

The Ascending Voice: An International Symposium Of Sacred A Cappella Music

AN EXPLORATION OF A CAPPELLA MUSIC WITHIN THE CONVERGENCE  
WORSHIP MODEL

A Paper

Submitted for consideration to the Ascending Voice Symposium

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by

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June 2007

The Convergence Worship model has been influential in many Christian communities over the last decade. In a recent book from the popular Zondervan series *Counterpoints: Church Life*, Convergence Worship is listed as one of the six most prevalent views among North American protestant churches today.<sup>1</sup> Churches that are in the process of moving from "Praise and Worship" or "Seeker" models to a Convergence Worship model often find themselves in need of music that supports the principles of the Convergence Worship model in a more holistic way than their current repertoires. These churches often have little experience with and have given even less thought to the unique contributions a cappella music can bring to worship communities that implement the Convergence Worship model and hail from a mainly instrumental tradition.<sup>2</sup> A cappella vocal music is an untapped resource that contributes to the execution of Convergence Worship in content, structure, style, and breadth. This paper will quickly outline the Convergence Worship model for those unfamiliar with its principles and then explore the unique way a cappella music embodies and contributes to those principles.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul F. M. Zahl and Paul Basden, *Exploring the Worship Spectrum : 6 Views* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Many churches embracing the convergence worship model are communities who have been raised on a very thin slice of church music (a North American contemporary praise and worship scene from the 1980s and 1990s) and are unaware of the rich history of a cappella music in the church. They are eager and ripe for more exploration of this tradition.

## PRINCIPLES OF CONVERGENCE WORSHIP

The Convergence Worship model combines 1) the story of the gospel (*content*) with 2) biblical *structure* (word and table) housed in 3) community-affirming forms of expression (*style*) converging the 4) *breadth* of the Church, both the past and the present.<sup>3</sup> First, the Convergence Worship model focuses on the story of God as its *content*. The story of creation, fall, covenant, exodus, incarnation, death, resurrection, ascension, Pentecost, and recreation provide the "what" of the Convergence Worship model. The content of such elements as music, prayer, preaching, visuals, and architecture overflows with the proclamation of God's acts in history, God's work in the present, and God's promises for the future.

Second, the Convergence Worship model *structures* the content of God's story around the Biblical precedent of a "Service of the Word" and a "Service of the Table" in dialogue. The Service of the Word enacted through preaching and teaching is clearly foundational for the gathering of the early church as chronicled in both Acts and Paul's letters.<sup>4</sup> Also foundational in Acts and the works of Paul is the Service of the Table.<sup>5</sup> The Service of the Word is seen mainly as a proclamation from God to His people while the Service of the Table is viewed predominantly as the people's response to God's work through Jesus Christ. This dialogical model of proclamation and response is modeled throughout Scripture in both a simple two-fold call and response as well as a cyclical on-

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<sup>3</sup> Convergence Worship is defined in many of Robert Webber's works. A concise definition can be found in chapter 5 of *Exploring the Worship Spectrum: 6 Views* cited above.

<sup>4</sup> See Acts 2:42 and 1 Corinthians 14:26-33

<sup>5</sup> See Acts 2:42 and 1 Corinthians 11:17-34

going dialogue between God and His people.<sup>6</sup> The Convergence Worship model seeks to foster this dialogical relationship between the congregation and God through the implementation of dialogical structures in all elements of worship, not only the meta-structure of Word and Table.

Third, the Convergence Worship model embodies the story of God in a dialogical structure through a community-affirming *style*. These culturally-affirming styles differ from time to time and location to location. Style is not the *master* of the Christian community, not as that which holds the power to divide the Church from culture; rather, style is the *servant* of the Christian community, that which uses culture as a conduit to deliver the content of the gospel in the structure of dialogical Word and Table to the world.<sup>7</sup> Elements in a service designed with a Convergent Worship model are then evaluated as to their content, place in the dialogue, and "conductivity" with culture. Should this sound too culturally appealing, the last principle of Convergence Worship, the component that works as a check on cultural tunnel vision, must be considered.

