CHAPTER 5
Placebo Singers, Jerome, and Psalm 116

Jerome translated Psalms into Latin for the Vulgate Bible. The Latin word *vulgate* refers to a common language spoken by uneducated people.¹ Jerome rendered a phrase in Psalm 116:9 as “Placebo Domino”, which means, “I shall please the Lord”.² Translated from Hebrew however, this phrase literally means, “I will be in step with the Lord” or more conventionally, “I will walk before the Lord”.

During evening Vespers, Psalm 116:1-9 became known as “The Placebo” with verse 9 sung as the antiphonal response during recitations.³ By the 8th Century, the Roman Catholic Church adopted this refrain for funerals and the Office of the Dead. Pretend mourners infiltrated funerals under the pretense of knowing the deceased person. They sang “The Placebo” with ulterior motives. Along with family, friends, and hired grievers, they hoped to win favors from a wealthy relative, accept monetary benefits offered to guests, and eat the traditional after-meal. These funeral-crashing sycophants earned the reputation of *placebos* because they sought to please themselves. The French labeled them, Placebo Singers because they sang songs to please relatives of the dead for personal gain.⁴

Music and song evoke substantial pleasure. God created harmonious sound waves for our benefit on earth and in heaven. Beyond pleasure, they exert a powerful influence. The sound of music, with or without lyrics, affects our soul with heightened emotion and enhanced mental and physical performance. It enriches our connection with God and others. Wanting to please the Lord and bless

² Psalms 116 appears as Psalms 114 in the Latin Vulgate Bible
http://www.biblestudytools.com/vul/psalms/114.html
ourselves, we sing songs of praise and gratitude while celebrating the death and resurrection of Jesus. Somewhat like *Placebo Singers*, we sing, say, and do religion to please God—while anticipating personal gain during so called worship services.

Without diminishing the pleasing influence and profound benefit of music and song, the Bible does not emphasize this expression as a response of worship. Hebrew and Greek words for music, singing, bowing, falling facedown, and worship rarely appear together in the same biblical narrative. Nonetheless, a distinct line of separation does not exist between these expressions. Singing praise, with or without music, sets a compelling tone of reverence while highlighting the stunning truth about God’s worth. Singing glorious praise with evocative music complements demonstrative gestures of facedown reverence. In response to an authentic encounter or spiritual revelation of God, songs facilitate, promote, and enrich worship. Sometimes however, they also “pose as worship” while functioning as a placebo to please ourselves. Expressions of true worship, in spirit and truth, transcend emotions triggered by a placebo effect.

**Trick Trials and Medical Placebos**

Religious agitators in Medieval Europe attracted widespread attention. Uttering inflammatory comments about the Protestant Reformation, they flaunted demonic manifestations. Their bizarre behavior served to either promote or refute claims made by Reformers and Counter-Reformers. These self-professed demoniacs interfered with diplomatic peace talks, which aggravated tensions between warring factions.

To expose the troublemakers, King Charles IX (England, 1565) and Henri IV (France, 1599) commissioned royal investigators to devise trick trials. They compared holy water, holy relics, and Latin Scriptures (used to exorcise demons) with ordinary water, common articles, and Latin literature, which served as placebos. The aim of these innovative placebo-controlled trials was threefold: to test the authenticity of demonic manifestations, to validate subsequent exorcisms, and to avert disruptions in military negotiations.

Pharmacologist Jeff Aronson describes how the meaning associated with the word placebo has shifted since Jerome’s use in the 5th Century, where it originally meant, “to please”. Writing for the British Medical Journal in 1999, Aronson explains that by 1785, the New Medical Dictionary defined placebo as, “a common

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place method or medicine.” He asserts that in 1811, Hooper’s Medical Dictionary defined it as, “an epithet given to any medicine adapted more to please than benefit the patient.” Aronson offers the following synopsis concerning the semantic shift of this word.

From being a popular medicine with a useful if minor effect, a placebo became a medicine without any effect at all, or not one that you could rely on.”

In clinical trials, placebos typically pose as drugs or therapies. They may be sugar pills, fake treatments, mock surgeries, or sham interventions. Medical investigators integrate placebo controls in comparative studies to evaluate the safety and effectiveness of new drugs or biotech treatments.

The American Heritage® Dictionary defines 21st Century placebos as, “A substance that has positive effects as a result of a patient’s perception that it is beneficial rather than as a result of a causative ingredient”. By the power of suggestion, placebos generate positive expectations and therefore, affect outcomes. Some placebos induce a subtle but measurable influence while others are more potent. As instruments of deliberate deception, placebos ignite rigorous ethical debate in the medical community.

**Placebos Posing as Worship**

Properly understood, true worshipers do not express worship for their own benefit or for the sake of others. Their worship targets God and God alone without consideration for personal pleasure or public influence. We derive important benefits from music, singing, and other religious activities. Worship however, as described in the Bible, is not a means to an end, performed to gain a personal advantage.

While spectators may watch or listen, worshipers send their message directly to God. They do not cater to backsliders or potential converts (worship evangelism). They do not use leverage worship to promote a cause, reinforce a doctrine, meet a need, support a ministry, or fight a battle (worship offerings, worship service, or worship warfare). By design, music and song integrate with prayers, litur-

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gies, sacraments, rituals, and preaching to support these valid and important causes. True worshipers venerate their Heavenly Father without ulterior motives; they offer sincere reverence without an agenda.

**Praise—Not a Substitute for Worship**

Tempting Jesus in the wilderness, Satan did not solicit a song of praise from Him. No, he tempted Jesus to “bow down and worship”.\(^9\) When various instruments sounded in Babylon, King Nebuchadnezzar did not command multitudes to sing praises. No, he commanded them to “fall down and worship”. The King did not punish Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego for singing out of tune. They either bowed before the golden image or faced death in a blazing furnace. Babylon’s herald loudly proclaimed:

“To you the command is given, O peoples, nations and men of every language, that at the moment you hear the sound of the horn, flute, lyre, trigon, psaltery, bagpipe and all kinds of music, you are to fall down and worship the golden image that Nebuchadnezzar the king has set up. But whoever does not fall down and worship shall immediately be cast into the midst of a furnace of blazing fire.” (Daniel 3:4-6 NAS)

Revelation 13 and 14 portray inhabitants of earth offering worship to Satan, the Dragon, and the Beast. With eternal consequences at stake, songs of praise are not mentioned. Singing will not suffice at this level of discriminating veneration.

The Bible distinguishes praise and worship as two separate but related expressions. It emphasizes songs of praise and highlights gestures of facedown worship. Before Jesus returns for His church bride, a decisive showdown will transpire. It will revolve around worshipers and the direction of their bow. Ultimately, residents on earth will integrate facedown reverence with songs of praises to our Heavenly Father.

"All the earth will worship You [bows down to you (NIV)], And will sing praises to You; They will sing praises to Your name. "Selah." (Psalm 66:4 NAS)

Like a placebo in medicine, false religion offers fake promises; it arouses false hopes from bogus gods. The Spirit of Truth abides in us to testify about Jesus, guiding us into all truth and disclosing what is to come.\(^10\) Our Heavenly Father has

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\(^9\) Matthew 4:9 NAS
\(^10\) John 14:17, 15:26, 16:13
equipped us to recognize bogus messiahs sporting counterfeit miracles. As we connect with Jesus for all He’s worth, we will offer an informed response of radical reverence and glorious praise.