

ESSAY 10:
21 QUESTIONS ON RECLAIMING SACRED AND
TRADITIONAL MUSIC FOR WORSHIP



The issue of musical styles used in worship services might seem to be a recent phenomenon to many. But denominations have vigorously debated the subject through the centuries in many languages and about many styles of music (as discussed in Essay 2). We should not be overly consumed with pigeon-holing musical styles for worship, but we should ask these discriminating questions:

- Must all musical voices be given *equal* consideration for use in worship services especially for congregational singing?
- Is some music better suited outside the worship environment but within the confines of an evangelical setting? If so, how?
- Should sacred, traditional music for use in worship services be reclaimed by churches of all denominations as well as non-denominational ones? If so, why? If not, why not?

Let us delve deeper into the issue. Here are 21 questions I have been asked (and you might be asking) and my responses.

Based on your experience performing both sacred music styles and Christian pop music styles, do you see where contemporary worship music can have a place in worship services?

Most of my formal musical training has been in classical music, and I have for many years had a strong interest in all forms of sacred music, both instrumental and vocal. I have also played in rock bands, blues bands, country/western bands, praise and worship bands, and folk-gospel groups, as well as a solo classical performer, so my experience as a teaching and performing musician is quite varied and extensive.

That said, I find contemporary Christian pop or praise music not to be worthy of consideration for congregational use. The function of this music does not transcend the limitations of the genre, and does not elevate the congregation's awareness to any higher purpose. Much of it is musically and lyrically trite and mediocre because it models the characteristics of secular pop music, it is anathema to worship, and is devoid of the characteristic properties of worship music that emphasizes communication that is directed toward heaven.

Others feel that Christian pop music as a genre may be better suited for horizontal evangelistic or fellowship-type functions rather than the vertical-oriented purpose of worship; however, whether it is a misplaced application of the genre depends on the "entertainment" index. Based on those characteristics as well as the accompanying issues, applying spiritual discernment to the question reveals to me personally that Christian pop music does not offer the best of available choices for worship services. Again, this is a question of appropriateness for worship, not about liking or not liking a particular music style.

What are those characteristic properties of church music? Is there a "standard" somewhere to reference?

Church music directors, organists, pianists, and other church musicians often cite one standard – Maurice Hinson's "Criteria

for Selecting Piano Music for Church Use.”¹ Dr. Hinson is professor of piano in the School of Church Music at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He states that church music should have the following qualities:

- Melody: flowing, diatonic in nature;
- Harmony: avoid musical harmonies and progressions associated with blues, jazz, and rock;
- Rhythm and tempo: avoid highly syncopated music (rhythms that accentuate the weak beat in a measure of music);
- Dynamics: balance *piano* and *forte*; virtuosity emphasizes the performer and detracts from the worship atmosphere;
- Form: formal structure is essential;
- Articulation and touch: *legato* (smooth) and *cantabile* (flowing) pieces are more suitable for worship than *staccato* (disjointed) and radical articulation changes;
- Title: titles often convey the composer’s idea of the mood or character of the piece;
- Association: avoid pieces with secular connotations; works associated with opera, movies, or TV should be avoided; and
- Appropriateness: consider the type of service (morning worship, communion, benediction) and cultural, ethnic, and social background of the congregation.

Dr. Hinson’s list serves as one excellent example of the type of objective aesthetic criteria by which all music must be measured before it is introduced into the sanctuary. Another great source is *A Handbook of Church Music*, edited by Carl Halter and Carl Schalk. While aimed primarily for Lutheran worship, much of the information can apply across other denominations and provide non-denominational churches with great ideas for their own

purposes. Other lists exist (see Richard Resch's criteria for a scriptural theology of music in Essay 8), but the essential criteria among them are very similar. It's important for me to state that having objective aesthetic criteria is a non-negotiable element for the reclamation of sacred and traditional music for worship. Without it, spiritual and scriptural discernment can degrade easily into a "*your* spiritual discernment is not *my* spiritual discernment" argument, much like that heard for defending one's personal preference, thereby implying a disputable matters claim.

However, the field of philosophy has many competing and complementary aesthetic theories. But for those proclaiming a Christian (theistic) worldview, an objective aesthetic theory is the only one that can be defended. Such a position is diametrically opposed to that of our post-modern culture, but then, isn't that what the church's position should be? Because of this stance, worship music lies outside of the biblical category of disputable matters.

Much of what is being sung and performed in many contemporary churches lacks these criteria for church music for several reasons, one of them being the original intent of the music. While it is difficult to truly know what motivates the heart of the composer, I think we can safely infer the general commercial approach Christian pop music takes as its primary motivation. However, the main issue is the formula commercial pop music uses (simple, repetitive lyrical and musical themes) that conflicts with church music standards. Many Christian pop artists write music for CDs and go on tour to promote their sale. The contemporary church movement has co-opted selections from those CDs and introduced them into worship spaces. The co-opted music then gets categorized as "contemporary worship music" even though its original purpose and intent might have been something altogether different from worship.

