



MUSIC AND WORSHIP

IN THE RESTORED CHURCH

Edited by Walter Whipple & Rowan Taylor

# THE POSSIBILITIES OF WORSHIP

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One of the central principles of the Restored Gospel is that God created people to be free to diminish or expand their relationship to Him. He invites us all to find joy in our creation and intices us back into His presence, but clearly the choice is ours as to the degree and quality of both our present and our eternal happiness. He revealed to the Prophet Joseph Smith that He doesn't wish to command us in all things, that we should "do many things of [our] own free will, and bring to pass much righteousness," for, indeed, the power to those ends is in us. Further, He says: "But he that doeth not anything until he is commanded, and receiveth a commandment with a doubtful heart, and keepeth it with slothfulness, the same is damned" (D & C 58:26-29).

That which follows will, hopefully, have less the tone of an exposition than of a call to action, an invitation to my fellow saints to be "anxiously engaged" in the good cause of improving the quality of worship in the Church. In that sense it is addressed to all who have experienced any degree of uneasiness about the quality of our worship, whether in format, spoken word, music, architectural setting, use of the other visual and performing arts, or even underlying concept. The proposition is that if these concerns are ours then the power and the responsibility to do something about them are also ours. If we really want to improve the quality of our worship experience the above scripture seems an invitation from the Lord to do so.

From the beginning of the Restoration the outspoken have pled for excellence in worship. The Prophet Joseph Smith spoke of the "ancient order" of services in Adamic times, wherein worship was conducted with "such propriety that no one was allowed to whisper, be weary, leave the room, or get uneasy in the least until the voice of the Lord, by revelation or the voice of the council by the Spirit, was obtained. . . ." <sup>1</sup> Brigham Young took great pains to elevate the quality of worship in the Salt Lake Tabernacle and elsewhere, <sup>2</sup> and essentially every president of the Church since then has at least occasionally addressed himself to this subject.

But these concerns have also been manifest by the Saints. Throughout our history many have anguished over our irreverence, the quality of our sermons, the inadequacy of our classroom teaching. Far fewer, it appears, have lamented the quality of our music, our religious architecture, and our production and use of the other arts in worship. This relative indifference in self-criticism may be due, in part, to the fact that we were more ambitious in these latter areas in the nineteenth century than we have been in the twentieth. Our pioneer ancestors rarely settled for mediocrity as we in the twentieth century so often have done. In fact, their focus upon what the Saints could be rather than what they momentarily were has been the source of occasional confusion to historians.

Voices crying for better expressions have been increasing in the past several decades. In *Dialogue* alone there have been a dozen major articles and numerous letters on these subjects. However, this growing concern has suffered from a lack of

focus. It seems that we have little consensus about the qualities of an ideal Mormon worship. We sense that what we do is not enough, but we are not quite sure of what we should do.

In the Spring, 1968, issue of *Dialogue*, a roundtable of architects, all but one of them Latter-day Saints, shared their thoughtful gropings for the essentials of gospel worship. Drawing a metaphor from Ruskin's "Seven Lamps of Architecture" they sought to discern some "Lamps of Mormon Architecture"—theological and ecclesiastical principles which should be expressed in our religious architecture. It seemed to them that our buildings should possess a highly significant handling of light, so that worshippers could be moved by a confrontation with that symbol of which so much is made in this gospel of light and truth. A second lamp which they discerned is the brotherhood and sisterhood of the community of the Saints which might be expressed in seating arrangements which would join us together facing one another rather than aligning us face to back along an altar-oriented axis which has no meaning in our theology. A third lamp is the exultation of the individual in the gospel, a concept seemingly incompatible with the cookie-cutter uniformity with which we erect our "authorized" designs in every locale and under every circumstance. A fourth lamp is continuous revelation from God, to which we should not respond with empty borrowings and rehashings of old ideas. The fifth and sixth lamps are the timelessness of God and His Gospel, and the supremacy of his excellence, deserving only the best and most enduring of which we are capable in all things.

In that same year in her book, *Worship and Music in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, Verena Ursenbach Hatch suggested eight characteristics of the Lord's pattern for worship: a special place of worship; services directed by the Spirit and conducted by the Melchizedek priesthood; prayer, by the Spirit and according to the scriptures; discipline in the order of worship; and simplicity. The model here is the sacrament service, of course, but it should be equally descriptive of other LDS services as well. Within this characteristic pattern she divides the service itself into four essential parts or periods: preparation, communion, instruction, and benediction.<sup>3</sup>

These expressions and others suggest a yearning for expressions responsive to the excellence and majesty of God. The Prophet Joseph Smith stated clearly that we should more than yearn for these experiences—we must fervently seek them:

The things of God are of deep import; and time, and experience, and careful and ponderous and solemn thoughts can only find them out. Thy mind, O man! if thou wilt lead a soul unto salvation, must stretch as high as the utmost heavens, and search into and contemplate the lowest considerations of the darkest abyss, and expand upon the broad considerations of eternity's expanse; [thou] must commune with God.<sup>4</sup>

If we would discern the Lord's taste in architecture and art we would heed the scriptures and lift up our eyes to the mountains.

