

Reformation
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The choir, in traditional robes and poised for another musical number, sings a country and western setting of C. Austin Miles' "In The Garden." You wonder how your music director could have picked this number. The ensemble proceeds through the last verse, with visions of someone in Gethsemane hearing the voice of the "Son of God" while the night "around me be falling." You wonder who checked out the theology of the refrain, with its heretical "And the joy we share as we tarry there, none other has ever known." You question not only the musical arrangement, but also the text. It confuses Christian worship with country rock, and sentimentalizes Christianity beyond recognition. If you are like most people, your jarred sense of propriety may lead you to talk with friends. You are not likely to go to your music director or pastor and complain, because there seem to be so few who agree with you. There is a reason for this kind of carelessness in musical choices—it revolves around the matter of musical taste. Dare we question someone else's taste, when others seem unconcerned? If so, how do we phrase our concern, not to seem hopelessly out of touch with contemporary worship? To answer this question, you will have to study in earnest the real reason evangelical (and mainstream) church music is in trouble.

Church Music Through History

Over nineteen centuries, Western church music has been used to declare God's glory, celebrate seasons of the church year, evangelize, missionize, commission and ordain clergy, awaken impenitent sinners, and assist in marrying and burying. Until the latter half of the twentieth century, church music generally existed for higher purposes than merely gratifying emotions. With varying success, it focused attention away from the self and to the living God. Church music in the time of Luther was considered "handmaiden to theology." During the Great Awakening, hymns celebrated the glories of the atonement, the bliss of newfound faith, and the hope of

heaven. Church music of various types found its way into the Sunday school movement in the nineteenth century, and later became an effective vehicle for weekly services of Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Episcopalians, Lutherans and many others. Usually a mix of old and new, tradition and innovation, much of this music reflects the individual charm of its era—anthems by T. Tertius Noble, solos like Mallotte's "Lord's Prayer" and festive pieces like Randall Thompson's "The Last Words of David." You will find that in this generation music has graduated from "handmaiden" status into "power" status. If you question your music director's contemporary choices, you might be labeled a "purist," or worse yet an "elitist." At the very least, you will need to do some homework into musical aesthetics, the matter of culture and taste—perhaps the most subjective, emotion-packed issue in many American churches.

The Problem of Taste in Music: Aesthetics

According to the dictionary, aesthetics is derived from the Greek *aisthetikos*, which comes from a base word meaning "to perceive." Various meanings include "relating to or dealing with the beautiful." In another sense, aesthetics is the branch of philosophy dealing with the nature of the beautiful and with judgments concerning beauty.¹

Now, we all know that "beauty is in the eye of the beholder." Common sense lends truth to the idea we are all subject to our circumstances and upbringing in many areas. However, our culture, steeped in the Hegelian relativism now popularized in various media, always focuses on the obvious: whatever someone's concept of the beautiful might be, exactly the opposite concept is just as valid. Despite warnings from pastors, Christians often fall prey to the notion that biblical authority ends just outside the door of the music store. If a tune is attractive to me, no matter what the style or connotation, it is good enough to worship by. My enjoyment is the main

issue. The music's merits, its goodness, its quality, its originality—all these are secondary considerations. Compounding this is the vacuum (in most churches) of sound teaching on the biblical use of music, a veritable parade of church growth techniques guaranteeing success, a growing Christian Contemporary Music (hereafter CCM) market in which labels like Reunion Records are supported by the Time Warner Corporation, indiscriminate usage of professionally recorded tracks behind volunteer choirs and all sorts of wanna-be singers, and you get the blind leading the blind.

Biblical concepts of worship and culture become marginal because the *seeker* must be attracted and not offended. If the church's demographics demand a yearning for Kenny Rogers-blended country rock, then that is what rules. What served for years as an organ prelude (and everybody just talked anyway) is replaced with fifteen minutes of "praise and worship" tunes, clapping, and generally loosening up for what follows. What used to be doctrinally valued hymns get shoved aside for repetitive and doctrinally soft choruses on overheads (to keep those heads looking up). The anthem, of course, is now a "special music" event varying from week to week, but almost never featuring a stand-up choir and organ accompaniment. The content is fueled by needs more than principle, the style is ruled by whatever mounts the CCM charts this quarter, and it all becomes a matter of what works best. The affirming smiles, "amens" and surging numbers send a clear message to church leaders. The complainers, those disenfranchised traditionalists whose sensibilities might be damaged in the transition, are quite irrelevant.