Some of the world's best sacred church music was composed by individuals whose religious convictions were unknown, suspect, or convoluted (Gustav Holst, John Rutter, Ralph Vaughan Williams,

Mozart, Beethoven); some was written by devout Christians as commissioned by the church (Palestrina, Monteverdi) or aristocracy (Handel, Bach), or simply created as a form of self-expression. Dr. Paul Jones, music director and organist for Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia uses sacred music from these composers in church, when the text permits:

... because of its excellence in expressing ideas about God in musically elevated ways, allowing for common grace to cover the spiritual inadequacies of the composers and even ours as musical performers.²

Does Christian pop music have a place within a larger evangelical paradigm, *outside* of a worship environment? Perhaps so, as I previously said. However, worship leaders, music directors, and church musicians – if they fully understand their historical roles in pastoral leadership – have a responsibility to teach the congregation about the importance of sacred, traditional church music and its use in worship services.

But isn't this position unpopular with some contemporary worship leaders?

Truthfully, this is not a question of what is popular and what is not; it must be a question of which is more suitable for use in worship services. And “suitable” is determined by the counsel of Scripture and spiritual discernment, not my or anyone’s personal preferences. While my position may be unpopular in some cases – particularly with those who uncritically and exclusively embrace Christian pop music for congregational singing – I believe that many disagreements are largely due to insufficient understanding or knowledge of the responsibility worship leaders have to their congregations specifically and to *The Church* in general.

After all, this is not a question about what I “like” versus what someone else “likes” for use in worship services. Even in disputable matters we have biblical prescriptions to help us make choices that glorify God. Music written for the church was written with one specific and primary objective – to glorify God; it matters not

whether those composers created those works out of love and duty or were commissioned by the church and compensated for it. The primary purpose of that body of music was the determining factor for its adoption and use. Should not music for congregational singing be drawn from such a bountiful harvest of works?

Some sacred-themed music compositions such as Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis* or Handel's *Messiah*, are meant for the concert hall rather than for worship services, even when the concert hall is a church sanctuary. The concert hall functions as an environment for contemplative listening, which is *static* or *passive* participation; the liturgy - or worship service - functions as a dialogue between God and His people—it is *dynamic* or *active* participation.

Dr. Robin Leaver, sacred music professor at Westminster Choir College and former president of the American Bach Society, reminds contemporary listeners that Bach's cantatas were intended as liturgical pieces, not concert works. Bach carefully constructed these works, says Dr. Leaver, including the *Mass in B Minor* and the *St. Matthew Passion*, to communicate the significance of a specific biblical text. According to Dr. Leaver, Bach designed these momentous works to elevate our hearts and minds above the ordinariness of our day-in/day-out living, lift up our spirits in worship, and thank our Creator for his sustenance.

Dr. Timothy Smith of Northern Arizona University writes that the *Mass in B Minor*, which contains 27 separate music sections and took 15 years to complete, was never intended to be part of Catholic or Lutheran liturgies. Besides the length of the work, a German Lutheran writing a Latin Mass for the Catholic Church was an irony that many people had difficulty with.

Missa Solemnis and *Messiah* are too powerful and overwhelming to be used in an active fashion. "Church" music and "religious" music are discrete, unique categories whose boundaries often overlap, but they are not synonymous with each other. Church music is often thought of in a Protestant church paradigm whereas religious music can cover many other religions. But in this context, it references Western Christian religious music.

We can draw a similar relationship between church music and contemporary worship music. While some boundaries between the two styles might overlap, they are not synonymous with each other. Much of Christian pop music is written by singer/songwriters/performers for a specific market segment. In its purest definition for the category, it is not music written *specifically* and *primarily* for use in the church and is music modeled after contemporary secular styles.

Can you support that with more evidence?

Most would agree that when it comes to opinions about Christian pop music, those views of the people directly involved with it carry more weight than those outside this genre.

