

As parents you know the power of a good teachable moment. If your toddler whacks his sister on the head with a metal Tonka truck, that is a teachable moment. If your teenager comes home and tells you that she got a speeding ticket, that's a teachable moment. You can tell your children not to hit one another and not to drive too fast but until they experience the natural consequences of their actions, they don't always listen to mom and dad as they should.

As a church I feel that we have a teachable moment before us and I want to take advantage of it. At the center of this teachable moment is one of the songs we sang this morning—*Trading My Sorrows*. Let me explain why this is a teachable moment.

About eight years ago the elders at our church decided that we would not be singing this song anymore. At this past Tuesday's elder meeting the elders made the decision that when accompanied by an appropriate explanation, like the one I am giving this morning, we could begin to include this song again. The journey that took place in the last eight years is a good opportunity to explain two main ideas—the importance of sound doctrine and the importance of good leadership in the local church. Whether or not you like this song, I trust that you will listen and learn from this teachable moment.

Here is a short background on this song. *Trading My Sorrows* was written by Darrell Evans and was copyrighted in 1998. CCLI is the organization that licenses the use of Christian songs for public use so they keep accurate records of how many times a song is sung around the world every year. Between 1993 and 1999, *Trading My Sorrows* always appeared on the top 25 most popular worship songs in the world. That says a lot about the popularity of this song. It was near

the beginning of the mass popularity of the song that the elders decided to no longer use this song in our Sunday morning worship.

The whole saga began with good intentions. Someone in the congregation raised a theological question about the song and brought their concerns to the elders. The elders took a look at it and decided that there could be some theological issues with the song. Because we did not want to make a snap decision but rather take time to look at the lyrics closely, we decided to remove the song from rotation until we had adequate time to examine the song. Note—we did not officially ban the song we merely temporarily removed it from rotation. We had never before or since made such a decision so we wanted to proceed carefully and prayerfully. We then informed all of the worship leaders of our decision.

This elicited a very strong reaction from at least two people in the congregation. By the way, the reason that I can tell this story publicly is because the key players left our church many years ago. My point in all of this is not to point fingers or assign blame but to use this as a learning experience for everyone. The reaction centered around whether or not the elders had the right to say which songs the worship team could or could not sing. In their opinion, we had overstepped our bounds and had encroached upon their area of leadership. Matters only got worse from that point forward. During the heat of the controversy, we brought in a woman from La Crosse to hold a worship training seminar for our church. During the seminar, the two disgruntled people shared this story with the worship trainer and then she sat me down and proceeded to lecture me on how awful it was that we had banned this popular song and that we had absolutely no right to do such a thing.

This was classic case of throwing gasoline on the fire—it blew the whole issue sky high. We spent the next several months meeting with several of the involved parties trying to work through the deep conflict. In effect, we had initiated the early stages of church discipline. The issue and the overreaction had caused deep division in our local body of believers which threatened to spread further and deeper. We no longer had a minor issue of checking into the lyrics of a song—we had a very serious matter of disunity on our hands.

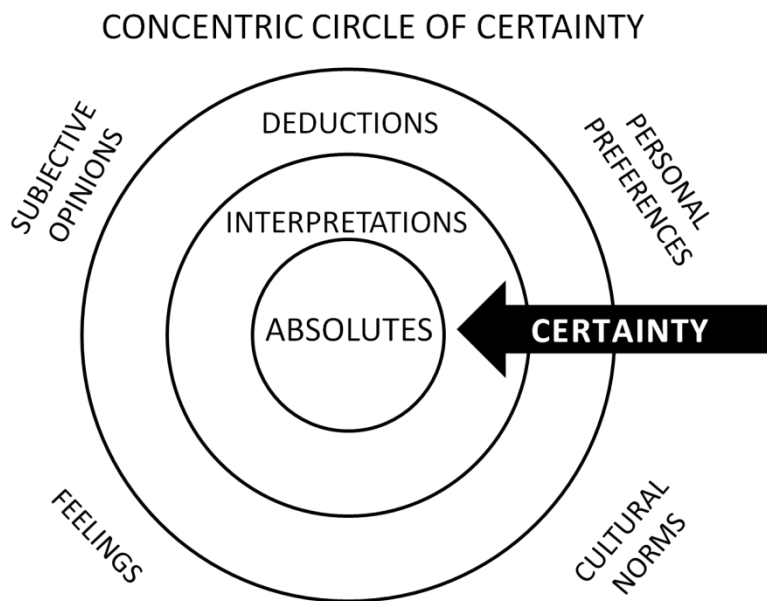
The issue really came to a head when I was sitting in my office on the second floor of the Landmark Center one day. The phone rang and the man on the other end told me that his name was Darrell Evans. You might recognize the name as the writer of the song in question. He said to me, “I am Darrell Evans Sr. and I want to know why you banned my son’s song from your church.” That was one of the most surreal experiences I have ever had. The question everyone asks is, “How did Darrell Evans and his father know what decisions our tiny little church was making? We don’t know for certain, but the woman who had led the worship workshop had been a concert promoter for Christian bands and had lots of contacts in the Christian music industry, so it almost certainly came through her. Darrell Evans Sr. said the same thing the two people in our church said, “This is such a popular song. All of the churches are singing it. Why would you ban it?”

