

The Music of Worship: Pleasing God or Pleasing Ourselves?

by Becky Maceda

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You've survived one in your church. Or perhaps you've heard of a particularly grim one at another church.

I'm referring to the battle over worship music that has divided believers in too many churches. Should we sing the old-time, doctrine steeped hymns, or confine ourselves to the singable, catchy, praise choruses? Should our music be classical, contemporary, rock, country, Latin, disco, folk, or eclectic (read: "a little of everything")? Should we use organs or pianos? And what about drums? Should music be exclusively for praise or should it perform other functions as well?

In a world that increasingly devalues the primacy of objectivity and the ability to think antithetically and which, conversely, prizes subjectivity and the ability to see life and the world in pluralistic terms, popular music has become a global language.

And why not? Whether you are Buddhist or agnostic, "third world" or "first world," speak English or only Urdu, have a Ph.D. or finish only second grade, you can enjoy 'N Sync or Britney Spears or MTV.

This takeover of the culture by popular music is reflected in our churches. How many Christians today are serious readers? How many believers today enjoy solid preaching? Ask church members on a Tuesday how much they remember of the previous Sunday's preaching? Chances are, those very same Christians are still singing or humming the songs they sang during the service.

Music can and does powerfully engage our emotions. It is therefore not surprising that it has become a battleground for individuals and congregations.

Teaching Through Music

Today we live in a time when simple is seen as good and complex as bad. The tongue trips and the mind boggles at Charlies Wesley's "Long my imprisoned spirit lay, Fast bound in sin and nature's night" and even Dwight Lyles and Niles Borup's

Proclaim the glory of the Lord,
Give honor to the Prince of Peace.
For if we cease,
The stones will start shouting.

Proclaim the glory of the Lord.
With hands uplifted
Let us raise immortal praise

To Him who reigns on high.

Leonard Payton, writing in *Modern Reformation* says "'Simple' is not bad. However, when 'simple' is a virtue placed in rank above 'biblical,' then we are in trouble." What if being "simple" means we are no longer able to fulfill our responsibility to "teach and admonish one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs"? Payton warns: "It will not be long before we are writing a different Gospel on the tablets of our hearts."

Music is very powerful because it teaches whether or not we perceive that it does. And the more a person is inclined to subjective, relativistic thinking, the stronger music's influence will be on that person. It therefore a potent purveyor of heresies.

How then must pastors and church music directors, who seriously take their biblical mandate, evaluate the music the church uses in worship? By applying the regulative principle of *sola Scriptura*. John Calvin articulated it thus in *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*:

We may not adopt any device [in our worship] which seems fit to ourselves, but look to the injunctions of him who alone is entitled to prescribe. God disapproves of all modes of worship not expressly sanctioned by his word.

Toward Biblical Worship

To evaluate worship biblically is to be willing to step back from our own preferences and experiences and ask, "what pleases God in worship?" We know that not all worship and music please Him (see Ex. 32:4-6). We therefore need to examine three aspects of worship music if we are to bring it in line with Scripture: 1) the words we sing, 2) the melodies of the words we sing, and 3) the instruments we use to accompany the singing.

The first and most important aspect is the words that we sing. The Word of God should be the basis of all that we sing in at least four ways.

The content of the songs of the church must be doctrinally sound. Worship must have a theological basis. The people of God must know whom they are worshipping and why. Because God is beyond our comprehension, we cannot know Him by speculating on His essence. Instead, we are to know Him by mediating on what He reveals to us in His Word.

True worship is faithful to the doctrine of God as revealed in Scripture. Even the most well-intentioned believer may unwittingly end up in idolatry--worshipping a god he has fashioned in his own image.

Kim Riddlebarger argues: "This is not to say that worship is not to be emotional or that one is not to experience God during worship, but worship must be based on a correct knowledge of God, not an ecstatic experience of God. Worship has a doctrinal, and not experiential, context. This intellectual priority in worship is also seen in the prohibitions against idolatry."

We need to be careful then of such lyrics as these:

I just want to be where You are
Dwelling daily in your presence
Take me to the place where you are
I just want to be with You. [italics added]

Is God omnipresent? It is not clear from the words of this song, specifically the third line, even when the entire song is considered.

Or consider this song:

Jesus, we enthrone You.
We proclaim You our King.
Standing here in the midst of us.
We lift You up with our praise.
And as we worship,
Build Your throne.
Come, Lord Jesus,
And take Your place.

Ephesians 1:19-22 clearly teaches that God, "the Father of glory" (v. 17), raised Jesus from the dead, "and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age, but also in the one to come. And He put all things under His feet." Who then enthrones Christ? Is it us or the Father?

Contrast these songs with another contemporary song.

We are called to be a royal priesthood
That will minister to God.
Declare the wisdom of His ways,
Exalt His character in praise.
We are called to yield unto the Spirit
That He may form in us
The beauty of the life of Jesus.

And give to Him undying devotion,
Our full adoration that He may be pleased.
And set our hearts on this one endeavor,
To worship forever His majesty.

While the entire song is not based on a particular passage of Scripture, the thoughts it contains are all Scripture.

