



Soothing Ourselves to Death

Should we give people what they want or what they need?

WHEN church music directors lead congregations in singing contemporary Christian music, I often listen stoically with teeth clenched. But one Sunday morning, I cracked. We'd been led through endless repetitions of a meaningless ditty called "Draw Me Close to You," which has zero theological content and could just as easily be sung in any nightclub. When I thought it was finally and mercifully over, the music leader beamed. "Let's sing that again, shall we?" he asked. "No!" I shouted, loudly enough to send heads all around me spinning while my wife, Patty, cringed.

I admit I prefer traditional hymns, but even so, I'm convinced that much of the music being written for the church today reflects an unfortunate trend—slipping across the line from worship to entertainment. Evangelicals are in danger of amusing ourselves to death, to borrow the title of the classic Neil Postman book.

This trend is evident not just in theater-like churches where musicians—with their guitars and bongo drums—often perform at ear-splitting levels. It's also true of Christian radio, historically an important source of serious preaching and teaching. Several stations recently—many acting on the advice of a leading consulting firm—have dropped serious programming in favor of all-music formats. For example, a major station in Baltimore has dropped four talk shows in order to add music. Family Life Radio, a first-class broadcaster, has adopted a new program split of 88 percent music "to appeal to the 35- to 50-year-old demographic." A respected broadcaster recently dropped *Focus on the Family* on the grounds that it had become too involved in "moral issues." Does anyone really believe the Bible is indifferent to moral questions—or that modern Christians should be?

One station cancelled my four-minute *BreakPoint* commentary saying that four minutes is the equivalent of one song. Horrors! Besides, the station manager allowed, *BreakPoint* is too serious and not contemporary enough. When another major station, this one in Cincinnati, replaced *BreakPoint* with music, I called the station manager, arguing that believers need to think Christianly about major worldview issues. The young woman on the other end of the phone admonished me: "But we don't want to do anything that will upset our listeners." Younger women, she said, want "something to help them cope with life."

This view was confirmed by a Christian homemaker

interviewed for a TV special on evangelicalism. She is so busy, she explained, taking care of the kids, family activities, Bible study, cooking, etc., that she doesn't even read the newspaper or care what is happening in the world around her. Church for her is getting her spirits lifted.

Admittedly, modern life does create enormous stress. But can't the church offer comfort *and* help people confront the culture?

The decision by influential Christian broadcasters and music companies to avoid moral controversies could result

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in the church withdrawing from the culture as it tragically did a century ago. What is the job of Christian radio, after all? To give people what they want, or—as with any ministry—to give them what they need? Music is important in the life of the church and can inspire us to focus on Christ. But it cannot take the place of solid teaching.

The great strength of radio, as with books, has been to present in-depth teaching and moral discussion that engages Christians cognitively. This is something Americans find increasingly difficult. According to a recent study, the average college graduate's proficient literacy in English has declined from 40 percent in 1992 to 31 percent today. The study defines proficient literacy as the ability to read lengthy, complex texts and draw complicated inferences. Think about it: One out of three college graduates cannot read a book or absorb a serious sermon.

But the gospel above all else is revealed propositional truth—truth that speaks to all of life. Yes, the gospel is simple enough for a child to understand. Yet if you want to study doctrine and worldview, you need the capacity to think. You need the capacity to engage ideas cognitively.

Doctrine and biblical teaching are not—as some "emerging church" advocates believe—dry, dusty, abstract notions. This truth has to be carried into the heart and applied. But there is no escaping that it is truth that must be learned.

Sure, skits and catchy music are good tools for drawing people in, and good Christian music on the radio can inspire us. But these things aren't an end in and of themselves; they should engage us in learning and applying truth.

When Postman published his book two decades ago, he feared television would impair our capacity to think. He was right. Can we learn from this—or are we destined to follow suit, the church blissfully amusing itself into irrelevance? ☪