

## THE GREAT DIVIDE

DURING HER FIRST THREE WEEKS OF COLLEGE, ADELE had found sleep to be a precious commodity. It wasn't just the talkative roommate or the hundreds of pages of assigned reading that kept her from bed, but the effort to introduce herself to every member of the freshman class in hopes of winning a spot on student government. So far, she hadn't found the energy to attend church on Sundays.

But her dream, still vivid in her mind, told her it was time to remedy that. Her efforts at gaining renown were not something God wanted to take backseat to. The rocks and trees might not be crying out their praise in her absence, but certain hunchbacks seemed to be.

Adele squinted at the glowing red digits of her alarm clock, which announced the time as 9:07. If she hurried, she could still make it to a service this morning.



At quarter past 10, Adele pulled into the parking lot of Glenview Bible Church. She was surprised to see a man wearing an orange vest motioning for her to turn left, and

wondered if perhaps construction was going on. But as she drove past him, she saw dozens of people in orange signaling the rows of traffic to the correct spots. Parking lot attendance — impressive, she thought to herself. Never seen that.

Inside, it looked like the world's largest family reunion. Adele waded through a sea of people, who chatted in groups and sipped at steaming cups of coffee. She picked up a danish from the refreshment table and chewed it absentmindedly as she stared at the information center, filled with attractive brochures detailing all the church's programs. They seemed to have a program for every age and every interest.

Adele followed as the herd began moving toward the sanctuary. Musicians were playing light background music on stage. She found a comfortable seat in the back and settled in.

A man walked up to the mic. "Welcome to Glenview Community Church," he said. "If this is your first time here this morning, we want you to sit back, relax, and enjoy. We're going to start off with a few songs to praise our Lord!" His words were followed immediately by a drum beat as the band transitioned into song.

Adele admired the enthusiasm of the musicians, whose whole bodies seemed caught up in the music, bopping and swaying. The singers' trained voices harmonized perfectly, and they wore expressions of joy. It was great to just watch them praise God.

But as Adele looked around, that's all most people seemed to be doing — watching. A few were clearly belt-

ing out the tune, and a fair number were staring at the projected lyrics and mumbling along, but at least half were not singing at all. People seemed to be enjoying themselves, but most were spectators.



The next Sunday, Adele was invited to Good Shepherd Church by Kevin, a freshman who had attended the church his whole life. It was a small traditional church in a small traditional building, shaded by an enormous oak tree nearly as old as the church itself.

They arrived early so Kevin could introduce her to everyone. It was a formal atmosphere, but people were friendly. She met his parents, their neighbors, the pastor, the substitute choir director, and a woman who talked too loudly but no one seemed to mind. Gradually, Adele noticed there were no other college students around. In fact, while she saw a scattering of younger families, most of the people seemed close to retirement if not well past it.

“So, you must be Kevin’s girlfriend,” said one of the deacons, shaking her hand and winking at the boy.

“No, sir,” Kevin said quickly, calming Adele’s sudden fears that perhaps he’d considered this a date. “It’s not like that at all. Adele here is just looking for a church that knows something about music.”

“Then you are in luck, young lady,” the deacon said. “This is a singing church.”

And he was right. People were holding the hymnals

but she could tell they really didn't need them. At one point the organ cut out but the voices carried on in beautiful harmony. Although the sanctuary could have fit 300, the 80 or so attenders filled it to capacity with resonance.

But she noticed Kevin kept his eyes in the hymnal, and sang without much energy. The younger parents, too, sang in a rote manner, as if these songs were someone else's. Adele wondered how much longer this would be a singing church. She could tell the people were holding onto something very dear to them, but it seemed to be a shell of what it was in the past.



"Welcome to Canticle Church. Is this your first time with us?"

"Yes, actually," Adele said.

The greeter gave her a pudgy grin. "Great, we're glad you're here. Do you know much about our church?"

"Not really. I just heard you're a unique church and decided to check it out."

"Well, we welcome you. As it is, you have come on part-singing Sunday." He paused, and Adele gave a quizzical stare. "On part-singing Sunday, our whole church divides into the four major singing parts — melody, alto, tenor and bass."

"O ... K ... " she said hesitantly.

"Since it's your first time, I suggest you sit in the melody section. That's easiest. But who knows — down the road you might be joining any of the sections. You see,

at this church we believe music is a powerful language of connecting people, not only to God, but also to each other. We want to help each person grow to their full potential in this language. So, once a month, we have part-singing Sunday.” He fumbled through the papers in his hand. “Here’s a brochure on the whole thing. I think you’ll find it quite interesting.”

Adele found her way to the melody section and sat down, a tad nervous of what might be asked of her. I guess John wasn’t kidding when he said this church was different.

