

“Musical Chairs at South Norfolk Baptist Church”

(With the organ console at South Norfolk Baptist now moved into a side classroom; with several senior members recently having told me that they do not want their funerals held there because of what is being pawned off as music; with some young adults telling me they are leaving due to the pastor/leadership catering to one youth minority ethnic group to the exclusion of the rest of the South Norfolk population; with young adults and seniors telling me they are being ignored; I think the leadership of South Norfolk Baptist should “face the music” and realize they have been playing “musical chairs” with their music program.)

I shall be sorry if certain opinions expressed in the following paragraphs appear to any reader to be harsh; but I shall comfort myself with the reflection that every word was written in an earnest endeavor to check what I believe to be a real evil and to promote a deeper interest in the true worship of God.

-J.H. December 2013

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Dr. Hubert McNeill Poteat, Professor, Wake Forest College, North Carolina, played the organ dedication recital for the new Henry Pilcher’s Sons Pipe Organ at South Norfolk Baptist Church, June 28, 1926.

He wrote, in 1921, “Practical Hymnology,” to contest the intrusion into worship of those songs that he judged to be unworthy and ephemeral; and my thanks to him for using some of his illustrations in this article. Consider this quote from the book: “The children can be trained to love good hymns; and we are exceedingly remiss in our duty to them when we expend all our energies in superintending their mental development during the week, only to expose them on Sunday morning to reverence-killing and soul-dwarfing trash in the shape of un-worshipful songs.”

He could very well have written that in the 21st Century, about the cheap (reference to quality, not price) and tawdry music being pawned off as

suitable for the worship of God at South Norfolk Baptist. The secular music of our people at South Norfolk Baptist *outside* the church, seems to be in demand *inside* the church; songs, ditties, "7-11 hymns," that are sung to words only, on a movie screen, have a thin veneer of religion, and is now the standard.

Cheap hymns and catering to one ethnic minority youth group, to the exclusion of the majority of citizens of South Norfolk with a "praise band," are not a cure for the disease of church growth; its adoption simply means the substitution of one malady for another. The ignorance and indifference of pastor and people are, very largely responsible for conditions, as they exist today, having started in 1993, by a newly arrived pastor.

But it was the last straw, as far as I was concerned, when the organ console at South Norfolk Baptist was moved into a side classroom in 2012, at the request of the pastor, David Slayton, "to make room for more staging area for the praise singers." (More on that later).

It's as if the church was taking it's cue from the slang for the area it is trying to reach for Christ... "SoNo," (the new catch-phrase for South Norfolk) or etymologically, "sono" from the Latin "somnia" meaning sleep; state of sleep;" or as a Latin verb: sono, meaning, "make a noise." Take your pick.

There is only one fundamental reason for the singing of hymns, and that is that the people may worship God. "God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth." (John 4:24).

Unfortunately, these new slick, cheap "ditties" (7-11 hymns) have been perpetrated on many an unsuspecting congregation, as at South Norfolk Baptist, by some slick-tongued "worship leader" of some years ago, who carried along a load of specious holiness and counterfeit piety as excess baggage.

I remember one of this ilk, in the late 1990s, who marched up to the pulpit, unlimbered his muscles and larynx, and announced a "hymn." Then, while the congregation turned over the pages in search for the gem with which they were about to approach the throne of God, the singer got a few hand-picked comments about "why we're here, etc., etc., etc., and isn't God good, blah, blah, blah, etc., etc.," out of his system. Everybody being at last ready, the organist (they were still using the pipe organ at that time) reeled off a

few measures (keeping time with as much of his anatomy as he could without precipitating himself from his organ bench), the people got their feet into action, and the worship of God began. He was a peculiar “worship leader,” for whether leading the congregation or singing a solo, he kept his eyes closed, in a specious counterfeit stance, of deep religious piety.

His “persona” was all about himself. His “patter” as we used to say in the radio business, was filled with personal pronouns. He would tell the congregation to “lift up your hands,” taking a personal action and turning it into an obligatory charismatic command. Then, he would ask how everyone is doing. (We’re not at a concert, so should I scream?) He basically told you what to do and how to worship...to the point where he made you feel guilty if you didn’t conform yourself to his understanding of what worship is. It became “scripted worship” that has continued until now. And he would talk (breathy speaking) between every song, repeating the same “catch-phrases” every week; a sermonette that was annoying; forgetting that the audience of worship is God and making it a performance for those sitting in front of him.