Stan Moser, former head of Word Records and CEO of Star Song Records, was a pioneer and key record industry executive within the Christian pop world. After 26 years in the industry in November 1995, he abandoned the movement altogether. In a 1996 article in *Christianity Today* entitled “We Have Created a Monster” about Christian pop music, Mr. Moser states:

But to be candid, I look at the majority of the music I hear today and think it's virtually meaningless. . . I would probably be more inclined to call the industry “commercial Christian music” rather than “contemporary Christian music.”³

In the same issue of *Christianity Today*, in an article entitled, “Can’t Buy Me Ministry,” Christian pop artist Michael Card admits that much of Christian pop music is devoid of anything Christian:

*The lyrics of a good number of the songs don’t betray anything specifically Christian – they may have some moral message, but not a lot of the big songs are identifiably Christian. . . What happens to the message when we start getting the music to as many people as possible? There is an essential part of the gospel that’s not ever going to sell. **The gospel is good news, but it is also bad news** [emphasis added]: “You are a sinner, and you are hopeless.” How is a multimillion-dollar record company going to take that?*

That's a part of the message, too, and if that's taken out – and it frequently is in Christian music – it ceases to be the gospel. . . The direction and value system are getting worse faster than any of us can imagine.⁴

Those are pretty strong indictments of the Christian pop music movement by the very people who were deeply involved with it. As far back as 1995, the people involved in Christian pop music were criticizing and condemning it as simply a lightly cloaked extension of secular music. Proponents of Christian pop music for use in worship services cannot dismiss such characterizations lightly. Despite these and similar confessions from artists, managers, and record executives, Christian pop music enjoys even more popularity in contemporary worship service than at any other time in its 40-year existence.

The defunct Christian rock band Petra called Christian pop music a combination of “ministry and entertainment.” Is not such a self-assessment enough to question the suitability of Christian pop music for worship? Despite the appealing nature of some Christian pop music, the overall genre is by definition an informal, secular-based man-centered expression with instant appeal because much of it mimics the purpose of Top 40 music: to entertain.

Such comments from artists and executives in the Christian pop music industry should be weighed very carefully. Church musicians, worship leaders, music directors, and pastoral staff must honestly and sincerely ask these questions:

- How can such music faithfully serve the church, when by its very man-centered nature, it is in rebellion with what is divine?
- Whose theology are we embracing when we accept the premise that there is no difference between the music of Saturday night and that of Sunday morning?

Its befuddled attempt to integrate sacred and secular only serves to confuse the unchurched and new believers, for when the

marriage of Scripture and music are not regarded with equal reverence, it is in fact the Word that ultimately pays the price.

Would you also exclude some “spiritual”-themed popular music from worship services?

Yes, and here is why. I once heard the songs “Wind Beneath My Wings” by Bette Midler and “Live Like You Were Dying” by Tim McGraw sung by a praise band during separate church services. No question, both beautifully written pieces of music, but neither has any place in a church worship service. The lyrical intent celebrates beautiful human-to-human relationships in their proper context. Take it out of the context for which it was intended, and the songs lose much of their character, and fall short for qualifying as church music – even with half-baked justifications: “We use it to celebrate that Jesus is the wind beneath our wings. . .” or “Jesus calls us to live our lives as though we were going to lose them.” If you allow that, then is there anything wrong with leading the congregation in singing a few verses of Led Zeppelin’s “Whole Lotta Love” because “Jesus has a whole lotta love for us” or “My Heart Will Go On” (the Love Theme from the movie, *Titanic*), because “near, or far, wherever we are. . . God is always close at hand.” Is such justification acceptable, regardless of its obvious shallowness, contrived connection, or transparent appeal to emotions?

Not everything that draws people to church can be considered biblically appropriate. Sally Morgenthaler, author of the book, *Worship Evangelism*, cites many Emergent Church movement leaders and how they use music in their services. For example, pastor, author, and worship director, Steve Sjogren, uses secular music in the praise band’s worship set, incorporating reggae, country-western, and country rock musical styles. He has even changed lyrics to create “worship” tunes of such secular hits as Foreigner’s “I Want to Know What Love Is” or Whitney Houston’s “I Will Always Love You.” Do these choices reflect spiritual

discernment in action, or do they instead ring more of personal preference and evangelical entertainment?

Don't you run the risk of becoming a "musical elitist" with your position? Isn't there a danger of beautiful music becoming a distraction in the worship environment?

That's a great question. The term *musical elitism* is defined as the valuing of one's own musical tastes as the standard by which all music should be made. That might be true if I were insisting on my personal preferences for music selections for worship services. My musical tastes run the gamut from instrumental rock to certain types of jazz and Celtic to classical and some opera. However, I set aside my personal musical tastes when it comes to the subject of which music is most appropriate for worship services. I am not against Christian pop music *per se*; what is called into question is its use in a worship setting because – stop me if you have read this before – that musical genre does not support a theological, scriptural basis for use in the service of the people in a vertical worship dimension.

Having said that, yes, there is definitely a danger in making the music the object of our affection. It is possible that people can become distracted with aesthetic art in a worship environment, and in fact idolize sacred music. The late British writer and philosopher Iris Murdoch once wrote about the seduction of beautiful church music:

*We may ultimately want to defend music and artistic beauty against these charges [of removing the 'holy fear' from the numinous by using artistic beauty], but we should also recognize how worthy of consideration some of the charges are.*⁵

So yes, people must be aware of it or when their affections and worship of God are being redirected to the vehicle (artwork, music) that helps them establish a divine connection.