One of the primary jobs of an elder is to teach sound doctrine. *He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it* (Titus 1:9). Furthermore, it is the responsibility of the elders of

a local church to maintain the unity of the church. Ephesians 4 reads, *Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace* (Eph. 4:3). On the second to last day of his life, Jesus prayed fervently for Christian unity. *I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me* (John 17:22-23).

I would never say that we must maintain unity at all costs. If we had an issue of major doctrinal importance and practice, we will stand firm regardless of whether it causes disunity or not. For example, if someone complained that they don't like the fact that our church believes that Jesus is the only way to salvation, there is no way we could compromise on this core belief for the sake of unity.

It's time to pull out what I call my Concentric Circle of Certainty. Many of you have seen this before but it bears repeating in this context. In the Word of God, there are absolute truths. These



are truths that we are literally willing to die for (but unlike, for example, Muslim extremists, we are never willing to kill for these beliefs). These absolutes need to be at the center of our belief system. These are non-negotiables and if a person or a group of people believe differently about core beliefs, then the group needs to go their separate way. We cannot “agree to disagree” about absolute truths. They are just too important.

The next layer in the concentric circle is interpretations. I am very certain of these truths but not so certain as to be willing to give my life for them. For example, the belief in premillennialism is in our doctrinal statement. As a pastor, I must hold to premillennialism to retain my ordination within the Free Church but even members of our church are given the freedom to hold a different belief about the millennium. Most things in this category we should agree upon but we can agree to disagree about some things.

When you extend to the outer level of the circle you reach the area of deductions, subjective opinions, feelings, personal preferences and cultural norms. These are all areas about which Christians will have great freedom and large amounts of disagreement—and that's OK. In many ways we welcome this disagreement because it demonstrates what true unity is all about. If we all believe exactly the same thing about everything, we would call that a cult but true Christian unity is best displayed when we unite around absolute truth and agree to disagree about the less certain beliefs.

Problems occur when we develop a confusion of the categories. For example, when the center circle of absolutes grows so large that it swallows up feelings and opinions, meaning that which should be called feelings and opinions become absolutes, you have arrived at legalism which can be just a few small steps away from being a cult. But the opposite extreme is liberalism when you shrink the circle so small that absolute truths almost cease to exist.

I tell you all of this in order to explain what happened eight years ago with this song. First of all, a few people confused their categories. They elevated their personal feelings about this particular song and put them in an inner circle where they did not belong. This is why we need to be so careful with our opinions about music and especially worship music. Music is inherently one of those areas in life where everyone has opinions and sometimes very strong opinions. For example, generally a person falls in to one of two categories—you either love country music or else you hate country music. Am I right? We tend to be very opinionated about our music.

But we must take great care to keep our opinions and feelings about worship music in the outer categories of this circle. We can agree to disagree about which style of music and which particular songs we each like best. We intentionally have a blended worship style at Grace in order to allow for these differing opinions about music. Most of you were not able to attend our congregational meeting last month when we discussed the real possibility of moving to two worship services within the next six to twelve months. I explained that if we do this, one thing is certain—we will not ever have two different styles of music in these two services. Churches that offer a traditional service and a contemporary service will inevitably divide the congregation into two separate churches which will almost certainly be divided by generations, and that would be a tragedy.