She began to thumb through the brochure. The first page read: “We believe God has gifted each person with the ability to give Him praise — and that our praise and worship not only honors God, but lifts up the spirit of the one giving the praise. We believe the ability to offer praise can be improved when worked upon. Though we all have limitations, we all can build upon the innate abilities we also have. We want you to be the best with the music of praise that you can be.”

Following pages gave more details of how the church makes this happen. There was a section on part-singing Sundays, along with a website that could help you learn parts at home. A calendar showed the schedule of workshops on part-singing, learning an instrument, and writing music. Another page gave contact information for church members giving free music lessons for guitar, keyboard, drums, strings, and voice. The back page advertised an upcoming parent-and-teen guitar-making class with testimonials from last year’s students.

**Church service  
at Canticle**

Adele had never been to a church like this. She wasn't sure what to think — on one hand, she felt like heading for the door, but, on the other, she was intrigued by a church that seemed so interested in what she might be able to do. They appeared interested in more than just trying to wow people with their own excellence, but actually care about what an average person like herself might be able to learn and contribute.

In fact, this seemed like the kind of church the bell-ringer was talking about when — Oh no. Am I dreaming again? Can a church like this really exist?



Adele had pinched herself repeatedly during the service, but had not woken up. Nor had she wanted to — she'd been enjoying herself far too much. One couple from the church had debuted a new song they'd written called "Mornings with the Savior." Adele stumbled over the words at first, but by the time each part had sung it through separately, she had it half-memorized. When they at last sang as a whole congregation, she was stunned by how caught up she was — perhaps by the beauty of the interwoven voices, or perhaps because she'd let the words become her own prayer to God.

Afterward, Adele had asked the music director, Carl, if she could talk to him. If she was not dreaming, she was curious to know how this place seemed to have sprung from conversations in her mind. Perhaps, years ago, God had given someone else the same dream. Or perhaps God

was just preparing her for this morning.

“So, you’ve just moved here, then?” Carl asked as they sat down in his office.

“Yes. I’m a freshman at State.”

“Welcome to the area, then. Have you had a chance to visit a lot of churches here?”

“So far I’ve made it to Good Shepherd and Glenview Bible, and now here.”

Carl smiled. “I see you’re browsing from all over the spectrum. Tell me, which style of music did you like better: the contemporary or the traditional?”

“I guess ... I like either. I think I realized this morning that my ability to worship God depends on my attitude — more than on the music style, I mean.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere,” Carl said, grinning. “But I’m glad to hear it. I spent many years involved in the debate between the old hymns and the new songs before I realized I was fighting the wrong battle.”

“How so?”

“Well, most people think the great divide in church music is over style — traditional vs. contemporary. Most worship wars seem to be about these two poles. But they are more alike than you might imagine: They both fail to teach people the language of praise. The great divide is really between churches where only a few people sing and play instruments and churches where everyone is learning to sing and play an instrument, making music part of their daily walk with God.”

“Really? Everyone gets involved? I mean — music isn’t everyone’s thing.”



“True. Not everyone is going to get up on stage and do a solo. But that’s like saying that reading isn’t everyone’s thing, so you don’t have to read the Bible. Song and Scripture are two of the clearest lines of communication we have with God, and yet the temptation is to let those who are more talented than us speak for us. I’ll tell you, Billy Graham is a great speaker but I’m not going to have him get on the phone and tell my wife how much I love her. I’ve got to do that myself. Same with music — I’m going to sing to God even if I’m not wonderful at it. Besides, the more I practice singing, the better I’ll get, and the more I’ll enjoy it.”

Adele nodded. “That makes sense. Does it work?”

“You don’t motivate people overnight, of course, but over time people have really gotten into it. I think for so many years they didn’t know they were allowed to do anything in church except be a spectator. Now, because people are practicing their singing and their music during the week, they can really participate on Sundays. They’re looking forward to the service all week because it’s where all their practice pays off. They’re so excited to be here — it’s a night and day difference compared with a few years ago.”

“So you’ve been at this for a while.”

Carl stared at the ceiling for a moment. “Just under two years, I believe.”

“If you don’t mind my asking — what happened two years ago?”

Carl chuckled softly. “It actually started with an absurd bet against my father. He’s a great proponent of

the old hymns, and I was squarely in the contemporary camp at the time, so I bet him I could prove that my style was better than his style. I researched everything I could about music, about American culture, about church mission, and I eventually discovered that we were bickering about the most minuscule differences. To my surprise, I convinced him, too. Once that barrier dropped, he and I began singing together, and I was reminded what music is all about. Our program here at Canticle is just an outgrowth of that enthusiasm for the power of music.”

Carl reached over to a small refrigerator and took out a soft drink. He raised his eyebrow at Adele, but she waved away the offer. “I’m confused,” she said. “Contemporary music seems worlds away from the old hymns.”