Finally, the Convergence Worship model seeks to *combine* worship expressions from the entire *breadth* of Christian history and tradition with new expressions from today's church. In the early development of the Convergence Worship model, many chose to call the model "Blended Worship" to communicate this final principle. The term "blended" soon became attached to the practice of using both hymns and choruses in suitable proportions to achieve peace in the so-called worship wars. The combination of

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<sup>6</sup> See Nehemiah 8:1-8 for an example.

<sup>7</sup> The scope of this paper is too narrow to discuss the problem of culture as a pure conduit for the gospel. I am aware that all conduits (or mediums) influence, to some degree, the messages that travel through them, but the Convergence Worship model views that influence as minimal.

worship expressions from different times and traditions to appease *style* wars missed and still misses the intent of the Convergence Worship model.<sup>8</sup> The combination of elements from past and present should demonstrate and proclaim the reality of the Spirit of God moving in the life of the Church both past and present. This principle is more an acknowledgement of God's omnipresence and sovereignty over space and time than a formula for stylistically-pleased parishioners.

#### THE CONTRIBUTION OF A CAPPELLA MUSIC TO THE CONVERGENCE MODEL

Let me begin this section by disclosing my affiliation with a tradition that uses predominantly instrumental music for both congregational song and presentational song.<sup>9</sup> My interest in and appreciation for a cappella song began in a search to find expressions that work within the Convergence Worship model. While I am sympathetic to (and sometimes indeed envious of) those who decide to use a cappella music as the only form of musical expression in worship services, my intent here is to demonstrate why a cappella music is an underutilized resource for instrumental churches trying to implement the Convergence Worship model.<sup>10</sup> The following material explores how a cappella music uniquely contributes to the above principles of the Convergence Worship model.

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<sup>8</sup> The *style* element is addressed above and is concerned with the accessibility of worshippers to content and structure through culturally familiar and necessary forms, not style preferences for different historical situations or traditions.

<sup>9</sup> My roots are in the Independent Christian Churches and Churches of Christ, a subgroup of the Stone-Campbell Movement. I teach at a college affiliated with this branch of the movement.

<sup>10</sup> I am aware that there are churches who use only a cappella music and implement the Convergence Worship model. I trust they see the benefits of a cappella music in general and need no apologetic for using them in any worship model.

A cappella music begins its contribution to Convergence Worship by providing a unique vocal exploration of the *story* of God. If God's story is the content of the Convergence Worship model, a cappella music becomes a unique and primal storyteller for that content. Storytelling has always been a vocal event. For millennia, story has been passed down from one generation to the next via oral tradition, often in the form of a song. The Bible contains many reiterations of God's story set into song form.<sup>11</sup> There is little doubt that the majority of these songs were sung without the accompaniment of instruments due to the frequency with which songs were sung and the nomadic heritage of Israel.<sup>12</sup> This unaccompanied vocal experience captures the essence of storytelling in its most raw and intimate form. In addition, this unique vocal experience also invites the singer to participate in the story as well as retell it. There is both a vivid and irreproducible experience of anamnesis and prolepsis brought about only by a human voice in song.<sup>13</sup> While story can be told via the printed word, images, instrumentally accompanied music, and many other media, storytelling, in its most radical form, comes through the naked voice.

A cappella music continues its contribution to Convergence Worship by providing a superb vehicle for *dialogue*. Like storytelling, dialogue is essentially a vocal event between two parties. A cappella song provides a medium for dialogue that preserves the

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<sup>11</sup> See Exodus 15:1-21, 1 Samuel 2:1-10, and Luke 1:46-55, 68-79.

<sup>12</sup> Andrew Wilson-Dickson, *The Story of Christian Music : From Gregorian Chant to Black Gospel : An Authoritative Illustrated Guide to All the Major Traditions of Music for Worship*, 1st Fortress Press pbk. ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003). Song was such a frequent part of life that the excessive use of instruments would have impeded the frequency.

