

RAMBLINGS ON MUSIC IN THE CHURCH

Each of us has our own musical taste. For some of us, this taste is eclectic—it encompasses a variety of styles, genres, etc. For others, we prefer mainly one style or genre over another. The same is true in church music. And this has led to what some have called “The Worship Wars.” Tom Long, in his book *Beyond the Worship Wars*, calls music:

“the nuclear reactor of congregational worship. It is where much of the radioactive materials is stored, where a good bit of the energy is generated, and, alas, where congregational meltdown is most likely to occur. Change the order of worship, and you may set off a debate. Change the style of music, and you may split the congregation.”

Why do I mention this? No. We are not planning a dramatic change in musical style in our Sunday morning worship service. You’ll remember that our worship is often referred to as “blended” meaning that there is a mixture of both contemporary praise music and traditional hymns (though some would call our service more of a mosaic than a true blend).

I am mentioning this because of our sermon series on “Why we do what we do in worship”. As I have been preparing for this Sunday’s sermon, I have found that I have a lot more to say on the subject of “Prayer—spoken, unspoken, and sung” than I realized when I set up this sermon series. There is a lot to talk about, particularly as it comes to music in worship. And so I would like to say a few words about music in worship here.

One of the frequent complaints about contemporary praise music is that it tends to be shallow—that there is little theological meat on the bones. Some people call these songs 7-11 songs—seven words repeated eleven times. And when people compare these songs to the richness of traditional hymnody they tend to agree.

However, does this mean that traditional hymns are better than contemporary praise songs? Does this mean that all traditional hymns are better informed theologically than contemporary praise songs? Does this mean that all contemporary praise songs are theologically shallow? Of course, the answer is a resounding “NO!” Of course, it depends on the piece. Some traditional hymns are shallow or bad theologically and some contemporary praise songs are rather good or theologically astute. But just because a song has more theological heft to it, that doesn’t make it a better song for worship. It depends on how the people who are singing it respond.

If the people sing with gusto and are led to worship God with all their heart, mind, soul and strength through a “7-11” song, then I would say it is the better song for that group. If the people sing with reservation and are led to wonder “What am I doing here?” because the song doesn’t move them, but has great lyrical style, quality and theological acumen, then I would say that it is perhaps not the best song for that group at that time. Function (or the ability to engage people in heartfelt worship) has a role to play in determining which music is better suited for a particular group in worship.

Sometimes people can learn to appreciate songs—songs can grow on them. Once they learn to appreciate the message or content, they can begin to sing them with more integrity. And sometimes it’s not the lyrics, but the music or the melody. Sometimes it’s the manner in which it is played or the instrument that is used. And this is why many of the great hymns of the past are being re-written musically to fit the taste and musical stylings of a new generation.

It is true that many of the hymns of the past are excellent when it comes to theological reflection, doctrinal confession, and narrative presentation. But what we have to understand is that the purpose of many of these hymns is different from what we find in many of our contemporary songs for worship. Contemporary songs don't necessarily intend to teach the faith—to proclaim the faith to the congregation—the way many of the hymns of the past were intended to do. Most praise songs today are written exactly as labeled—as “songs of praise”—songs that provide a vehicle for people to offer their prayers and praise to God. They are purposely understood to be more like a prayer than a proclamation of the gospel.

Instead of being sung doctrine or narrative content, they are sung forms of prayer and meditation which is why there is so much repetition. Some praise songs are intended to help us meditate on God in the presence of God and the repetition helps us do that. The repetition allows people to put themselves into the meaning of the words in perhaps a deeper way; to reflect on the nature of God in a way that moves beyond the head and into the heart; a meditation that is meant to be pleasing to God.

Of course, lovers of traditional hymns would argue that hymns can do the same thing if we really understood them and put ourselves into them. But that's not always as easy as it sounds. Some traditional hymns just don't engage us in an emotional or affective manner either lyrically or musically. Some traditional hymns seem to stifle emotion and individual expression.

And so I would argue that perhaps it is good practice for the worshipper to share some of the responsibility. Perhaps it is good practice for the worshipper to prepare themselves for the music they will be singing in worship. Perhaps it is a good idea for people to arrive early on Sunday mornings, to pick up a bulletin, to find the hymns and read through the words and reflect on them before worship, so that when it comes time to sing them during the service, we can do so with understanding and integrity; they can become more personal.

Traditional hymns could benefit from being done in a more moving and emotional way; with a little more repetition and a little less formalism. And, contemporary praise songs could use a bit more theological or doctrinal heft. The hope is that we find a good balance.

A similar complaint or question has to do with the question: “To whom is the music directed?” Are we singing to God? Or are we singing to other people?

From my perspective, music in the church should always be God-directed and is best when it is written about God. I grow uncomfortable when the music seems self-directed or sounds narcissistic; when it constantly speaks in the first person rather than the second; when it's about “I”, “I”, “I”, and “me”, “me”, “me”, rather than “You”, “You”, “You” or “He”, “He”, “He” (not that God is male). It's not that we should never use the first-person in singing praise to God. It's just that if there is too much of it, we need to check our focus. Are we relying too much on subjective personal experience to define our faith or is our faith founded upon certain doctrinal truths? Should we focus more on experience or truth? Balance I think is the key. And I would tend to err on the truth side of the equation and the history of the church when it comes to faith than what our personal experience might dictate.

One thing that I find particularly annoying is when a hymn or praise song sounds like it is being sung by a group of protestors or participants in a parade to the crowds lining the sidewalk; when the second person pronouns refer to other people instead of God. There is a role for music in evangelism. But is evangelism the central purpose of worship? I prefer it when hymns and songs in the church are

intended primarily for God's enjoyment—thus being God-directed—rather than our own enjoyment or education (not that our own edification is a bad thing).

Finally, there is the question about emotion and feeling in worship. Is worship an intellectual event or an emotional event or both? Many of us have heard the quip that Presbyterians are known as the “frozen chosen”; a comment on the lack of passion in our worship as well as our theological proclivities. And many people who prefer contemporary music especially appreciate the emotional response and feelings that can be generated in worship.

It is true that worship without passion is dead. But it is not true that emotionalism means that God is present and active or that true worship exists. The amount or level of emotion in our worship isn't necessarily an indicator of how much God is present or how much God is at work among us. It also isn't necessarily an indicator of how much God is pleased with us. Likewise, a lack of emotion doesn't mean that there is a lack of passion. And it also doesn't mean that God is absent or is not at work among us. Worship should engage us emotionally, but emotion is not the “be-all-end-all” of worship.

Worship that appears to be strong on the intellectual front can be just as true and powerful as worship that appears to be strong on the emotional front. Contemporary worshippers are good at reminding us of the importance of engaging the whole person. And traditionalists are good at reminding us of the importance of engaging the head as well as the heart. We each need to learn from each other. Both sides need to be a little less quick to judge, and a little more appreciative of the strengths of the other and a little more open to grow in our own experience.