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Music in Worship

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Worship is an activity in which all believers are to be regularly involved. As with any customary activity, it is commendable to stop and re-evaluate why we do what we do. This will invigorate our worship with fresh perspective and avoid its degeneration into mere routine. As fundamental Baptists, we would do well to ask ourselves the questions, who is it we are trying to please in our worship? What are we intending to accomplish when we worship? Do our activities accomplish these intentions?

When Jesus spoke with the Samaritan woman, he did not accuse her of not worshipping. He simply challenged her with the fact that she was ignorant of the object of her worship. Our focus must be the God of the Bible and him alone.

There is much discussion in evangelical circles today about both worship and music. Fundamentalists have lagged behind in their discussions of this critical topic, but lately there has been renewed interest in the activity of public worship. In order for intelligent discussions to occur in the area of music and worship, the definition of terms is essential. Following a definition of these terms, the components of worship will be considered. This will conclude with a brief summary of the historic roots of the use of music by fundamentalists. It is hoped that this survey will provoke further discussion toward a theology of music for public worship.

Music and Worship: Definitions

Music can be defined as the organization of tones and rhythms into a discernable whole that is designed to communicate a message to the listener. This definition has some important overtones for further discussions regarding the role of music in worship; namely, that music itself does communicate a message.

Defining the term worship is not quite as easy. The resurgence of interest in worship among evangelicals in general and fundamentalists in particular has produced a proliferation of definitions for worship. Many of these definitions have great merit. I would suggest that there are some essential elements which must be included in any biblical definition of worship.

First, worship experiences throughout scripture began with some form of divine revelation. Moreover, this self-revelation of God prompted a response on the part of the worshiper. Isaiah, for example, "saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up," and his immediate response was to acknowledge his sin (Isa. 6:1-5). In another passage, we learn that God revealed himself to Abraham and commanded him to offer his son Isaac as an act of worship (Gen. 22:1-18). True worship cannot occur until both some aspect of God's person is revealed and there is an appropriate response by the worshiper.

A second element essential to understanding worship is that the nature of the worshiper's response often varies. In the scriptures, these responses varied from jubilation (Ps. 95:1-2), to fear (Eph. 5:15; Rev. 14:6-7), from verbal (Isa. 6:5, 8) to nonverbal (Rev. 1:17) responses, and from seeming inactivity (Rev. 1:17) to lifelong pilgrimages (Isa. 6:9-12). Every example of worship recorded in the scriptures demonstrated a response on the part of the worshiper.

Third, the true worshiper was to respond in the context of an obedient life. He was to worship in light of the revelation that God had given him. One might define worship then as seeing God for who he truly is and responding to him in praise, awe, and adoration within the context of an obedient life. With

these definitions in mind, we can now relate music and worship to contemporary discussions.

Components of Worship

Much of the controversy surrounding music for worship today revolves around a misunderstanding of worship itself or a mistaken idea as to the purpose for music.¹ To cry out against a certain style or movement simply because "that is not the way we do things here" is not enough. We must understand and attempt to emulate the kind of worship the Lord is seeking. He is the one who makes it clear that he is looking for those who will worship him (John 4:24). What does he want? What is it that will bring him the greatest pleasure? These are the questions we must resolve to answer. It is possible to arrive at sound conclusions regarding the components of worship by applying the principles we see modeled in the scriptures.

Basis of Worship: The Revelation of God

If worship begins when people see God clearly for who he is, then there are several things that must be true about our worship and the music that is chosen for worship. Music for worship must clearly present a truth about God in an authentic, truthful, and accurate way. Paul emphasizes the need for letting Christ's words dwell in each believer through the hymns that they sing to one other (Col. 3:16). This imperative emphasizes the need for the music of worship to be pure in its didactic

¹Clearly the Bible permits music that is appropriate for the believer, but not intended for the worship of God. The Song of Solomon is an example of human love of which God approves. There are other examples of music surrounding national victories (Judges 5), the digging of wells (Num. 20:17), and soothing others (1 Sam. 16:23). It is not the purpose of this paper to discuss all of these secondary musical purposes.

properties. What is this music (both text and tune) saying about God? The answer to this question, however challenging, must be our primary consideration. Is this music for worship consistent with all that I know about the Lord and his character? In our public worship, we must ask what this music is communicating to those who are supposed to be worshipping along with the worship leader. No matter how a person may feel in a worship experience, how orthodox the worship may appear, or how aesthetically pleasing it may be judged, there has been no worship if God is not accurately portrayed.

