

Gravity and Gladness on Sunday Mornings: The Pursuit of God in Corporate Worship

by Alex Chediak

“For those who own Jesus, a thousand musical tongues will never be enough to praise him.” – Harold Best, *Music Through The Eyes Of Faith*, Harper, 1993

“There is a kind of happiness and wonder that makes you serious.” –C.S. Lewis, *The Last Battle*

Executive Summary

Christian congregational gatherings are both declarations that God’s steadfast love is better than life and corporate expressions of the pursuit of greater satisfaction in God. They are also the means of awakening and strengthening affections for God in accordance with true spiritual light, as the Spirit of God ministers the Word of God to the people of God in word and song. This paper deals only with the use of music in congregational services. It argues that the New Testament’s relative lack of specificity on form is a result of the Lord’s mandate to bring the gospel to the ends of the earth – that is, to see the gospel take root within each particular culture and people group. Therefore, it is appropriate that the musical profile of a particular congregation be a reflection of their stylistic preferences. Nevertheless, congregational singing must be a response to objective gospel truth from hearts delighting in the reality of that truth. In other words, both mind and heart are essential in the pursuit of God. It is recommended that worship leaders draw from the best representations of older (often more lyrically rarified) and newer (often more lyrically accessible) songs. Corporate worship is fuel for the passionate, authentic, heart-felt delight in God (i.e., worship) in all of life, which glorifies God and is why we were made.

Practical Theology

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Thesis

This paper is an explanation and biblical defense of a theological vision for music in worship. I support employing a blended worship style, combining selections of lyrically and poetically excellent older hymns and contemporary worship songs for congregational singing. But though a congregation's musical style might reflect its culture, singing should promote a response to objective gospel truth from hearts experiencing the reality of that truth, inculcating a sense of reverent joy in the midst of God-ordained, and often painful, trials.

Background

The essence of worship is heart-satisfaction in God: a delightful recognition that His steadfast love is better than life (Ps. 63:3). Although all of life is to be worship (Rom. 12:1), the Old and New Testament exhibit regular corporate gatherings of God's people for worship via the singing and proclamation of God's word (Deut. 32; Neh. 8:6-8; Eph. 5:18-19; Acts 13:14-16). Old Testament worship was highly prescriptive and localized.¹ In New Testament worship, there is a remarkable indifference to outward forms and geography (John 4:21). We're informed of corporate gatherings (I Cor. 14:23; Heb. 10:23), but are provided almost no detailed instruction regarding forms. There is simultaneously a radical intensification of worship as an inward, spiritual experience that permeates all of life (I Cor. 10:31; Col. 3:17). These two shifts (away from prescribed forms and towards intense heart worship) are consistent: the forms must be malleable because God commands true worship from those of every culture (Acts 17:30).

Implications

Consequently, we have the freedom to worship with various genres of music. The music of a community can be seen as falling along a "fine culture – folk culture" continuum. "Fine culture" is a pattern of life that puts a high priority on intellectual and artistic expressions that

require either a high level of skill to produce or an acquired ability to appreciate (e.g., opera, classical music). “Folk culture” puts a high priority on expressions of heart and mind that are accessible to the average person without significant effort (e.g., praise choruses which feature simple lyrics).

Both “fine” and “folk” cultures have inherent strengths and vulnerabilities. Intrinsic strengths of fine culture include a high value on thinking and an ability to awaken rarely felt emotions (e.g., reverence for God’s grandeur). One danger of fine culture is intellectual snobbery. People can slip into loving artistic excellence in worship to the point where the “excellent” vocalist (or her singing) becomes idolized, and the congregational meeting develops the flavor of a concert performance, rather than a united pursuit of God.

Folk culture’s main strength is accessibility – a sense of resonance with the average person. For example, the simple lyrics of “I Love You Lord” can be highly worshipful for some, while others may prefer lyrics that are more theologically dense. An intrinsic vulnerability of folk culture is the potential for drifting from musical and poetic excellence (as these may require more refined tastes).

In light of their relative strengths and vulnerabilities, a musical style that carefully blends elements of both “folk” and “fine” songs seems wise. Particular songs should be selected based on two sets of criteria: (1) lyrical, poetic, and musical excellence and (2) accessibility for *various kinds of people* that make up the diverse congregation. Such an approach prevents the musical center from becoming too narrow, which could lead to excessive familiarity and a conditioned reflex rather than authentic worship. But a musical center that is too wide can result in the congregation feeling disoriented and unable to sense being “at home” during worship. Excessive variability also diminishes the impact of appropriate experimentation: If almost every

¹ Exod. 25:8; Exod. 25:1-30:10; I Chron. 28; II Chron. 4.

song feels new, the effect of trying a new song is diminished. Avoiding either extreme is preferable.

The musical profile of the church should be sufficiently wide to include elements of represented minorities in the congregation or in the culture of close proximity. For example, if a significant Spanish-speaking culture is present, the occasional Spanish song is a visible expression of welcoming love, and an opportunity for the majority culture to practice “count[ing] others more significant than yourselves” (Phil. 2:3).

Regardless of the blend of styles used, congregational singing must be a response to objective gospel truth (understood with the *mind*) from *hearts* delighting in the reality of that truth (Mark 7:6; 12:30). Contemporary music that features a strong emotional appeal, but theologically ambiguous lyrics, should be avoided. In general, the historic wording of hymns should be preserved, given their theological and poetic excellence. This also guards against “chronological snobbery” by reminding people of our rich musical inheritance. Lastly, we ought not declare to God things that are untrue: “In all I do, I honor You” is not as helpful as “In all I do, *help me* honor You.”

Connecting the head with the heart is also facilitated by mingling songs *about* God with songs *to* God. Each has value: Singing about the *objective* wonders of God’s plan of redemption (in all the rich, theological language of the Bible) should awaken a *subjective*, earnest response in the believer’s heart (for which many accessible, lyrically simple songs give helpful expression). The worship leaders should observe the range of historic, biblical worship elements, such as adoration, contrition, and pleas for persevering grace amidst intense hardship. The singing should advance a “suffering yet always rejoicing” ethos of reverent joy, without minimizing the reality of painful providences.

Conclusion

The New Testament's relative lack of specificity on the form and structure of worship is in harmony with the great commission mandate to take the gospel to every culture. Therefore, it is appropriate that the musical profile of a particular congregation be a reflection of their amoral musical and stylistic preferences. A thousand tongues are insufficient to sing our great Redeemer's praise (Charles Wesley). Nevertheless, all singing must be a response to objective gospel truth, understood with the *mind* and enjoyed by the *heart*. Therefore, it must have a heavenly aroma of reverent joy in the midst of pleasant *and* frowning providences, acknowledging both the pain of Christian warfare (Ps. 56:8; Luke 9:23), and the goodness of the ever-faithful God (Rom. 8:28; Ps. 73:25-26; Ps. 136).