“The main difference between contemporary songs and traditional ones is the beat,” Carl said, then took a sip of his soda. “Hymns tend to place every word on the downbeat. Here, watch my foot,” he said as he began tapping it against the carpet. “There are two strokes to the foot tap. There is the downbeat — when the toe comes down to meet the floor. Then there is the upbeat — when the toe is pointed toward the ceiling. Now, what’s a favorite hymn of yours?”

“‘Amazing Grace,’” Adele answered before knowing it.

“All right. Now watch my foot as I sing. A-ma-zing-grace-how-sweet-the-sound. See, every syllable comes on the downbeat — when my toe hits the floor. Contemporary music, in contrast, puts a lot of the sylla-

bles on the upbeat. It is called syncopation. Syncopation is harder to sing. That, in part, explains why older people, those who were raised on the hymns, have a hard time learning the contemporary songs. They are not used to singing on the offbeat. And it also explains why younger people who were not raised on the hymns, but exclusively on contemporary music, think the hymns are kind of boring: because singing every syllable on the downbeat is not as rhythmically complicated — and, in their minds, interesting — as syncopated music.”

“That’s it? That’s the difference?”

“There are the lyrics, too, of course. It’s sort of an opposite situation there, because older songs are more complicated in their language — using larger and more ancient words — while the newer songs use the relatively simple phrasing of today. It’s funny: I set out to prove that my songs were better because they had more accessible lyrics and more complicated music, and discovered that my father’s songs had more accessible music with more complicated lyrics. It was like seeing myself in a fun-house mirror.”

Adele smiled. “So if the differences are that small, why is there such a fierce rivalry?”

“I had trouble figuring that out, too,” Carl said, pausing to drink again. “But eventually it dawned on me that people don’t simply choose a favorite music style, they fall in love with their music. You don’t choose your spouse based on a list of pros and cons, you just find this connection to another person that you can’t quite explain. Music is the same way. People don’t understand exactly

why music moves them, and they become afraid the magic could slip through their fingers if they don't continue with what they've always done.

"The more people I talk to, the more I'm convinced that the music people love is the style they were listening to during emotion-filled times in their lives. Just hearing music in that same genre will bring these strong emotions back, and move you deeply."

"Because music is sticky," Adele said softly.

"What was that?"

"Just ... well, songs stick to memories, feelings, that sort of thing. Right?"

"Right," Carl said, pleased. "You catch on quickly. It took a little longer to convince my dad, but eventually I showed him how we both loved the style of music we listened to during our teens and twenties, that time in our life when we were becoming men, exploring the world and our place in it — the most emotional parts of our lives. Once we discovered this, we felt free to let go of our desperate grip on our favorite music.

"As long as I knew I could come back to it and get my fix — so to speak — I had no problem exploring my dad's songs. It was much easier to be selfless. Music styles are a lot like foreign languages, I think. For a long time, before either of us spoke a word of each other's language, they created a barrier between us. But once we spoke a little of each other's language, it gave us a patch of common ground. And, I think, we learned to appreciate our own language even more."

"Wow. That's really cool. Does your dad go to this

church?”

“No. He lives cross-country. But he’s getting his church into the basics of singing, too.”

“Really? Is he a music director, too?”

“Nope. Just a ordinary guy eager to help people learn music.”

The door opened behind Adele, and a woman stepped in with a stack of papers. Carl excused himself and conferred with the woman for a few minutes.

“So, where were we?” Carl said as he sat back down.

“You’d explained how your bet with your dad brought you closer to him,” Adele said. “But I’m still not sure how that got you both to transform your churches.”

Carl took a long drink from his bottle. “In a nutshell, I was inspired by what life was like 50 years ago in America. I really had no idea what the church was like back then, because for most of my life I wouldn’t listen to my dad when it came to music. Once we began to sing together, though, I was more open, and began to get a picture of what life was like when he was growing up — those emotional times when his favorite music was being set in stone.

“Close your eyes for a moment and try to imagine it: There are no CD players, no record players, no tape machines. If you want music in your life, it has to be live. So families sing. They sing on every occasion — ball-games, parties, boys’ and girls’ clubs, meetings, political rallies, the military. And most people sing in church. And the songs they sing in church they sing over and over. They hum them at work. They gather around the piano at

**Adele talking to  
Carl**

grandma's house and sing. Not only do people sing, but they play instruments. In the north, every home has a piano. In the south, fiddles and guitars are common. Imagine a family of eight gathered in a circle, singing 'How Great Thou Art,' with dad, sis, and junior playing along on their guitars. My dad always says, 'Music was something you did — not something that was done to you.'"

Adele opened her eyes. "But society has changed, right? I mean, I like the idea of making music as a family, but you can't turn back the clock."

"True, society has changed. Specifically, it began to change in the early '60s with the invention of the transistor radio. That made radios small and more importantly, cheap. Kids could afford one. They started listening to their own music. Families no longer needed to entertain themselves.

