

## MUSIC IN WORSHIP SERVICES

The practice of music in corporate worship has historically been punctuated with controversy, but that controversy seems to have become particularly intense and divisive in the American church in recent decades. I have observed people joining churches, leaving churches and entire congregations splitting over the matter of worship music. This is most unfortunate since music is a gift given us by God to enrich and fulfill the divine invitation to worship Him (Ps 95:1, 6).

Congregational music and singing is prescribed in both Old and New Testaments. Many of the Psalms were written to be sung and some contain musical instructions as a preamble (Ps 6). We are called to use voice and instruments, “*Sing for joy in the Lord, O you righteous ones; Praise is becoming to the upright. Give thanks to the Lord with the lyre; Sing praises to Him with a harp of ten strings. Sing to Him a new song; play skillfully with a shout of joy*” (Ps 33:1-3). The New Testament church continued to employ music in its worship (Col 3:16).

Worship involves the totality of a person, mind, intellect and emotion. Music is a powerful medium for expressing and applying the Word of God in our hearts. In his book, *Worship in Spirit and in Truth*, Professor John Frame observes, “Poetic and/or musical form enhance the word of God in various ways. In particular, poetical/musical forms impart vividness and memorability to God’s words. That vividness and memorability, in turn, drives the word into our hearts, so that it becomes precious to us and motivates us to praise and obedience”.

Variety and diversity characterize worship music in Scripture and in church history. There are a variety of instruments mentioned in the OT such as trumpet, harp, lyre, timbrel, stringed instruments, pipe, and cymbals (Ps 150:3-5). As the church has evolved over the centuries, so have its musical forms and expressions. The tension between traditional and contemporary music style is not unique to the modern church. Especially in times of revival large numbers of people embracing Christ has been accompanied by the creation of new music and lyrics. For example, during the Reformation in 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe, Martin Luther himself wrote new songs for his congregation and John Calvin encouraged new psalm arrangements. Both of these Reformation leaders borrowed from contemporary secular tunes and moved away from Latin to the vernacular of the day in their lyrics. Calvin’s contemporary tunes were derisively referred to by some as “Geneva jigs”. The religious awakenings in 1700’s America and revivals since have spawned new worship songs and styles that were often met with disapproval and suspicion.

There are some who contend that there are particular rhythms and beats that do not promote holy worship, or worse, are down right evil or ungodly in their origin and they seek to support this claim from Scripture. I disagree with this view and deem the claim to be based upon faulty exegesis and interpretation. I do not see any rhythm/beat to be necessarily evil. The lyrics are the primary litmus test for determining the spiritual appropriateness of any song.

The diversity of lyrics, instruments, melody, vocals (soloists, duets, choirs, etc) is further amplified from culture to culture. I have had the opportunity to worship with fellow Christians in Kenya, Uganda, Serbia, Haiti, Brazil, Israel, Belarus and in Eastern and Western Europe. In some cases the music forms could not have been more different...from formal liturgical services in grand edifices to meeting in thatched roof churches without walls. In fact, I have had profoundly different worship experiences in Nebraska compared to Florida! We should acknowledge that there is no one right way to worship and bless the Lord in music. Each local

church needs to embrace the style that best expresses the gifts and calling of that particular church family. No one church can likely adopt all forms of worship music (classical church organ music will probably never be too welcomed in the churches of the Appalachian Mountains), but it is healthy and preferable to allow for as much variety as is represented in the congregation and that is reflective of the cultural context. Since opinions can be so wide and varied, the pastors, elders, and leaders of corporate worship must decide the tone and balance for any given congregation.

In my pastoral ministry I have sought to maintain certain principles to guide in the choosing of various kinds of songs and music. There are four main principles, the first two pertain to the songs and the second two pertain to the musicians:

1. The lyrics of songs must be Biblically and theologically correct.
2. The tunes to songs must be readily “sing-able” and intelligible by the congregation
3. The musicians must possess good quality with voice and instruments.
4. The musicians must seek to draw attention to the Lord and not themselves, avoiding the demeanor of “entertainers”.

We typically have 3 or 4 different music worship teams at any one time. There may be some overlap of musicians from one team to another, but each team has a different leader, each with their own unique style. The teams take turns and rotate in leading corporate worship services. The presence or absence of particular instruments is usually due to the availability of the musicians. An effort is made to allow as many folks as possible to use their musical gifts to benefit the church family (currently we are blessed with 10 pianists in rotation!). For lack of a better term, “blended” would be one way to describe our worship music, i.e. a combination of traditional hymns, contemporary songs and new arrangements of traditional songs.

On a final note (pun intended!), meaningful worship is a very personal and subjective experience. There will be types of songs that inspire us and others that we dislike and may even find distracting. I call upon my brothers and sisters in Christ to try and be accepting of the variety of tastes of your fellow worshipers. To quote Professor Frame again, “...even within the same culture there are different musical languages, such as the difference between the music of the old and the music of the young. What one considers joyful, the other may hear as irreverent; what one considers reverent and dignified, the other may see as joyless and dull...We should not selfishly insist on using music only from our own favorite tradition. Rather, in the spirit of Christ the servant, we must be willing to sacrifice our own preferences in order to reach others with the truth...It is a good idea, then, for all of us to learn to appreciate music that doesn’t immediately appeal to us. In that way we serve one another, and we also grow by learning to praise God in new ways”.

Suggested further reading:

1. *Worship by the Book*, D. A. Carson, editor
2. *Contemporary Worship Music*, John M. Frame