Our yearning for expressions truly responsive to the majesty and excellence of God has been intensified by denying ourselves the satisfaction of it. We have engaged in an occasional grandiosity such as a 1950s temple design or a dance festival, but grandiosity is differentiated from grandeur by many qualities, including significance and excellence. More often in this century, however, the Saints have simply neglected grandeur and excellence altogether. We have become inexperienced in expressing these qualities and then have tried to justify ourselves by



Salt Lake City Theatre Orchestra. Left to right: Josh Midgley, Ebenezer Beesley, D. W. Evans, Geo. Careless (leader), Mark Croxall, H. K. Whitney, Orson Beesley (?). Taken, Dec. 22, 1868.

considering them to be in opposition to simplicity, humility, and honesty without realizing that true majesty and excellence are founded on such attributes rather than being antithetical to them.

In his essay on the dedication of the Washington Temple in the Summer 1974 issue of *Dialogue*, Eugene England noted the harshness of the red, white and blue stained glass windows, which seemed more appropriate to politics than worship, the mural with some qualities less than ideal, and the Hosanna Anthem, “. . . not particularly esthetic perhaps, but serving much higher values than art. . . .” The error here is in expecting these expressions to serve art. The forms and practices of worship should not serve art, but art should serve them. The stained glass, the painting, the music are all expressions of the soul to God and can lead as much to worship of Him as anything said over a pulpit. Only great art can thus reveal the Lord and the wonders of eternity to us. It is mediocre art such as now abounds in our worship which draws attention to itself rather than to God.

Both ancient and modern scriptures amply testify that the manifestation of our Heavenly Father is in the still small voice and in the private chambers of the soul. Elijah discovered that the Lord was there rather than in the strong wind, the earthquake or the fire. We in the Church have made much of this intimate finding of the Lord. For the individual it can certainly be the most meaningful way. But the Saints are also a people, a community capable of a kind of grandeur in communing with

God that no individual can attain alone. The Lord has made it clear that we need both ways. The Scriptures as well as the annals of the modern church are replete with accounts of the Lord's presence filling a place in which a throng of his children worshipped Him richly. II Chronicles provides a marvelous example of such an experience:

Also the Levites which were the singers, all of them of Asaph, of Heman, of Jeduthun, with their sons and their brethren, being arrayed in white linen, having cymbals and psalteries and harps, stood at the east end of the altar, and with them an hundred and twenty priests sounding with trumpets: It came to pass, as the trumpeters and singers were as one, to make one sound to be heard in praising and thanking the Lord; and when they lifted up their voice with the trumpets and cymbals and instruments of musick, and praised the Lord, saying, For he is good; for his mercy endureth forever: that *then* the house was filled with a cloud, even the house of the Lord; So that the priests could not stand to minister by reason of the cloud: for the glory of the Lord filled the house of God. (5:12-14)

For such a filling I believe our souls hunger.

Many of us in the Church have witnessed sublime, exultant expressions of other souls that have made us long for similarly eloquent statements to our Lord as *we* know Him. Any Mormon who has been awed by the grace of a Donatello sculpture, or caught up in the drama of a Sistine Chapel mural, or bathed in the radiation of stained glass at Chartres, or swallowed in the vast and heavenward ascent of a gothic cathedral, or whirled heavenwards by some polychoral wonder of a Gabrieli, or entranced by the movement of Asian temple dancers, or inspired by an English high church service wherein each part leads contextually to the next, or comforted by the simplicity of a Shaker meeting house—cannot help but be envious and wish for such expressions of praise to the glory of God from among ourselves.

President John Taylor in his now famous statement had a vision of such accomplishment among the Mormons:

The "Mormon" Church will have a music of its own, of the Hebraic order, and inspired with prophetic themes and hence, like as in the Catholic Church, it will be universally cultivated as the highest branch of art, and in this in time will give birth among our people to great singers and composers.<sup>5</sup>

Note that in stressing the importance of artistic excellence among the Mormons, President Taylor did not hesitate to use that qualitative comparison—the Catholic Church—which is anathema to so many contemporary Mormons and, moreover, to cite its music as worthy of our emulation. Some of us Mormons are so reactive *against* other churches and the whole Christian tradition that we have little room to develop our own expressions to the Lord. Is it possible that we take such pains to be the Church of the non-Catholics or non-Protestants that we have no time to be the Church of Jesus Christ? President Taylor says we *will* have a music of the highest expression, and if music then why not all types of religious expression? The issue, I believe, is not should this come to pass, but what can we do to effect it?

