

February, 2003 Worship Music: From Compromise to Maturity

And now for the “letter” portion of this NewsLetter. What I want to talk about is worship music. But it’s kind of a soap-box of mine lately, so I’ll say it anyway. Let’s title it “Worship Music: From Compromise to Maturity.”

The Problem

If you are in leadership at a church, you are probably dealing with the “worship music” issue. You know what I mean. If, for example, you are at a traditional church (Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, Evangelical Free . . .) it runs like this:

“We have sung hymns all these years, we have had this organ/piano all these years, and now the young people want to sing these worship choruses with rock and roll bands. So loud! And so shallow! Three lines of words that get sung again and again and again. Can’t we just stick to the classics that have nourished and instructed the church for generations?”

And then the “young people” (though we know that there are people of all ages in both camps) respond: “You call this *worship* music? I call it *funeral* music! These old hymns just don’t speak to me. It’s simply not the music of my generation. And how can I wait upon the Lord or be sensitive to the presence of God when I am trying to follow verse after verse of words in a hymn book? Why can’t I just close my eyes and sing a few words of scripture long enough to let them sink into my soul?”

Now, you must remember, of course, that in the revival meetings of the 1800’s people were saying very similar things about the “new” songs being introduced into the church (just as was said during the Reformation, and with the introduction of polyphony into church music in the middle ages).

Now, if you are a part of a “contemporary” church (Vineyard, Calvary Chapel, independent charismatic . . .) it runs like this:

“We have been singing these Maranatha tunes (or classic Vineyard or Integrity Praise music . . .) all these ten years, we have had this acoustic guitar and this little group (or this choir/band), and now these young people want to sing Delirious? and Sonic Flood music and use electric guitars and dance and jump up and down in church. This is just too much! I can’t concentrate on God what with all the activity and noise!”

Then the “young people” respond: “Those old Maranatha songs don’t speak to me. They are soooo cheesy. And can’t we just *let go* a little in church?”

And on and on it goes, complicated even more when we might want to add a few songs of Taize music or some John Michael Talbot, just to add a “contemplative” dimension to the service.

The Common Solution: Compromise

One the one hand, these debates might seem a little silly. But, I assure you they are not

small matters. The issue of worship music touches us where we meet God. We cherish the songs that were played at key moments in our lives, the music that shaped us during our developing years (Do you and your special someone have “our song”?). Music speaks to our heart. Just try watching a movie without the sound for a while and then turning the sound back on. Those tender moments are greatly enhanced (if not *created*) by the background music. Music that speaks to us can be a powerful vehicle of God’s grace. Music that does not speak to us can be a royal distraction! No wonder when we try to address this issue the emotions get so heated and it is so hard to come to a solution. Churches have split and pastors have been removed from their positions over this very issue.

Some of us try to solve the issue through compromise. We introduce a few worship choruses at the beginning of the service (so the “hymn singers” can arrive late and not miss anything). We sprinkle a bit of this and that throughout the service and hope we all can just “be at peace” about this thing. But, without careful planning this sprinkling can become very awkward. Different styles of music can foster different types of being present with God, and to move from one to the other can feel jarring at times (this brings us to the question of what a worship service is about, a question which hides quietly under the “worship music” issue, but which ultimately cannot be ignored. I will save this question until a future NewsLetter). And the thought of “careful planning” seems to transform the ministry of the Spirit into an human-orchestrated event. But we have to try and meet everybody’s needs as best we can, don’t we? Another option some try is to have both a “traditional service” and a “contemporary service” (or a number of these for each sub-community). That decision, however, has its costs in church unity. Others simply say, “This is what we do - if you want something else, go find the church that does that.” But then we face the complications of such a decision for a multi-generational congregation or for those who treasure not just the music but the people or other aspects of the congregational life.

Maturity: An Interesting Idea

While I respect our natural musical preferences and appreciate the practical need for compromise, I think there may be something more that God is asking of us as a Church at this point in time. I see us being invited by the Spirit into a special opportunity for growth. It is about learning to receive.

When we read a book or hear a song for the first time we open ourselves to the world of that song/book (at least if we are not just reading /singing to get it over with). We allow the mood, the sounds, the words to speak to us. Perhaps this or that will touch us, and we are shaped by the encounter with the book or song. We “receive” from that media. When we hear a new *kind* of music, over time, we have the opportunity of opening ourselves to the world of that music (at least if we hear not just to get it over with). I remember listening to jazz in college. It seemed so abstract and dissonant at times. But as I gave it time, I learned to appreciate the spontaneity, the freedom, the expression of jazz, a kind of creativity unavailable in other kinds of music. Having opened myself to jazz I was able to “receive” from the music.

Different worship music styles reflect different styles of music. But I am convinced that there is more here. Different worship styles are not *just* different kinds of music. Rather they embody the expression of different moods to God. They explore different means of pursuing relationship with God. They communicate different aspects of God's own heart toward us. A few weeks ago, while I was in California, I visited an Orthodox church. Two hours of worship service, and all of it but the sermon *sung* (with no instrumental accompaniment), by the pastor, the choir, and the congregation. Russian, Greek, English all woven together into a comprehensive rehearsal of the Gospel presented to the congregation and from the congregation to God. This was not just a different music style, this was a different *spirituality*. I could feel myself being invited, not just to enjoy a new song, but to participate in a new approach to relationship with God. Could I "receive" from this?

To learn to receive from another tradition, another worship style, is to permit ourselves to be uncomfortable and to rest in that uncomfortableness--for a while. It is to open ourselves to the heart-expressions of others who seek and find God differently than we are used to. You try to sing hymns sincerely, and one day the progression of those many verses may jump out at you and you realize that the hymn, in all its complexity, is summarizing the entire scope of the Christian faith. WOW! And you receive. You sing that worship chorus, and after the fourth time around the words begin to sink in and you begin to voice it from a depth you had not known, "Spirit, I adore you, Lay my life before you, How I love you." And you receive. Furthermore, as we deepen in our reception of the music, we begin to receive more deeply from the spirituality lying within the music. We enter into the centeredness in the core truths of the faith reflected in chant, the aspiration for new life in the gospel hymns of the revivals, the longing for intimacy expressed in Vineyard worship songs, the victorious praise of Hosanna/Integrity music, the contemplative devotion of Taize, and so on. As we enter in to the music, we begin to grow spiritually, to grow closer to God, in ways we may not have imagined.

I believe God is inviting us to learn to receive from one another, to drink from the springs of living water found in the various traditions of God's people (see Richard Foster's *Streams of Living Water: Celebrating the Great Traditions of Christian Faith*). Yes, I understand that some may never learn to receive from electric guitars. Yes, in practice we may have to stoop to "compromise." But, in the midst of that compromise we *can* communicate a wider vision. I look forward to the day when churches decide themselves to transcend compromise and to commit themselves to the maturity of learning to receive from various worship styles. Wouldn't that be sweet? Yes, it may feel uncomfortable for a while. But give it a try. You never know what may be there for you at the end.

May God the Father bless you with riches in Christ Jesus through the work of the Holy Spirit.