

“Music and the Worship Service - Part One”

Foundational Principles for Corporate Worship Music

1. *Worship is no longer culturally and ethnically bound* - There was a radical change that happened in worship from the OC to the NC. I think it’s hard for us to realize how radical the change was for the people who lived through it. Prior to Jesus, worship of the true God, revealed by God, was deliberately mono-cultural and ethnocentric. After Jesus, there is a radical democratization of worship. It’s many tongues, many tribes. (The analogy is over-used, but...) there is an Incarnational analogy of the Gospel affecting culture. Just as Jesus entered our world and took on flesh and blood and lived in a specific place and time - at the fullness of the time - there is an analogy for the Gospel incarnating itself in every culture. The Gospel goes in, comes alongside, and yet calls out and challenges. The Gospel goes into a culture, but does not ask that the culture become Jewish, or Western; it becomes redeeming of culture. (It should make you a better African, or a better Philadelphian... That’s different than Islam, which tries to be deliberately monocultural...) It enters in, condescends; and challenges and transcends. We don’t have time to develop this. But this needs to be emphasized because it’s easy to fall into traditionalism, to institutionalize preferences and assume they have biblical warrant without thinking critically about culture, critically about ourselves and lovingly about others.
2. *Corporate Worship is (in its priority) about edification through the ministry of the Word* - If worship is all of life; if all of life is to be lived in worship to God, what is the purpose of corporate worship? It is an intensification and focusing of that worship that goes on every day, because of the horizontal aspect. Our worship needs to be God-centered. But it’s not about you and your private religious experience in the pew. The purpose of corporate worship is sitting *together* under the ministry of the Word and also ministering that Word to one another. It is an intensification of the vertical because of the horizontal. Why do we meet with God when we meet together? Because we minister with and to one another - the Holy Spirit using each other’s gifts in the Body of Christ. Every time you see an example of corporate worship in the NT or directions for corporate worship, the emphasis in every occasion is on the ministry of the Word in ministry to one another. The teaching is that because of the Holy Spirit there is a remarkable range of word ministries among the people for the people. There are men specifically gifted and called to be teachers in the church. But there are also word gifts among the congregation of encouragement and consolation and exhortation. We sing the word, pray the word, preach the word, exhort and encourage with the word. Word plays the primary role. We are to build each other up in faith; we are to be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith; faith comes by hearing. Corporate worship is not about meeting the personal needs in the pew; it is about mutual ministry. See Acts 2:42, Eph. 4:11-16, Eph.5:18-21, Col.3:16-17, 1 Cor.14...
3. *The Purpose of Music in worship is edification; it is a subset of the ministry of the Word in the life of the congregation...*

The Role of Music

Why Music? What Music Helps Us Do?

Music is a means of communication; it has the ability to communicate to the heart - to inspire, to stir the emotions; it has a resonance in our emotions. Like speech, it has pitch, timbre, rhythm. Used alongside words, it has the ability to enhance meaning... [Examples...] Music has the ability to interpret as words are happening.

Poetry and music have been used from the first moments of Creation - Gen.1-2... Poetry communicates vividness and memorability - making words more powerful, driving them into our heads and hearts so they become precious to us and motivate us to praise and obedience.

Deuteronomy 31:19,21-22 - “Now therefore write this song and teach it to the people of Israel. Put it in their mouths... And when many evils and troubles have come upon them, this song shall confront them as a witness (for it will live unforgotten in the mouths of their offspring)... So Moses wrote this song the same day and taught it to the people of Israel.”

Preaching can sanctify your people on the spot, and hopefully, they will remember and be changed by things that you preach. But I’ll tell you this - they will remember the words they sing from their songs and be singing them the next day.

Music and poetry was used in the Bible at moments of great importance. Almost every period of religious revival in history has been accompanied by new outpourings of music.

God himself is musical...

Music can help us: obey God’s Word (Ps.47:6 - it is commanded), learn and remember God’s Word (Col.3:16-17), respond to God’s grace and to the Spirit (Ps.108:1, Eph.5:18-20, 1 Cor. 14:24-26), combine biblical doctrine and strong devotion (Ps.33:1-8), express unity in Christ (Rom.15:5-7 - with one voice), reflect the songs of heaven (Rev.5:8-14).

Why Is Music Controversial?

Music is so controversial because it is so powerful and important. When music goes wrong, something vital, something enhancing is lost.

Music is hard because worship is hard. It is seeking to represent the ineffable. We spoke in the last session about the tensions and continuums of worship: transcendent vs. immanent, vertical vs horizontal, unity vs diversity, reverence vs joy, cognitive vs emotional, objective vs subjective, excellent vs common, theological vs simple. Music is also trying to represent the mix and matrix of those things.

Music Is A Language

One of the reasons music is controversial is because music is a language; perhaps better to say, music is a dialect or accent. Musical style is relative and cultural. That does not make it free-form or relativistic. God created it and anchors it. He upholds the expression of His image in man even in our music. Music has anchors rooted in the foundations of rhythm, harmony and

the tensions of dissonance and syncopation. Those foundations are cross-cultural and universal. But their expression, their ‘accent’ across cultures is relative and situational.

I have been told that years ago in Wales, a minor key communicated happiness. I don’t know if I believe it, but I’ve been told that’s true. There was something they thought beautiful and in harmony about a minor key.

As a Music Major in college, I had to take courses in Music History where we were tested in our ability to identify what periods certain samples of music were from, and even geographic regions and even specific composers. Certain geographic regions expressed preferences for certain chord progressions and harmonies. And even some composers had elements that marked their music. You can identify certain music as baroque or classical or early Romantic or late Romantic. Music often can be identified by the culturally common harmonies, chord progressions, rhythms, instruments, number of voices that are used. The changes in musical language can be traced historically.