To excel as President Taylor predicted is a high and a hard thing. When we consider our present talent and wealth in comparison to that and when we consider our achievements in relation to that of past centuries, the goal becomes awesome indeed. Some might find President Taylor too idealistic, but we should remember that we are part of a Kingdom that stretches eternally in both directions and throughout the universe and contains everything that is. It is more vast than any church, including our own. It is of Him who made the worlds and us. It is of His son who will soon be here among us again. It is the Kingdom of God. We know within us that



Park City Independent Band, 1915. Front, left to right: Geo. Gidley, Bill Blackler, Ray Bircumshaw, Alfred Blackler (leader), Willard Bircumshaw, Joe Marriott, Bill Lewis. 2nd Row: Sam Denver, Bert Thomas, Reed Johnson, Wid Bircumshaw, Bert Bircumshaw, Tom Birbeck, Jack Whitla. Rear: Joe Kemp & Rex Walton.

such things should come to be and, although none of us may know how in the world they can come to be, we never will know unless we start. The Lord is clearly not going to do it for us.

It is reported that on a recent tour of St. Peter's Basilica the guide remarked, "No one would ever build such a church today; no one would ever dare!" Recently Reverend Ian White-Thompson, the Dean of Canterbury Cathedral, in speaking of the grandeur of that building said, "Our Church was built for the glory of God, for His worship. . . . Why did people build this cathedral, and the one before that? For God. Time was no object. Money was no object. It was 'Let's do the best we can!'" Speaking of the attitude of those who expanded and improved Canterbury Cathedral in the twelfth century, Kenneth MacLeish says, "The immense renovation of the cathedral so soon after its completion says something fundamental about medieval man and his Church—something that is hard for us, living in a time when religion seems to mean so little to so many, to understand. . . . Nothing was too good—or good enough—for a monument raised to the glory of God."<sup>6</sup> Our pioneer forebears seem to have understood this better than we do.

In order to regain this lost concept of offering our best and noblest expressions to God and His glory, those of us who desire these things should continue the process of education in the arts in our wards and branches. While we have no right to force our ideas of progress on our brothers and sisters, we who hunger and thirst for nobler expressions should pursue them as energetically as we are able. Hopefully our efforts will be first spent in improving the quality of sacrament and conference services. But we needn't be limited to those occasions.

Several years ago LDS students at the University of Utah began holding such "worship services" on Sunday evenings in the Assembly Hall on Temple Square. There, with no verbose welcome or disruptive "announcements," a group of Saints held a simple worship service in which well-performed vocal and instrumental music of the highest calibre alternated with sections of an ongoing "narration" or sermon. The chosen theme for the service was elaborated in turn by each musical

selection and spoken section so that the worshipper was gently but unswervingly thrust forward into communion with his Heavenly Father. Here artistic excellence was instrumental in creating an intensely personal experience which left worshippers contemplative and motionless during the long organ postlude. Sadly, some observers report that in recent years this practice has degenerated into another series of firesides. The awed hush is gone.

But the opportunity should be there for us all, as it was for those students, to gather ourselves together and, with sincere humility and prayer to guide us, explore the heights and expanses of worship and artistic expression. If those of us who care were to begin such worship services wherever we could gather and they were to grow in prominence and worth as President Taylor's predictions suggest, they would increase the light among us all and therefore to the world. In time it might become apparent that we would need appropriate buildings to properly house such activities. These might be vast in some cases, but they should always be of the highest aesthetic quality, churches in which the greatest expression of every art form would be integral. Perhaps those who have so generously given money to the Church for field houses, academic buildings and fountains might be persuaded to support architectural creations of greater and more lasting significance, churches of the calibre of St. Peter's Basilica, Amiens, Ankor Wat or even the Pazzi Chapel, where Latter-day Saints could collectively offer their highest expressions to God. From such centers and such activities these ideals might well spread out to fill the whole Church.

This kind of thinking may be preposterous or it may be the kind of thinking that is necessary before President Taylor's prophecy reaches fruition. The coming of the Lord to the earth again also sounds preposterous. Yet He is coming. In how many ways should we be ready for Him?

Praise ye the Lord.  
Praise God in his Sanctuary:  
praise him in the firmament of his power.  
Praise him for his mighty acts:  
praise him *according* to his excellent greatness.  
Praise him with the sound of the trumpet:  
praise him with the psaltery and harp.  
Praise him with the timbral and dance:  
praise him with stringed instruments and organs.  
Praise him upon the loud cymbals:  
praise him upon the high sounding cymbals.  
Let everything that hath breath praise the Lord.  
Praise ye the Lord. (Psalm 150)

<sup>1</sup>(*Documentary*) *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1946), Vol. I, p. 256.

<sup>2</sup>*Journal of Discourses*, Vol. IX, pp. 194-195.

<sup>3</sup>(Provo, Utah: M. Ephraim Hatch, 1968).

<sup>4</sup>Letter written in Liberty Jail, March 19, 1839, published in *Millennial Star*, 17: 54-55.

<sup>5</sup>As quoted by Hatch, *Music and Worship*, pp. 128-129.

<sup>6</sup>"Canterbury Cathedral," *National Geographic*, 149 (March, 1976), 375, 370.