It was about this time that this “worship leader” decided that the choir could dispense with wearing robes. It is my conviction that the choir members should wear some sort of robe, and that Herman May, when he was Minister of Music, was correct on this point. He also asked that women not wear jewelry/earrings that would distract from their uniform appearance in the choir loft. (And, by the way, the “choir loft” disappeared about this time; the choir rail was taken out to turn the pulpit platform into a stage. This was the beginning of the irreverent worship entertainment that is prevalent today).

The weekly display of variegated millinery and more or less brilliant gowns, suits and dresses in the choir loft is too much like a fashion show to escape general observation and comment from the feminine, and some of the masculine, portion of the congregation. When the “7-11 hymns” are sung, some awe-inspiring hat or dazzling dress is sure to distract attention from the act of worship then in progress; whereas, if the men and women in the choir wore robes, the fashion show would give place to a body of Christians unostentatiously striving to promote the worship of God.

Along with the fondness of secular music tunes, the taped accompaniment, the enthrallment with the electronic gizmos of today, has contributed to the downfall of the South Norfolk Baptist music program. And instead of

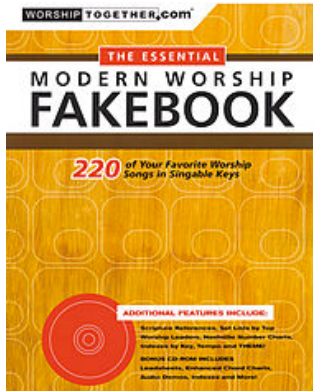
making necessary repairs to the building (including the front steps) they decided they needed another new sound system first.

They had previously (and twice now, as of 2012) turned down offers to have their Pilcher Pipe Organ repaired *at no cost to them, by a non-profit organization; a \$50,000 gift!* The pastor (David Slayton) has since moved the organ console into a side classroom, in order to make more room for rock & roll instruments and praise singers. He also ushered the last Minister of Music out the door, because he didn't want hymns used or a woman with a seminary degree, leading the music.

Cheap, secular, rock-like pseudo-Christian song-tracks on CD and cassette, have secured such a strangle hold upon the feelings and affections of the church members, that they cannot stand to be deprived of their favorite musical and sentimental (not to say intellectual) nutriment even in the place of prayer and praise. And they will gladly tell me, "Well, they're trying to reach the young people." And what about the young couples and seniors who live in South Norfolk? What about them? And the couples that are leaving the church because they no longer feel they fit in?

And the worship by motion picture screen has also given way to worship with loud "canned music" of the CD and cassette tape for the choir. These are cheap substitutes for the real thing, especially when no effort has been made to secure an organist. The choir that has to have a small projection screen to see the words placed on the balcony railing when singing so they can follow the words (pretending to sing from memory?) is not being trained to read music notes.

And why are some of the South Norfolk Baptist "praise singers" using music "Fakebooks" to sing from? (A Fakebook is a published book/collection of music containing the melody line, basic chords, and lyrics; the minimal information needed by a musician to make an impromptu arrangement of a song, or "fake it.") Example of a "Fakebook":



A commercialized hymnody has no place in true worship! A choir that sings trash of this sort on a regular basis, and cannot be taught to read music with piano or organ accompaniment, ought always to have an ambulance ready to cart basso soloists to the hospital when they collapse after the awful Sunday morning strain of ripping and tearing up and down the scale.

Every piece of music played or sung in the House of the Lord should be regarded as an act of worship, and should be chosen and rendered with absolutely no other object than of making a real contribution to the inspiration and the spiritual power of the service.

Does the church leadership think people are looking for “excitement” as they church-hop and church-shop? (I knew one member of South Norfolk who joined 6 different churches before they landed at one they “liked;” joining one church twice!) Yes, there have been churches that advertise themselves as, “The Fellowship of Excitement,” as South Norfolk did at one time. (I maintain that the results of false religious fervor claimed for the cheap ditties may not only be equaled, but also surpassed, through the use of good hymns. Defenders of the cheap ditties of the “7-11 hymn” variety, constantly mistake the zest of animal enjoyment, in a rub-a-dub rhythm or the shout of childish pleasure in a ‘catchy’ refrain, with the un-theological charismatic hand-raising, for real religious enthusiasm).