The Bible and Musical Taste

In the Bible-believing Christian groups, music is the perfect tool for "power" religion. But when the Bible speaks on music, there are immediate conflicts with the concept that if something works, we must use it. For example, when Paul admon-

ishes the Colossians to teach one another “with all wisdom” and “admonishing one another” with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, he adds that there should be “thankfulness in your hearts” directed toward God (Col. 3:16). Personal enjoyment is secondary to group edification. In another context, Paul emphasizes music’s clarity as a picture of the proper use of gifts, showing his preference for “a distinction in the tones” in communicating meaning (1 Cor. 14:7). In the same chapter Paul says, “I shall sing with the spirit and I shall sing with the mind also” (1 Cor. 14:15b). Obviously the link between clarity of meaning and edification of the church is an issue. In summary of his posture on Christian living, Paul offers this advice:

Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any *excellence* [my italics] and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things (Phil. 4:8).

While music is not mentioned in this passage, it follows that every area of life must be placed in subjection to God’s law. Here, again, is an area where pastors and music ministers fail to communicate with their congregations. Apply this to any number of cultural items and you immediately have the sense that Paul was less upset over outward behavior, and more zealous that our minds and hearts be in agreement with what we watch, or listen to, or sing.

Biblical aesthetics in music are difficult to pinpoint, until the larger issues of *purity* and *excellence* are addressed. Mere enjoyment is not enough. Doctrine alone is not sufficient. Sincerity does not excuse shoddy workmanship, nor does high art excuse borderline idolatry. Adjectives like distinctive, heartfelt, true, honorable, right, pure, lovely, reputable, excellent, praiseworthy—these are the Bible’s ideal for music. How, then, do we come to a place of mutual agreement about

what this music is?

Traditionalists and Innovators

On the one hand there are the traditionalists, advocates of established norms, regularly seen in the professional choral and organ journals. Their taste may vary by denomination, coming from different training modes and worship patterns. They are interested in carefully protecting what has been esteemed before this generation. James Moeser, former president of the American Guild of Organists, warns of “the seductive lure of the easy; the desire for instant gratification over rigorous and disciplined practice.” Paul Westermeyer, a Lutheran church educator and conductor, writes:

The church, in imitation of the world of popular culture at the moment, is in the business of making a wholesale dismissal of artistic concerns.... Musicians and other artists are among those who instinctively know about this.... It is true that we often turn this concern into an unfortunate sort of snobbery....³

Traditionalists usually oppose radical change in every realm. They were responsible, for example, for keeping hymn singing out of Anglican churches until about 1820, preferring the Psalm settings of the English Psalter. Whatever their faults, their conservative influence has spared Christianity from many aberrations of thought and practice.

The innovators, on the other hand, have led the way into new forms of liturgy, or discarded liturgy altogether as did early Protestants. (Luther, it will be remembered, sought to establish reforms in the Roman Catholic church at first, keeping intact the mass format—not transubstantiation—and other service elements.) Today’s innovators are more pragmatic, if not completely brazen in their approach to music. In a recent television special, *In the Name of God*, ABC’s Peter Jennings noted that in pastor Bill Hybels’ Willow Creek

prototype near Chicago, music performed in a club-like atmosphere with professional quality instrumentalists was part of the success story. Freely moving congregants get a spiritual high from such music, and are ready to listen to a gospel message. On the other hand, columnist Arsenio Orteza of *World* writes that most pop-music styles rely to some degree on the “predictability of their lyrics,” because that very quality sells records. We should not wonder that in many CCM albums, the lyrics are “only a corollary”—manifested in the “low quality of writing that most CCM musicians and fans alike have always settled for.”⁴ This is innovation of a different sort, more market-driven imitation than pure artistry or disciplined creativity.

If the music of pop religious culture suffers from shallow lyrics and its style is somewhat manipulative, then church leaders need to beware of its uncritical presence in their worship. Such music offers no serious alternatives, but exists to excite and encourage churches as they worship because it is so different from what they are used to hearing in church. True innovation, fueled by curiosity and a desire to improve what exists already, is easier to praise. The most brilliant innovators in music through the centuries have always defied tradition, sometimes to their ruin. Their collective genius, however, has retarded inevitable decay while creating new and expressive modes of worship. Without them, we would have missed the dramatic cantatas of J. S. Bach or the anthems of Henry Purcell, the oratorios of Handel, the *German Requiem* of Brahms, or the refreshing contemporary hymn settings of England’s John Rutter.