The content of the songs must be God-centered, not man-centered. Consider this example:

Things in the past, things yet unseen,
Wishes and dreams that are yet to come true.
All of *my* hopes, all of *my* plans,
My heart and *my* hands are lifted to you.
Lord, *I* offer *my* life to You.
Everything I've been through,
Use it for Your glory
Lord, *I* offer *my* days to You,
Lifting *my* praise to You,
As a pleasing sacrifice.
Lord, *I* offer You *my* life [italics the author's].

The purpose of music in worship is to assist the congregation in worshipping God, not to encourage believers to focus on themselves. Songs that are full of what is happening or not happening in the lives of those who are singing, according to *their* point of view, may not be the most appropriate for worship.

The songs must deal with the whole counsel of God as it pertains to worship. As the Bible says, "Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God" (Col. 3:16). Church songs cannot focus exclusively on "singing with thankfulness " to God. They must also teach and admonish.

The Book of Psalms has given us a model for what we are to sing. The Psalter contains a rich variety of songs that we can and should sing to God--joyful praise and thanksgiving (Ps. 146-150); reflections on creation (Ps. 19, 104); a recounting of the saving work of God in Christ (Ps. 2, 22, 24, and 110); and meditations on God's Word (Ps. 119). There are also psalms of lamentation and repentance (Ps. 32, 51, and 137).

In some churches today, however, it seems only happy and joyful songs are sung. Is joy the only emotion Christians experience? Christian worship needs to provide expression for sad and reflective emotions as well. Here is one such song.

Search me O god.
Reveal my heart.
Expose my sin that it may be confessed.
Search, me O God.
Unveil each thought
And leave no hidden motive unaddressed.
Uncover every action born in pride.
Show me the worldly ways
I still embrace.
May every anxious thought be brought to light,

And each unspoken fear with faith replaced.

The songs must "handle accurately the word of truth." While we recognize a certain latitude of expression owed to poetic license, we cannot forget that worship music functions as an integral part of teaching ministry of the church.

Congregations who would never tolerate shoddy exposition from the pulpit at times sing songs that would not be out of place in a "prosperity" or "deliverance" or "miracle healing" gathering. Are we not undermining our own efforts to teach our congregations to view all of life and doctrine through the lens of Scripture?

Over sin He has conquered.
Hallelujah! He has conquered.
Over death victorious.
Hallelujah! Victorious!
Over sickness He has triumphed.
Hallelujah! He has triumphed.
Jesus reigns over all!

While there is scriptural warrant for the first two assertions, there is none for the third. We must be careful to choose music texts with as much theological clarity and linguistic skill as possible.

The second aspect which we must evaluate is the melodies to which we sing the words. While it is important that a melody is singable for the congregation, it must likewise support the content of the song. It is very difficult, for instance, to sing about God as the "consuming fire" (Heb. 12:28-29) in a samba or disco beat; or to sing as a lament the following lyrics:

Every perfect gift comes from above.
From the Father of lights
From the Lord of love
This joy that I have
That I'm singing of is from the Lord.

Determining the appropriateness of the melody must also pass through another sieve: does it "make provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts"? Does the melody truly exalt God or does it appeal primarily to the carnal tastes of man and his desire to be entertained? Does the melody serve to focus the believer's attention on God as He reveals Himself in Scripture, or does it cause him to focus more on the world or on himself?

According to Heb. 12:28-29, thankfulness and joy should be united with reverence and awe in our worship. These characteristics are complementary, as a study of psalms will show. "Worship the Lord with reverence, And rejoice with trembling" (Ps. 2:11).

Reverence does not always mean quiet, and joy does not always mean noise, says W. Robert Godfrey in *Pleasing God in Worship*. Joy and reverence are attitudes of the heart which we seek to express in worship. Joy may be intense in the singing of a very quiet song. Reverence may be expressed in loud singing.

Here is a song that is joyfully reverent:

What do I possess that You did not give to me?
What mysteries are clear to me that you did not explain?
When did I share truth I had not received from you?
What good works have I performed that You did not ordain?

Any strength I have, any good I do
Comes from the life I found in You.
So in all I am and in all I do
I give the glory to You.

The third and last aspect is the kind of instruments we use to accompany the songs we sing. What kind of instrument is biblical? In Old Testament worship, a wide variety was used in the temple. Yet in the New Testament, it is not clear what role instruments played in corporate worship (though obviously they had no central or independent role).

Today most churches use one or more instruments. Where they are used, a good guideline to follow is that they should aid the singing of the congregation, not overwhelm or dominate it. They should contribute to a sense of reverence and joy, not undermine it.

Music is a vital element in the worship life of God's people. And because it is so powerful in its effects, we need to consider it carefully. In its Cambridge Declaration, the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals spoke of worship under the last theme, "Glory to God alone":

The loss of God's centrality in the life of today's church is lamentable. It is this loss that allows us to transform worship into entertainment, gospel preaching into marketing, believing into technique, being good into feeling good about ourselves, and faithfulness into being successful....We must focus on God in our worship, rather than the satisfaction of our personal needs. God is sovereign in worship; we are not. Our concern must be for God's kingdom, not our own empires, popularity, or success.

God is calling His church to repentance. Let us examine our own churches--have we been faithful in exercising pastoral oversight in this critical aspect of our teaching ministry, or have we neglected it? Let us cry out to God for His mercy and take back our authority over the music sung in our churches. Let us evaluate the entire collection of songs we are using and discard all that do not wholly conform to Scripture.

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