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 Introduction

There is a lot to be said for maintenance. From a simple carving knife to a complex space station, everything works better when it is well maintained. In fact, maintenance cannot be postponed for too long without painful consequences. Maintenance on our church building is a good example. What may have cost thousands of dollars a-year in routine maintenance, ended up costing hundreds of thousands of dollars in maintenance deferred. Yet, through the faithful commitment of this entire congregation and the tireless efforts of our dedicated building and grounds team, we celebrate the fact that this property is as well maintained as it has ever been. However, as important as the church structure is to the life of our congregation, building maintenance is not one of the Great Ends of the Church. No. Our primary purpose is “The Maintenance of Divine Worship.”

## I

In fact, it’s been said that worship is the only indispensable thing the church does. Together, we offer many services in faithful response to God’s call. But the one thing which we must maintain at the center of our life together is worship. Why? Because the primary focus of this service, the basic reason for our worship, is God and God alone. We worship simply because God is our God and **“we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand.”** When we worship we are busy serving God. The word “liturgy” means literally, “the work of the people.” “Our service of worship on Sunday is central, essential, and primary to all other service to God.... Sunday helps to remind us who we are, who we are not, and who, by God’s grace, we are becoming. Worship reminds us why we serve and Whom we serve.” (Wm. Willamon) Best of all, the good news is that even as we are busy serving God, in our service of worship, we find that God is also busy serving us! That said, the purpose of maintaining worship is not in order to please us. Worship is not about me and you, it’s about “God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and Jesus Christ his only son, our Lord.” That’s why worship is the only indispensable thing the church does. Where there is no worship, there is no church.

## II

Want to fight about it? Yes we do. In fact, fights over the maintenance of divine worship can be even fiercer than battles over building maintenance. Naturally folks squabble over the color of the carpeting in the sanctuary, the need for adding an elevator, or the wisdom of removing the choir loft. Some have even left the church over such things when they didn’t get their own way. Why, I know of one woman who resigned in a huff when the sink installed in the ladies’ room was not placed on the wall where she had recommended it. But such controversies, gradually fade away. It is the worship wars that never cease. For instance, if you personally had sole authority over the way we conduct our worship, I bet you would make some changes, wouldn’t you? Some of you would no doubt start by throwing away these silly bulletins in order to free us up to go with the Spirit’s flow. Others will want to eliminate intrusions that you think interrupt the proper flow, such as announcements, small talk, mission call, and passing the peace. Still other’s will say, “if it ain’t broke, don’t try tinker with it.” Then there are the perennial communion questions. Why not celebrate the Lord’s supper every Sunday? Why do we have to sit in our pews instead of walking forward to receive? Why can’t we have the option of wine **or** grape juice? Why can’t we have bite size servings of bread all the time? Oi Vey! It’s enough to drive the worship council crazy. But that’s not their biggest challenge.

## III

I mean, we’ve got trouble, right here in Lake City, it starts with an M, that rhymes with M and it stands for Music. Yes, we’ve got trouble, right here in Lake City and in every other church community where music matters. Music may be the international language, but if that’s true then we have at least five different countries represented in this congregation alone, many of whom seem to be either unable or unwilling to understand each other. There are those from classical land—we only understand music composed by dead white males during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. There are folks from folk land—we think that if Peter, Paul & Mary wouldn’t sing it, it’s not worth singing. There are those from Jazz land—we prefer to worship “round about Midnight.” There are those from praise land—we find it impossible to hold a hymnbook and sing at the same time. Then there are those from the land of contemplation—we tend to fall asleep after singing the same line over and over and over. Time does not

permit us to even comment on the other myriad music languages such as blue grass, country western, hip-hop, hard rock, and rap. Taste in music is as personal as toothpaste taste. I think it was Count Bassie who, when asked to define good music said, “If it sounds good, it is good. No wonder some folks contend *“that music in worship is the most church-dividing issue within a congregation.”* (Charles Wiley)