The Balance: Biblical Principle in Practice

Musical aesthetics requires some standard from which to prefer one style over another. In a culture where that standard, however intangible, falls into disuse, then musical anarchy results—and we have modern rock, rap, heavy metal,

electronic noise or body noises esteemed as art. True traditionalism is usually open to new ideas, when presented attractively. True innovation borrows heavily from the past, often rearranging and reforming into startling and different forms. Surely, with all the data at our fingertips from centuries of music making, we can avoid extreme positions on either side. If there is a balance possible, it will come when both sides lay down weapons of war and begin sober reflection. What better place to start than the Bible?

In order to establish biblical standards, eventually someone must choose and use the music with those standards clearly in mind. The following questions might be of help in that process:

- 1) Does the text adhere to biblical doctrine, or is it “soft” on truth?
- 2) Is the music convincing in its craft, technical discipline, and emotional flow?
- 3) Is the overall style neutral, or at least refreshingly unworldly?
- 4) Does the music exalt God only, or human sentiment on a subject?
- 5) Will this music stand the test of time? Will it be useful beyond this generation?
- 6) Is the performer/artist sufficiently humble to model Christian life?
- 7) Will you remember the words of the selection better, or the music?
- 8) If you put this selection in a worship service, would it attract attention to itself?

Below are several principles for using music, and examples to illustrate them. I recommend you select a few to listen to personally, and verify your own response. The critical remarks below are based on their appropriateness in a Christian concert or worship service, and in no way seek to impugn the integrity of the artists involved.

Principle 1: Let no other gods come before me (Ex. 20:3)

Musical Example: Michael W. Smith's "Friends" (1982, Meadowgreen Music Company). Avoid music that exalts anything above God, including human love, religious feelings, and personal fulfillment. The rather sentimental text is about as biblical as "Simple Gifts" with the subtle suggestion that even if something is different, it's "okay, man." Mr. Smith, an accomplished singer in this genre, manages some nice moments. Unfortunately the style and presentation in tunes like this one tend to elevate the personality of the artist—whether intentional or not.

Principle 2: "Let everything be done decently and in order (1 Cor. 14:40)

Musical Example: Petra, "Midnight Oil" (Bob Hartman, 1993, Word, Inc.). Avoid music that may have a biblical text, but ravages or diminishes it through sensation or excessive volume, mimicking previous styles. This predictably heavy rock number uses intense rhythmic drive, ear-shattering guitar solos, mike-eating screams, etc., to make its point. The words are loosely based on Matthew 25:1-13, the Parable of the Ten Virgins. While they are true and their message is clear, the medium chosen automatically bypasses the bulk of America's church services. This is the ultimate "hard sell." Bach did a much better job with his Cantata No. 140, at one-fourth the volume.

Principle 3: "I shall sing with the spirit and I shall sing with the mind also" (1 Cor. 14:15)

Musical Example: Michael James, "I Don't Condemn You" (1992, words and music by Bobby Price and Michael James, Reunion Records). Avoid songs which may have some good thoughts, but say nothing of any consequence, even bypassing the mind for the heart. This is tender-hearted, sensitive country rock that melts the hearts of its fans. Sentiments expressed by the text (space does not permit a complete look at it) seem loosely based on Jesus' words to the adulterous

woman in John 8:11. No matter how popular or meaningful its appeal, such art shamelessly plays on the factors of sentiment to teach the concept of forgiveness. I can imagine the same words handled in a less manipulative way.

Principle 4: "See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men. . . rather than according to Christ" (Col. 2:8)

Musical Example: Cindy Morgan, "I Know You" (source not available). Use music which affirms godly life and clear doctrine, and makes no effort to accommodate the world and its fleshly domain. One of the worst abuses is to cloak sensuality in religion. Here is a clear example of contemporary music that calls itself Christian only to lower us to the level of a breathy, pop female vocalist whose style mimics Janet Jackson or Paula Abdul. The "you" of the text is unclear—it could be a friend, a boyfriend, or God, or her karma; who knows? This is one of CCM's hottest properties, but her vocal training is weak, she drops phrases and muddles her words noticeably. The tragedy is, many aspiring singers in Bible-believing America will pick up this single (and others like it), buy the track, and mimic its style in front of the congregation to the delighted beams of seeker-sensitive church leaders.