The text of course is the obvious place to begin. Much of what has been and continues to be passed off as Christian music is not worthy of the God to whom it is directed. Texts that are untrue or unworthy of the Savior are often tolerated, because they happen to have a musical style that is appealing to the worshiper. The musical style that accompanies these texts may be within the accepted norms of a particular group and even conservative, but if the text is of little value in portraying God as the transcendent, yet approachable God, it is not acceptable music for worship. This is not to say that all texts must fathom the depths of theological truths, for simple truths can be meditated upon with great benefit. They must, however, be consistent with theological truths. The angels worship God night and day saying, "Holy, Holy, Holy" (Isa. 5:3; Rev. 4:8). Whether simple or profound, the text of worship hymns must be theocentric. God must be pleased with what we are telling him about himself.

Not only is the text important, but the vocabulary of the music itself is also important. By vocabulary I mean the genre of the music (e.g. classical, jazz, rock). It is important that the style of worship music reflect cultural sensitivity. This means that when public worship occurs, there must be an understanding of the 'baggage' that accompanies the vocabulary of each musical style. Moreover, there must also be an understanding and sensitivity to the people that we are attempting to lead into the Lord's presence. In other words, to use a style of music that for whatever reasons carries a message that is foreign to the purity

of Christ is to lose focus on the need to see the Lord accurately in worship.

Since music is about communication, the sounds that are used in any Christian community communicate much more than words. It is wishful thinking to argue that style of music should not communicate anything; no one lives in that kind of a cultural vacuum. In order for worship to be biblical, each believer must see God clearly for who he is. That means every ingredient of the music must aid in accurately picturing the God of the Bible. We must ask with integrity the question, "What does the music of this worship song communicate to these people at this time?" Only as we wrestle with the answers to these questions can we hope to worship the Lord in a way that brings pleasure to him and helps others worship along with us.

Purpose of Worship: To Please God

The music of worship must also encourage the believer to offer up praise and adoration to God. In order to accomplish this, we must grapple with several truths. There must be an understanding that the focus of the worshiper is to bring pleasure to God. It is here that there seems to be a misunderstanding. Often the reason musical styles are accepted or rejected is based on the pleasure of the worshiper, not on God. The focus must not be on the worshiper's own pleasure.

Even an English word study on worship will easily reveal that not every worship experience brought pleasure to the worshiper. When Abraham was preparing to worship God with the sacrifice of his son, he entered this worship time looking for God to get something out of his worship. Abraham could have said, "I am not getting anything out of this worship time." When we hear someone say that they "are not getting anything out of a worship service," perhaps it is not all bad. Perhaps we should remind ourselves that we have succeeded in worship when God "gets something out of it."

Worship by definition cannot be anthropocentric. It is man

offering a gift of awe, praise, adoration, obedience, submission, and reverence to God. This is not to say that man cannot or should not derive pleasure from such an intimate relationship with God in worship. He is predisposed to bless us. By way of illustration, the Psalms often command us to bless the Lord. Whether we get a blessing out of our worship of God is God's concern, not ours. "The celebration that we call worship has less to do with the satisfaction of the pursuit of happiness than with the abandonment of the pursuit of happiness."² Even when we see the Psalmist requesting God to bless him, it could be argued that he does so simply to acknowledge his own dependence upon the Lord. Most often the Psalmist simply expresses the reality that God will bless him.

Christ is pictured as the perfect Bridegroom. As such, he desires to meet our needs. But the marriage type used in Scripture also clearly illustrates that the bride's focus should be on bringing pleasure to the Bridegroom and not to herself (Eph. 5:22-33). Worship music that is chosen or disdained simply because it is enjoyed or not enjoyed reflects an inferior understanding of worship. It should be the worshiper's concern to bring Christ pleasure and blessing. If there is a break in intimate worship, it is not the fault of the Bridegroom, it is the selfishness in the approach of the bride.

Nature of Our Worship: Whole-hearted

The predominate word used for worship in both Hebrew and Greek speaks of bowing or laying prostrate before God. Interestingly, when Christ responded to Satan's temptation to false worship, he quoted Deuteronomy 6:13 and interchanged the words "fear the Lord" with "worship the Lord" (cf. Deut. 6:13 and Matt. 3:10). The posture of worship and the activities that

²Richard John Neuhaus, Freedom for Ministry (New York/San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979), 126.

surrounded biblical worship experiences indicate that the total person was involved in awe in their worship.