## IV

Rick Warren, author of the Purpose Driven Church, claims that there is no such thing as Christian music, only Christian lyrics. Personally, I beg to differ with him. I think there is such a thing as sacred music—Gregorian Chant, preferably sung in Latin. I once heard a beautiful recording of Gregorian chant being played in a music shop in Burlington. I felt like I was being transported into an experience of divine worship right there in the store. So I asked for the title of the recording. It was called “Pig-gorian Chant”. It was sung in Latin but the English translation was quite familiar: “Old Mac Donald had a farm, ee—ii—ee—ii—oh!” So which is more Christian? To sing: (to tune of Doxology) “*Old Mac he had himself a farm, ee—ii—ee—ii—ee—ii—ee—oh.*” Or to sing: (to tune Old Mac Donald) “*Jesus died on Calvary, He died for you and me. Jesus rose up from the grave. He rose to set us free.*” Throughout church history, great theologians have put God’s truth to the music style of their day. The tune of Martin Luther’s “*A mighty Fortress is Our God*” is borrowed from a popular song of his day. Charles Wesley used several popular tunes from the taverns and opera houses in England. John Calvin hired two secular songwriters of his day to put his theology to music. The Queen of England was so incensed by these tasteless tunes that she derisively referred to them as Calvin’s Geneva jugs! When “Silent Night was first published, George (W)Veber, music director at the Mainz Cathedral, called it “vulgar mischief and void of all religious and Christian feelings.” Even Handel’s Messiah was widely condemned as “vulgar theater” by the churchmen of his day. Like the criticism of today’s contemporary choruses, the Messiah was panned for having too much repetition and not enough message—it contains nearly one hundred repetitions of “Hallelujah!” The truth is that so-called “traditional and contemporary worship” have always existed side by side it’s just the definitions that have shifted with the times.

## V

So what’s the problem? We have this incredibly wide variety of Christian music out there and that’s a good thing. We have rich historical forms of worship as well as emerging traditions that are Spirit led and that’s a good thing. The challenge is how can we honor such variety in a common service of worship. As one theologian puts it, “*It is a problem to provide a theologically and liturgically coherent account of worship when it is directed to narrow sociological bands defined by race, class and increasingly by age.*”

*It is a problem when worship is so identified with particular genres such that **common** worship becomes an oxymoron. Church buildings are becoming “branded” by type of music in worship. More and more, when you walk into a church, without anyone saying a word, you know: “This is an organ church” or “This is a band church.” What does it mean for our notion that the church is catholic (that is universal and comprehensive) when we cannot find a way to sustain worship together?”* Good question. Personally I don’t see it as a problem. I see it as an opportunity. We are being given an opportunity to grow in our understanding of what it means to be faithful to our purpose of maintaining divine worship. When Jesus, a Jew, encounters a Samaritan woman she asks: “**Our ancestors worshiped God at this mountain, but you Jews insist that Jerusalem is the only place for worship, right?**” Contemporary Samaritan worship vs. traditional Jewish worship. How does Jesus’ reply? “**God is spirit, and those who worship God must worship in spirit and truth**” (John 4:24)

## VI

Get it? It’s not the order of the service that is essential. It’s the spirit of worship. It’s not the style of preaching that counts. It’s the truth that is proclaimed. It’s not the music. It’s the message. According to John Calvin the marks of a true church are two: the preaching of the Word of God and the administration of the sacraments. Everything else is up for grabs as long as it is in accord with church doctrine. When it comes to Christian music the Bible gives us some clear direction. “**With gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.**” You may not have a great voice—sing anyway. You may not like the tune—sing anyway. Don’t

just stand there with your bare face hanging out! **“Sing your hearts out to God!”** says St. Paul. It seems to me no accident that, indispensable as it is, the maintenance of divine worship is listed as the **third** great purpose of the church. Because truly **common** worship is possible only among those who have first embraced the gospel of salvation in a church where we experience shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship as children of God. That’s why St. Paul precedes his comments about music in worship by saying: **“Let the peace of Christ keep you in tune with each other, in step with each other. None of this going off and doing your own thing. And cultivate thankfulness. Whatever you do, let every detail in your lives—words, actions, whatever—be done in the name of the Master, Jesus, thanking God the Father every step of the way.”** (Colossians 3:15 f.)

#### Conclusion

80% of maintaining common worship is showing up! So, as we gather here around the Lord’s table, and as we gather around tables of fellowship downstairs, following this service, remember this: **“Let the peace of Christ keep us in tune with each other.** And never forget to be thankful for what God has done for you.” Do that, and divine worship will maintain itself.