My criticism of CCM artists and artistry, at whatever level, is not intended to further the chasm between tradition and innovation. It is intended as a caution against idolatry. Having listened fairly patiently to numerous examples of such music over the years, I come back to one question: Is this the best we can do? Related to that, and critical to the summary of this article, is the question of doing better, and why we must if we care at all about the church in the next century.

The Final Assault: The Next Generation

We have discussed what is occurring throughout America's churches as tradition ends its reign in our worship, new replaces old, and elitist past leaders meet head-on the de-

mands of a generation hungry for entertainment. There are those who believe we will make it through this period with few scars, if any. I happen to disagree.

The largest problem we face as our children become participants in a contentless, sentimental, self-centered musical paradigm is that they may have little or no contact with doctrinally correct, excellent quality church music. This is already happening in churches who long ago discarded hymnals for overheads. We have a generation of young people who do not know what existed previously, and one for which solid Christian doctrine is boring. Luther was right in catechizing the young with German hymns—tools for dogma and worship. What bothers me about this generation is not its ignorance, but its arrogance (with exceptions) in the area of music. We have raised a generation of young elitists, whose view of music transcends doctrine, faith, and the rustic concept of sacrifice. True to form, when confronted with critical assessments of CCM or seeker-worship this generation responds with “That’s your opinion.” We are already paying the price in churches across America with diminished use of hymns, anthems, and scriptural allusions in songs.

If we are sincere in wanting a reformation in church music, we might well look into alternative styles. Must we always have pop? Is there nothing else to play, or sing? We have already turned away gifted composers and musicians—many of whom could be producing that alternative style. The legacy for the coming generation of Christians is a hollow shell compared to what it might have been with a more balanced practice of biblical aesthetics.

Conclusion

Suppose your church sends you on a mission to find the ten best composers of biblical worship music in this generation. You might file through acres of anthems, solos, tapes, CDs, and videos in a bewildering search for principled, mature

music based on Bible doctrine. Possessing strong musical instincts as a Christian will guide you as you derive your aesthetics in the Bible, and apply them in your music ministry. Sound too simple? It works the same with Christian bricklayers, doctors, and politicians. The difficulty comes when an agnostic, self-deceived culture conflicts with what we believe is true, and our choices require self-examination, humility before God, and renunciation of past sins in our work.

Calvin Johansson has written about the quest for a God-centered practice of church music in evangelicalism in his recent book, *Discipling Music Ministry: Twenty-First Century Directions*. He concludes that the church will need to reshape its music over the next decades:

Even as the twentieth century has continued to unravel the tightly knit influence of God over human life, so the next century must reestablish it. Church musicians have a major role to play because of the power and control art forms enjoy over contemporary society. Music ministers will need a special measure of fortitude.... Designing worship to be biblically sound and less faddish, straightforward and less manipulative, ascetic rather than indulgent, honest and less showy (pretentious), God-centric and not egocentric, more wholesome (edifying) than entertaining, will call for some rugged changes.... A discipling music ministry is not predicated upon fleshly enjoyment, but upon people’s need to grow into the likeness of Jesus.⁵

Considering the likelihood of a rethinking of musical values throughout independent evangelical churches across the United States, it is easy to be cynical. What we really need is a “new song” that rises above our tastes for the sake of the church—not market trends. Your quest for startlingly fresh, visceral and doctrinally true hymns, psalms, and spiritual songs will not go unrewarded, and certainly not unnoticed. It is a goal that we must, regardless of tradition and taste, strive to complete. But we must first confess before God our musical

prejudices. Our own taste, in the end, may be the ultimate sacrifice, so that God may work graciously in us for the biblical church music He intends to establish for His own glory.

Endnotes

- 1 *Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield: G. and C. C. Merriam and Company, 1977), 15.
- 2 Moeser, James. "President's Address," *The American Organist*, October 1994, 24.
- 3 Westermeyer, Paul. "Theology and Music in the Context of Popular Culture," *The American Organist*, November 1994, 35.
- 4 Orteza, Arsenio. "Gospel Art," *World*, March 25, 1995, 23.
- 5 Johansson, Calvin M. *Discipling Music Ministry: Twenty-First Century Directions* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1992), 168.

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