There was a German Lutheran accent... There is an English chorale accent... You can tell music written from 1880-1920...not just by the sentimental content but by the musical accent.

We live in a day where people have more exposure and access to music than anyone in history... That does not mean there is more musical literacy... Nevertheless, exposure has increased exponentially. (Incidentally, I believe younger generations of people today have a better trained tonal memory and developed intuition into harmony as a result.) As the exposure has increased, two things have happened. On one level, the process of language change has increased. Musical accent is more volatile and tribal in development than has ever been. The “in-vogue” instrumentation, rhythm, and harmony seems to identifiably change within a few years - you can recognize whether music came from the 1970’s, 80’s, and 90’s. On the other hand, change can also be said to have flattened out. There is more knowledge and borrowing from other styles and a blurring of accents. (There will always be a flux between conformity and diversity in human culture. It is symptomatic of Creation itself.)

This dynamic flux in accent and dialect is part of the controversy of music. Younger generations may find newer dialects more intelligible and attractive; older generations may find it unintelligible and distressing. These preferences can be petty, proud and selfish, but can also be legitimate. Your worship music is the language of your heart communication with God. There are reasons why it is important to you.

Biblical Assumptions for Corporate Worship Music

Here are some principles, or Biblical assumptions we need to have about corporate worship music.

1. *Corporate worship music must reflect the tensions and continuums and spectrum of worship.*
Our worship music needs to reflect the range the heart longs to express in worship to God...
2. *Corporate music must teach Gospel theology.* If music has this ability to be remembered, what’s your best vehicle for getting theology into the heart’s of your people? The music. So

we want our music to have substantial content. We want both our minds and hearts engaged. The music is going to impact you; God created it to impact you. You can't be afraid of music impacting you. But we want that power of music to be enhancing my focus on the truths of God's Word.

3. *Corporate worship music must be intelligible* (culturally contextualized, understandable, singable).
4. *Corporate worship music is a ministry* (edification, focus on the corporate). It's not about a performance; it's a ministry to one another. (In my opinion, there is nothing wrong with special music used to edify in the congregation. But it must be a ministry, not a performance. Even instrumental music can be a ministry. Your instrumentalists may play songs at certain points in the service that are instrumental arrangements of hymns, and by their thoughtful choice of songs - be directing the thoughts and edifying the rest of the congregation).

The Question of Style

The Bible has very little to say about musical style. The Bible does not teach a uniform aesthetic. Therefore, it is a matter of Christian liberty and wisdom. We must be careful to avoid hard and fast rules that go beyond Scripture. As a matter of liberty, musical style needs to be a matter of humble dialogue and mutual submission.

So is it just a matter of preference? Are there any principles that should guide us practically?

We don't have time to go into this with any depth - but John Frame's tri-perspectivalism is a helpful tool in thinking through some decisions of church life.¹ If you want to know what faithfulness to God means, you need to know three things: the *normative* perspective...the *existential* perspective...the *situational* perspective...

The *normative perspective* is: What does God say? We need to know God; we need to know theology; we need to know God's purposes for worship and worship music. The Scripture is our norm and it norms us.

But to make a decision as to how to apply that, we need to know the *existential perspective*: We need to know ourselves. In the life of the church, you need to know your theological heritage and church tradition, your congregational make-up and gifting, and your congregational temptations and idols. These are the strengths and weaknesses of our congregation, the background and tradition of the church.

But we also need to know the *situational perspective*: We need to know our community, who God is calling us to be now, where the battle lines are, where we are to minister and what the needs are in the situation and community God has placed us in.

¹ Frame develops this idea in several places, but principally in *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1987).

Looking at those three perspectives, those things will vary from church to church. God gives *principles*. We apply them in the *circumstances* we find ourselves in.

One of the important principles of the Reformation was that worship should be in the *vernacular*. (This was even part of the Counter-Reformation with Palestrina...) While I was classically trained, from the moment I began writing music, the tunes were recognizable from their melodies to their harmonies as ‘contemporary’.

Likewise, music should reflect the *cultural vernacular*. (This does not always mean “contemporary”! Some people make a mistake thinking that you need to do rock music in church to reach young people. There are many examples of churches full of young people and the worship music is classical-traditional.)

Freedom and wisdom in our church has meant doing mostly contemporary worship - folk rock with a hymn twist. Much of that has to do with the people God has brought to our church. We have had between 4-6 pianists who can play piano by ear. Only two of those are able to sight-read very well. The rest are wonderful at reading chord charts and improvising. But when asked to sight-read a hymn that’s not familiar, they can’t do it. When they try, it’s bad, and when you’re music is bad, your people won’t be worshipping. We also have a bassist, harmonica player, flute player, and a professional drummer. This is the talent God kept bringing to our small church. So the music we can do well is more contemporary than traditional-classical. Most of what we do is almost all hymns, but put to newer music or arrangements. We sing music from a range of sources: Indelible Grace, Sovereign Grace, Sojourn Music, Red Mountain Music, Getty Hymns, plus music that we have written ourselves. I believe this style also fits well our suburban culture. I believe, done well, it is more approachable and edifying. I think it fits our culture. And we have the talent to do it.

Change is important in church life. A resistance to change can be a real righteousness problem. Being open to submitting to others out of reverence for Christ, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, and flexibility is a discipleship concern. It is an important pastoral principle to disciple your people to be open to change. God is going to be changing things in their lives all the time. It’s a matter of faith to respond to change. There will be new people coming into your church, people different than you. We don’t want change for change’s sake. But to have an openness and willingness to change is important. You don’t want to be calcified...