<sup>13</sup> Anamnesis is a term used to describe a hyper-experience of remembrance where the past is pulled into the present and experienced as if the one remembering were actually a part of the narrative. Prolepsis is a similar term that describes the same experience in regards to the future.

primarily vocal nature of the event while simultaneously infusing speech with musical qualities. These musical qualities, when crafted carefully, bring unique clarity and meaning to speech, meaning and clarity that text or rhetoric alone cannot.<sup>14</sup> The introduction of instrumentation can detract from the primal vocality of dialogue and should be used with care when dialogical material is set to music.

Next, a cappella music contributes to the Convergence Worship model through a distinctive connection to culture via *style*. This may seem an odd claim at first because of the somewhat small emphasis placed on a cappella music in the mass media, but more reflection provides many examples of a cappella music in the North American culture and cultures around the world.<sup>15</sup> For example, one of the few times people sing together in public is the singing of the national anthem, usually a cappella, at a sporting event. Again, one of the most popular shows on television consists of singers auditioning a cappella in an attempt to display their talent in its most fundamental form (usually for ridicule by the judges).<sup>16</sup> Aside from these examples, the real cultural strength of a cappella music is the power to unite communities.<sup>17</sup> One needs only to think of immigrants, protestors, oppressed peoples, and political prisoners brought together by the simplicity and unity of a cappella singing. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian

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<sup>14</sup> I am not advocating some hidden meaning that only a musical setting of a text can reveal; instead, I am advocating *heightened* meaning through a musical setting, much like the power of a symbol to express a heightened reality through its non-textual and aesthetic function.

<sup>15</sup> Mass media, by no means, dictates culture. I use it here as a quick barometer for the general public's view of culture.

<sup>16</sup> The television show *American Idol* is by no means a positive example of a cappella song in America. I only cite it here to demonstrate the sometimes myopic tendencies we have towards recognizing a cappella events in popular culture.

<sup>17</sup> Again, the purpose of style in Convergence Worship is cultural access in community. Styles that disrupt community are counter productive. See above.

imprisoned by Nazi forces and later martyred for his faith states that "in singing together it is possible for [the congregation] to speak and pray the same Word at the same time; in other words, because here they can *unite* in the Word."(emphasis mine)<sup>18</sup> Bonhoeffer goes on to present a case for unison singing, presumably a cappella, as a catalyst for community. While I disagree with *unison* singing as the *exclusive* community-forming act<sup>19</sup>, I do affirm Bonhoeffer's statement (applied to the song of the people in both unison and parts) when he says:

It is the voice of the Church that is heard in singing together. It is not you that sings, it is the Church that is singing, and you, as a member of the Church, may share in its song.<sup>20</sup>

Finally, a cappella music contributes to the Convergence Worship model by providing a rich history of song suitable for embodying the entire *breadth* of Christian worship from the past and present. A cappella song is the oldest form of Christian music and has always had a place in the Church throughout history. The majority of liturgical families have incorporated a cappella song into their services at one point in their history and many still retain portions even today.

While the abundance of historical material is a notable asset to apply to the principle of *breadth*, a cappella music's ability to connect and combine past generations through the process of oral tradition is also equally fascinating. When music is passed on from generation to generation through oral tradition, a true convergence of the cultures and generations takes place. The old is mixed with the new and the music passed on reflects this co-mingling. When music was first written down and codified, this co-

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<sup>18</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans. John W. Doberstein (New York: Harper & Row, 1954), 59.

<sup>19</sup> In my opinion, Bonhoeffer proceeds too far in his attempt to remove the distractions from community song.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

mingling began to decrease as the texts began to preserve the music in the manner a museum piece as opposed to a living entity.<sup>21</sup> Community responsibility in music-keeping and music-creating was slowly given over to the composer and performers who fixed their music in the medium of print, not the medium of community memory. A cappella song, because of its musical portability and accessibility, has the opportunity to revive the co-mingling of generations and communities through the use, once again, of community oral tradition.

In conclusion, the Convergence Worship model has much to gain from the unique contributions of a cappella song. Content, structure, style, and breadth all benefit from a cappella music's strong history, primal vocality, heightened dialogue, and community-centered characteristics.

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<sup>21</sup> Wilson-Dickson, 48.

## WORKS CITED

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