We not only have to be careful about our opinions about our taste in music but I would go a step further than that and challenge you to broaden your horizons when it comes to music. You don't have to like everything we sing but most of the songs will have decent lyrics and you can concentrate on them if you don't like the style of music. This is what I try to do every Sunday. Sometimes the Holy Spirit just knocks me over by a song. I struggle to fight back tears during the whole worship set and wonder how I am going to stand up front and preach a message through my tears. Other songs I enjoy but don't always have the same response and still other songs I have to work hard at to enjoy and draw meaning from them. Trading My Sorrows is in the latter category for me. I know what you're thinking—I don't like it because of the controversy. I confess that the conflict didn't endear me to the song but I didn't much care for it before all of that. And that's OK. I don't have to like every song equally, but I should try. Be careful about your personal opinions and work hard in your worship.

The second thing that happened is that these few people greatly misunderstood the roles and responsibilities of elders. A vital role of an elder is to guard sound doctrine. We saw this last Sunday in Hebrews chapter thirteen. The leader's job is to "Keep watch over your souls" and part of "keeping watch over your souls" is the responsibility to teach sound doctrine and that most certainly includes doctrine contained within songs. About half of Paul's letters were written in response to false teaching that was infiltrating the new churches throughout Asia, and all of this happened within ten or twenty years after the founding of these churches. History

demonstrates again and again that all Christians and especially elders must be constantly vigilant against the osmosis of false teaching seeping into their church. And I call it osmosis because false teaching never knocks down the church door and busts in uninvited. Instead, it is given a front row seat because it is cloaked in truth. It seeps in and begins to permeate the church. Moreover, since songs teach theology and because music speaks to the heart and center of our emotions, it is even more possible to sing false ideas without being fully aware of it. Therefore, elders not only have the right but also the responsibility to make sure our worship songs are teaching sound doctrine.

Around the time of this conflict I asked Chris Eisermann if he could be our designated elder that keeps an eye on worship lyrics. He has been doing this ever since then. You may have noticed that occasionally we sing a song with slightly different lyrics. These changes were probably made by Chris. He has taken what I call so-so songs and made them really good and he has taken good songs and made them great. I am thankful for his gifts and efforts in this area.

The third thing that happened was that the conflict surrounding this song became very emotional and tiring. This past week there was a 6.1 magnitude earthquake in Japan which came almost exactly one year after their devastating earthquake and tsunami last year. They were on high alert and thankfully the quake was too small to generate another tsunami. Just mentioning the word “earthquake” to someone living in Japan will no doubt cause a gut level reaction. Because of the controversy surrounding this song in the past, to those who lived through this tsunami of conflict eight years ago, merely mentioning the song causes a gut level reaction. When some of us thought about singing it again our thought was. “Do we really have to go there?” It’s kind of like the way we choose names for our children. I am guessing that most of us have purposefully decided against certain names because of someone you knew from your past who had that name. If there was a boy named Billy in your school and Billy was a real bully, there is now way you would ever name your child Billy because the name would be forever associated with the bully with the same name.

So *Trading My Sorrows* was placed on the shelf. The people who walked through the conflict didn’t want to touch it and the people who came after the conflict had heard whispers of a problem but never knew the whole story. In the last week and a half, some on the worship team asked if they could sing this song this morning. Fortunately we had an elder meeting this past Tuesday and we gathered the elders and some ladies on the worship team and had a good discussion. With all of this as a background, let me explain the original concern we had with the song and why we decided to sing it again.

The potentially problematic part of the song is in the second verse.

