup>25</sup>Such as "The free-church movement is therefore halfway toward being a cult...The free-church movement does effectively deny the church catholic. We should, I suggest, return the favor" (p. 122, n. 17).

even exist to be sung! I agree with Gordon's assessment when he says that it was largely Johnny's *father and mother* in the boomer generation (esp. p. 159) who indiscriminately embraced those values and raised Johnny in a church with those values. But as Johnny is now coming into his own, thinking for himself, and exposing himself to the broader church, he is rediscovering what (to quote Kevin Twit) "[his grandmother saved and his parents threw away](#)."<sup>26</sup> What we're seeing is that, as young Johnny re-discovers the church's vast arsenal of hymnody, he loves it and claims it as his own. Now, much to Gordon's chagrin, Johnny will sometimes sing hymns set in his own musical vernacular, but he is nonetheless falling in love with and growing in faith through historic hymnody. And, slowly but surely, Johnny *can* and *is* singing hymns.

4. **We should therefore seek to re-educate and re-introduce hymnody into the contemporary church.** While Gordon offers much criticism, he gives little by way of a plan of action. So perhaps we could begin this effort through a middle-road methodology of offering contemporary worshipers old hymn texts to new music (e.g. Indelible Grace or Red Mountain Church),<sup>27</sup> or the songs of the "modern hymns" movement (e.g. Keith & Kristyn Getty). Perhaps this, in turn, would whet the appetite for not only a broader textual palate but a broader musical one, too. At that point, we would be able to introduce not only historic and beautiful texts but historic and beautiful music.

## **Conclusion**

Because of the book's misrepresentation and caricaturing of contemporary worship and so-called pop music, it is unhelpful in the ongoing dialogue between traditional and contemporary worship. While its premises are fairly sound (pop culture *has* rewritten the hymnal), its conclusions and applications are not. Gordon seems to conclude that traditional, classical music and hymnody are superior in every way to contemporary/modern worship forms and hymns, and so churches should ideally rid themselves of the latter. Gordon neither makes room for mediating positions such as that of the burgeoning hymns movement, nor does he entertain the notion that perhaps the gospel compels us to be optimistic that there can and should be a *via media* in all of this. Therefore, I can only see this book as fostering an unhelpfully critical and divisive spirit in Christ's church, giving traditionalists polished yet hollow ammunition for their war against contemporary/modern worship. *Why Johnny Can't Sing Hymns* is not entirely unhelpful, though. We need voices like Gordon's, prophesying against the uncritical embracing of popular culture by the church. Unfortunately, the book as a whole takes the reader in such an unprofitable direction that it makes its positive message extremely hard to hear.

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<sup>26</sup>Kevin Twit, "My Grandmother Saved It, My Mother Threw It Away, and Now I'm Buying It Back: Why Young People are Returning to Old Hymn Texts," *Reformed Worship* (70): 30-31. Available online: <http://www.igracemusic.com/hymnbook/other/RW70.pdf>

<sup>27</sup>Of course, to agree to this, Gordon would have to come around on his understanding and appreciation of some of the musical styles employed by such artists, which seems unlikely.

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