Worship is not something that one is to observe or enter into casually but must be an intense act by each individual believer priest as they approach God to adore him. This is quite foreign to our western idea of entertainment music. Worship music cannot be the 'muzak' of the service. For worship to occur, music must be a deliberate exercise of intense sincerity that the perfect Bridegroom deserves. Apathetic music is the antithesis of true worship. When a believer is preoccupied by his likes or dislikes, the activities of others, the criticism of others, or even the beauty of the music, he cannot be worshipping God through his music. He may have had a pleasing aesthetic experience or an emotional high, but he has not worshiped. For us to be authentic in our worship and radically biblical, we must commit to being involved as we worship. All of our heart, soul, mind, and strength must be involved in our expression of love to our Savior. It is the first and greatest commandment (Matt. 22:37-38). Each believer must offer up praise and adoration to God and God alone with his whole being for worship to occur.

Without a serious concern for these main components, music in worship will degenerate into little more than another medium of entertainment. Unfortunately, this is the trend of much of the music among evangelicals and fundamentalists. So, why is it that we evangelicals and fundamentalists have found ourselves so out of focus in our worship when it comes to the use of music? To at least partially answer this question, we must consider how the role of music has changed historically in evangelicalism as well as fundamentalism.

Historic Perspective

History can help lend perspective to our pilgrimage. While I was in college in the late 1970s, much of the church music being performed was directed to the people and measured by their approval. Although this seemed very much like the

atmosphere that pervaded the new evangelical movement that I had only recently left, I soon began to understand that this tendency to think of music and worship strictly on a horizontal plane was shared by more than new evangelicals. It seemed strange that music was appreciated, applauded, encouraged, and called a 'blessing' that had little to do with the only worthy object of worship, God alone. Yet others were often criticized for doing the exact same things; simply 'doing' music and engaging in 'worship' that was self-centered and self-gratifying. This is not to deny that there were many who were honestly motivated out of a sincerity to maintain purity and integrity in the choices that they made in public and private worship. Others, however, were confused and caught up in just 'doing' it. A look into the roots of fundamentalism has some answers for why music and worship may be as troubled as they are among our ranks.

Principle of Separation

A distinction of fundamentalism has been an emphasis of the principle of separation. Over the years, in a conscientious effort to be relevant in their application of biblical truth, separation has been applied in different ways. I believe that for the most part, fundamentalists have attempted to be consistent in this area. What has been criticized as an over-zealousness has usually been modified as time made evident the need for a change. Associations do change and this means that applications must also change. The point of contention within fundamentalism, however, has usually revolved around when and where to make this change. The goal is to maintain doctrinal and associational purity while remaining culturally sensitive. The fundamentalists in particular have been concerned about presenting music that was not associated with error. Because of the ever-changing palette of musical styles, the application of the principle of separation to music has always been in a state of flux. This flux has caused alarm for some. Nevertheless, as the

concept of separation is understood and spiritual integrity is emphasized, proper applications are able to be made.

Zeal for Evangelism

A zeal for evangelism has been another distinction of fundamentalism over the years. This zeal can be demonstrated in two specific ways: the desire to maintain the gospel's purity and the emphasis on activities that promote evangelism.

Although a zeal for evangelism has been a hallmark of fundamentalism, this zeal has not always been balanced by a zeal for purity. Consequently, compromise was made in the area of separation. This is probably no more apparent than in the area of music. Pragmatism became the basis of the use of music in public services. It served the function of drawing huge crowds for mass evangelism.

Since the music seemed to have a certain effect on its listeners or seemed to attract a crowd, it was easy for fundamentalists to simply dismiss other critically important areas of consideration. Evangelist D. L. Moody, for example, admitted that he knew little about music and could not tell the merits of a song until he saw how well it moved the crowd. The wrong understanding that music's primary purpose is to be a tool for evangelism and not worship has led to many wrong decisions regarding music within the worship services of fundamental churches. This is a crack in the foundation of the fundamentalist's music. It is my contention that this is what has led to a shallow view of the role of music in many fundamental churches.

The effect of this imbalance has had serious consequences. Among others, it has minimized the importance of worship in the public services. The importance of worship for today, however, can be brought into perspective when considering the importance of worship in the eternal state and the true motive for salvation--eternal fellowship with God.

Perhaps the dominant role of the evangelist (the radio evangelist in particular) encouraged the use of music outside the local church ministry, where worship would more likely be centrally controlled under the local church. Since the evangelist's message was usually more clearly directed to the unsaved, he frequently used music that would appeal to the lost. In the scriptures, however, music for worship was always directed to the Lord. Its influence upon the unsaved was secondary. Obviously evangelism is important. Fundamentalists, however, must obey God in this area and not assume that their obedience in evangelism justifies disobedience in other areas, specifically in the area of music for worship.

If we are to allow worship and music to hold their God-intended purposes in our private and corporate lives, then we must make sure that they are defined properly and practiced with God-honoring integrity. Only as we understand where we should go and where we have been in our worship music can we hope to chart a path toward a truly biblical music and worship program.