I'm trading my sickness
I'm trading my pain
I'm laying it down for the joy of the Lord

Now remember that we never actually banned the song due to the lyrics. We never got that far because the conflict itself was the overarching issue. But our original concern came about because this verse could be interpreted as a type of prosperity theology or hyper-charismatic

teaching that flows through some churches. In its worst form, some Christians believe and promote the idea that Christians should never be sick and if you are, then it is due to your weak faith. If you had more faith you would not be sick. If you just asked the Lord you could “trade” your sickness and he would give you joy in place of your sickness. Unfortunately, this false teaching is all too rampant among believers and churches. It degrades the character of God and twists God into some kind of great Santa Claus in the sky. If I can just say the right words and jump through the right hoops, God will do what I want him to do. We already have words to describe such a belief—words like witchcraft, sorcery and paganism.

The following is a testimony of someone who had been given this false teaching and how she responded to this song.

It is for people who are incurable and struggling, and misunderstood that I have frustrations with "trading" my sickness and pain. They cannot even grasp why it is happening, let alone lay hold of it to make some kind of trade. I meet weekly with a group of health professionals who work in hospice, trying their best to treat terminal patients with care and dignity. In my opinion, "Trading my Sorrows" as it stands is insulting to those who have months or weeks or hours to live; often in great pain and grief.¹

Even though this song could be and probably has been misinterpreted like this, we do not think that is what it actually is saying or was meant to say. For example, this verse is pulled directly from 2 Corinthians 4.

I'm pressed but not crushed persecuted not abandoned
Struck down but not destroyed

But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you (2 Cor. 4:7-12).

The final words of the song are pulled straight from Psalm 30.
Though the sorrow may last for the night, His joy comes with the morning

For his anger is but for a moment, and his favor is for a lifetime. Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning (Psalm 30:5).

As final evidence, here is part of Darrell Evan's description of what the song meant to him.

Joy isn't tested when things are great," says Darrell. "Joy is tested and strength is tested when things are difficult. Where are you going to run when things get hard and you don't understand? I'm going to run to you, God. I don't get it, but I'm going to trade this in for joy and just know that walking with You is more than enough to carry me through."²

Here is another testimony from a woman who holds to this Biblical understanding of suffering and trials.

Like Paul, I have many times asked Him to remove this thorn. But as of today, He has chosen not to. This does not mean that my faith is not strong enough, like some have told me. It means that God is allowing this pain to humble me and keep me from pride. I know that others who have this illness are sometimes bed ridden and cannot function. I praise God that in my weakness He is strong. He has allowed me to active enough to serve Him in ministry, but weak enough to know that it is Him giving me that strength. It is not by might or by power but by His Spirit. I have learned to depend on the one who gave me life, and as long as He chooses to allow the pain in my life, I choose to give Him all the glory through it...³

It is possible to trade your sorrows if that means laying down your sorrows and your pain and your suffering at the feet of Jesus and asking him to fill you with supernatural joy—Joy that does not come through getting exactly what we want but exactly what we need, which is Jesus.

Let me draw some conclusions from all of this.

First, follow the instruction from Hebrews 13 we read last week. *Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you. Had the elders been allowed to do their job in the first place, all of this would have been avoided. We probably would have come to the same conclusion we have reached now and all would be well but a few people forced us to do our job with groaning. There may come a time when we will have to permanently remove a song from our worship list. If for some strange reason this song caused another ruckus we would probably remove it again but if we do, please know that it is for the benefit of everyone.*

Second, make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. The way in which we get along with one another directly testifies to the power of the gospel. A weak church body testifies to a weak gospel and a strong church body testifies to a powerful gospel. I really appreciated the spirit of those who asked for an explanation about this song. They handled the situation peacefully, respectfully and lovingly. It was a pleasure to have walked alongside of them through the past week. May this be a model for all of us.

Third, work hard at your worship. If you don't, then who misses out? Not God, but you. You miss out because you fail to see God as high and lifted up. You fail to grasp his beauty and majesty.

Let's stand and say the first part of Psalm 98 together.

1 Oh sing to the LORD a new song, for he has done marvelous things! His right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him. 2 The LORD has made known his salvation; he has revealed his righteousness in the sight of the nations. 3 He has remembered his steadfast love

and faithfulness to the house of Israel. All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God.

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March 18, 2012

¹ <http://www.whereisgod.net/testimonies.htm>

² <http://www.crosswalk.com/church/worship/song-story-trading-my-sorrows-by-darrell-evans-1236482.html>

³ *ibid.*