It is unfortunate that the so-called “worship leaders” (a misnomer in itself: there is no biblical reference to such a position; in reality the individual is a Choir Director; and to call the person a “worship leader” takes away the idea that by preaching, teaching, listening to, and devouring the word of God, and applying it to our lives, we are somehow *not* worshipping God) have diligently spread abroad the miserably false idea that there is no enthusiasm in the great hymns; that congregations cannot be aroused to spiritual activity

by the “old songs;” that the only remedy which can cure a church of religious lethargy, and “bring in the sheaves,” is the “new music” of the “7-11” variety. So assiduously has this wretched and poisonous heresy been disseminated, that thousands of people actually believe it.

How, in all seriousness, can a boy be expected to maintain a reverent attitude toward the Sunday morning service, when the “hymns” that are sung are so insistently reminiscent of the dance he attended the night before. If the songs, his only medium of participation in the service, are theologically thin, (as in the case of the “7-11 hymns,”) how can his feeling toward the service be reverent? (Note: have you seriously researched who wrote the lyrics and music? (And have you researched the syncopated beat of the music? You may be surprised.)

Is it because the “worship leader” likes them and thinks the people do too? Well, many people do like the cheap music. Many people like whiskey, also. But drinking whiskey is a sin. Is this an unfair illustration? No. Whiskey has a deleterious effect upon the human body. The human soul is a far more important thing than the fleshly envelope in which it resides. And if the cheap “7-11” song degrades the worship of God, and then it also degrades that spiritual essence within us through which alone we can worship.

The “7-11 hymns” need to be rooted out; they are like a cancer eating at the heart and soul of the worship and praise of God. The popular taste for trash has shuffled the real hymns permanently into the background. And their repetitious use is appalling, not only for the congregation but also by the “worship leader,” who on 3 successive Christmas Eve services, sang the same canned solo! I wanted to throw up!

I can just hear “worship leaders” saying *with* their pastors, “But we need to attract young people; we need to alter the church service to meet *their* demands.” (Note: nothing is said about the mid-to-senior adults and young couples in the community that are *not* being reached.) That can only mean one thing, and that is the lowering of the devotional standards of the Lord’s house, through the introduction of cheap “7-11 hymns,” and offer other unworthy devices, such as “religious dance,” (which South Norfolk Baptist sponsors on it’s church calendar), or recreation to charm a variegated array of half-baked tastes, like the pool table that has been installed.

When I was in the South Norfolk Baptist youth department in the 1960's and 70's, proper training of young people in Sunday school, with the genuine spirit of worship, made the transition to the church service natural and easy. But today, if reverence is undermined and all but destroyed, by the cheap ditties and sundry little stunts, the worldly recreation, (aka pool table and dance classes), and antics; then the church service will appear stiff and solemn and not to be endured. What we need is not the alteration of the church service to suit the fancy of the "worship leader" and pastor trying to entice worldly young people into a service, to the exclusion of Christians (both young and old) who come to Worship God, be spiritually fed, and *not* be entertained; but the training of the young people into a reverence and love for the church service.

Children can be trained to love the good hymns. Pastor: you are remiss in your duty to them when, during the week, they spend time in public/private school training their mental development; then you expose them on Sunday morning to reverence-killing and soul-dwarfing trash in the shape of unworshipful "7-11 songs!"

It should be our purpose to approach God's throne with our prayer and praise as reverently and worshipfully as in us lies. We have no right to use an unworthy vehicle for our praise.

Our Lord is no mumbo-jumbo deity to be propitiated with dance hall ditties; He merits and demands the best and the noblest offerings of worship that we can bring, and the emotions and aspirations that ascend to Him on the pinions of song are too divine, too sacred, to be degraded and defiled by the cheap ditties of the street.

A variety show in the choir loft and a juggling act in the pulpit would not be one whit more sacrilegious than some of the "ditties" being sung in choir lofts and some of the contortions perpetrated in pulpits all over this land. Harsh words? Yes; the time has come for sound thinking and straight talking. It is time to return to the hymns that speak to the spiritual needs of people and that glorify and praise the Lord in His House.

"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord." (Colossians 3:16)