

Thoughts about Music and Worship

In Ephesians and Colossians Paul mentions three kinds of *Songs for worship* Christian music - psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Psalms refers to the traditional Hebrew songs of the Old Testament which include both hymns and spiritual songs. Hymns, from the Greek hymnos, are addressed to a god. Technically speaking, a hymn is a sung prayer, addressed to God. The word Paul used for spiritual songs is "ode" which originally included sounds of nature, humans, instruments, and even animal sounds. It came to mean the personal expression of lyric poetry.

If the aim of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever, then music's highest purpose is for worship, with God Himself the focus of the text, the focus of the music enhancing the text, and the focus of those who sing to Him.

There are many accounts of music in the Bible, some of the occasions fulfill God's purpose; others fulfill man's purpose. The Old Testament speaks of music used in various celebrations - in victory, triumph, music for military purposes, for funerals, music honouring kings and even pagan gods. Music having a purpose other than that of directing our attention to the Lord has been traditionally called secular music. It has its place, and we all both need and enjoy it.

However, the exhortation of the New Testament is to make music an *avenue* agent of edifying the body of Christ. There is no mention of choosing music for worship on the basis of its appeal. "Give the customer what he wants" is a purely commercial ethic. The Christian ethic, as expressed in Romans 15:2 is

"Let each of us please his neighbour for his good, to edify him." Not: Let each of us please his neighbour for his approval, to entertain him.

While it is not my aim to tell anyone how to worship, it is appropriate to remind each other now and again of what worship is. Worship is reverend homage paid to God. He is our one and only focus, and it is not divided between attention to our friends, our children, pets, or anything else. It is different from fellowship. To quote Dr. Harold Best in Christianity Today, "We must stop thinking of music as an AID to worship. Rather, it should BE worship." In line with this, not all music focuses our attention upon God. This is where those who select music for worship and those who perform it need God's wisdom.

It came as a shock to me, only a few years ago, to realize that not everyone understands the message of music, even if they understand the words. The music can enhance (support and reinforce) the text, or it can be at cross-purposes with it. Music can have a powerful biological effect. It can alter your heartbeat, your adrenalin, it can cause you to perspire or reach a high emotional pitch. It can set up a motor impulse causing you to sway, tap

PNG 17

your feet, or clap your hands. But, once the senses begin to overtake us, the focus shifts insidiously from God to the pleasure of our senses, and worship falls short.

It is a pity that we neglect our musical heritage. Everything within our music system belongs to us. Our written music tradition was the same throughout Europe and dates from the 17th century. Four hundred years of it, during which time hundreds and thousands of items of music were composed to the glory of God. God was the acknowledged source and inspiration of music then, and until our 20th century.

I am leading up to a caution, namely, that of getting into a rut musically, and thereby depriving ourselves of spiritual food which will edify us. The trend of the past 20 years was to look for refreshment spiritually in only what was contemporary, new, and novel. The pendulum is now swinging back. Today there is a trend among students to return to what was established by believers in past generations. These students have expressed a need for music and hymns of more depth. The trendy songs were all right for their early teens, but the 20-year-old views them as belonging to his childhood. I have seen them excited over the Scottish Psalter, as if it were entirely new.

The open-mindedness of these students is an attitude different from that of the same age group even 10 years ago. They sang only one small collection of hymns and spiritual songs - never the Psalms - and that narrow body of music represented to them the whole of ^{so-called} "Christian" music. I remember the comment of one such student after I had played a chorale-hymn by Bach. It happened that the words of this chorale caused me to pursue Christianity. Translated from German:

"Jesus, I will ponder now on thy holy passion.
Endow me with thy spirit for such meditation.
Grant that I in love and truth
might cherish the image of your suffering, pain and death
that I may not perish."

When I had finished playing it, the student said indignantly,
"Don't you know any Christian music?"

Vida Chenoweth, Dec. 5, 1976