"The church reacted to this change in two primary ways. The traditional churches have kept right on doing what they've always done, ignoring the social shift. But although the church has kept singing its hymns every Sunday, the opportunities to sing those very same hymns during the week became less and less. And before long, the kids with no ties to this old music found it boring and stopped going to church once they grew up.

"So in the early '80s, some churches began using contemporary Christian music to win back these kids. They adapted, taking Christian content and putting it to a beat and note pattern that is closer to what most people currently listen to — on the radio, on television, at the

movies, in advertisements. Because the music is closer to what the new people understand, the contemporary church has an easier time of bringing new people in.

“But I believe there is a third, and better, way for churches to respond to this change in society. Because it wasn’t just 50 years ago that people sang as part of their daily life, it’s been that way for thousands and thousands of years. Music is woven into the very fabric of our being. God created us with this appetite for making music so we might connect ourselves with people and with Him. So I believe that you can turn back the clock. I believe that once people get a taste of what it’s like to make music, they’ll be hungry for it. Rather than ignoring or adapting, I think the church is in the perfect position to take advantage of the social shift, and to rejuvenate a nation of spectators.

“Think about it: What if the church was the place that people went to learn music? What if our songs were the ones they practiced every day? What if families started singing again, and the language of music helped bond people like it did with me and my dad — and all the credit went to God?”

Images leaped to Adele’s mind from the brochure she’d read this morning. A mother and son writing a song together. A family making a guitar. A bunch of neighbors practicing as a band. “I can see it — the church helping people succeed in their relationships.”

“Exactly. We’re doing more than telling you how to get close to God and to people; we’re helping you.”

“That’s an exciting mission,” Adele said. “But I’m still



curious as to how you got your whole church on board for this experiment.”

“Well, it actually started pretty small. At the beginning I was just excited to get people interested in music, so I offered a free class on Thursday nights for anyone interested in guitar who’d never actually played. That went so well that I added a class for those who wanted to learn how to sing parts. I added two or three more classes, but it didn’t take long before I had stretched myself too thin. So a few of the other musicians in the church started covering for me. Once there was a few of us involved, it became really fun. I was learning a lot, too, because teaching music forced me to really look at it in depth. I got addicted to helping people succeed.”

He paused to drink the last of his soda. “It was great. Our church was really changing, not from some program I set up, but because I made a small effort and other people joined me in my enthusiasm. People started doing music as groups and as families, in their devotions and in their spare time. People who thought they were tone-deaf were succeeding at carrying a tune. Suddenly I had this whole pool of people who could sing and play instruments and were willing to help out with the service. It was like I was the coach of a major league baseball team who suddenly found out that he owned all these minor league teams where he could find talent. And that he had fans who were playing the sport in their backyard, pumped about going to the big game on Sunday.

“I realized, eventually, that our official music program should support and encourage this movement to put

music in people's homes and daily lives. I wrote up a little something ... you know, I might have it around here somewhere," Carl said, rummaging through drawers. "I wrote up a plan for how our church might get everyone here involved in the effort. Then I took it to our leaders and posed them a challenge. I asked them what criteria they were using to measure the success of our music program. They gave answers like 'the number of people we attract with it', 'the quality of the music,' and 'that God is praised.'

"Then I suggested that we institute a new measuring stick. I told them our first goal should be to get people singing. I believe my exact statement was that 'We should judge our program by how enthusiastically all the people of the church — especially new people — sing and play their instruments.'"

Carl bent over to look more closely in one of the drawers. "Here it is," he said, pulling out a stack of stapled paper. "I brainstormed a bunch of ideas of how we could encourage music participation on every level — individuals, couples, families, small groups, Sunday service, and even inter-church events. I started out thinking about how it might work in just our church, but I think got carried away and started preaching to the whole world at some point — you'll have to excuse that," he said with a smile. "But if you're interested, you can borrow it."

Adele took the manuscript from him and flipped through the pages. "Sure, that'd be great. Thanks."

"Oh, I think a friend of mine made some notes for me on that copy," Carl said, pointed at some pencil marks

he noticed. “You can pay as little attention to them as you’d like. Like I said, it was a rough draft, not a blueprint. It ended up as a launching pad for a lot of the things we do here. We let our program take shape based on the people and resources God has given us.”

The door opened again, and when Carl saw who it was, he glanced at his watch and stood up hurriedly. “Seems I’ve let time get away from me — I’m late for a staff meeting.”

Adele stood up to leave. “Oh, I’m sorry. Thanks for talking with me anyway.”

“You’re welcome. It was very nice to meet you, Adele.” He shook her hand, then gestured to the proposal in her other. “You can give that back to me next ... well, are you going to be here next Sunday?”

Adele thought for a moment. “Yes. I imagine I will.”