Where, then, do you think Christian pop music might fit within a church's evangelism paradigm?

I am not sure it can fit anywhere. Even a non-threatening, informal evangelistic event for unchurched people to check out what the church has to offer should still abide by scriptural guidelines if it is to be an *evangelistic* event. Such an event would be conducted in a programmed, controlled atmosphere that shields seekers from anything approaching overt spiritual activity that might be unfamiliar or uncomfortable. It would be a worship-free event where questions get answered, without any direct involvement or participation from guests. The next step guests can take is to attend a Sunday morning worship service.

I take the same position for informal fellowship or whenever members of a congregation assemble for non-worship events so long as the music and lyrics uphold the qualities of Scripture and refrain from becoming *entertaining*. Music for the horizontal, people-to-people dimension of Christianity, which is fellowship, evangelism, and teaching, must still be guided by scriptural principles.

But why are so many churches in a rush to conform to the preferences of the world when it comes to defining what church and worship should be? *Church is what it is*. Scripture provides us with guidelines to address such issues: "Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw nigh to God and he will draw nigh to you. Cleanse your hands, ye sinners; and purify your hearts, ye double minded," as James reminds us in James 4:7-8. He does not write, "Submit yourselves to the *will and whim of the world...*"

You have performed a variety of different types of music over the years. Have you always subscribed to this perspective on Christian pop music?

No. For several years, I was one of the lead guitar players in my former church's praise band. Our weekly repertoire for congregational participation consisted of Christian pop music.

Having been a performing musician for many years, I recognized the dangers of playing for ego, because ego has a way of getting in between you and your instrument, and you and your audience. I have remained conscious about “staying out” of the music instrumentally, which means I would play melodic solos, song introductions, and turnarounds within songs without my overdoing it, or so I thought. I have always practiced a “less is more” philosophical approach to being a lead guitar player, but people in the congregation would write on their comment cards after the service: “Donn, you rock!” or “Awesome solo, Donn!”

This was not what I wanted to hear about my co-participation in worship. Some in the congregation were focusing on *me*; they were focusing on my *entertaining* them. I began having second thoughts about my true motivations for not only *how* I was playing, but *what* I was playing. I started to feel uneasy about my involvement in this type of music especially if it appeared that my efforts were not helping people focus on a worship environment. I have mentioned the details in another chapter, but I realized that too much attention was still being placed on me and that my participation with this music was not helping prepare hearts and minds for worshipping God.

Through this experience (and prayer), the Holy Spirit convicted me that I was to use my talents to create classical guitar arrangements of hymns, sacred music, and inspired classical music to help craft a worship atmosphere that facilitates communion with God. From the talent God gave me, I developed my own arrangements that congregations embraced as creating that space where words cannot address for people to connect with God.

As I present these arrangements at various houses of worship, the comments I ask for and receive let me know how the music (the Holy Spirit working through me) helped prepare hearts and minds for worship. Such comments serve as feedback that the *All About HYMN* programs for houses of worship stay within their fixed boundaries, and I solicit them whenever I play. I want to know when the music accomplishes the goal, and I want to know when it

does not. The feedback helps keep the music (and me) focused on the true purpose.

So, you want people to focus on the music...

It is not about what I want. Congregations have told me that they find the classical guitar arrangements help them enter into a space that allows them to better commune with God without putting so much focus on the music or on the performer. The Holy Spirit taps the shoulders of certain musicians, vocalists, and music directors every generation and places on their hearts the responsibility for carrying forth the tradition of providing, promoting, and educating others about the use of sacred music in worship services. I am one of those people.

I see what I do as something like the stagehand that raises and lowers the curtain in a theatre; his task is largely unobserved by the audience. His job is to help focus the audience's attention on someone or something other than himself. He is a minor player, but his involvement is important to the event. By raising and lowering the curtains, he has a small but essential responsibility in presenting to the audience the proper settings for their experience. The stagehand contributes to the overall production, but people do not come to see him. He hopes his work contributes in some small way to helping create the proper atmosphere for the work that is about to be presented, and he is humbled by those he serves.

So, how do you handle applause at church performances?

Itell people upfront that I am there as a co-participant with them in worship and not there to provide entertainment. In that light, if what I do helps them create that space for communing with God, then they can acknowledge it by a simple "amen" or "praise God" instead of applause upon the completion of the piece.

I do perform at many venues outside of worship environments, so applause after the performance of a piece is quite natural in those environments.

Sacred music includes instrumental pieces and choral works, but isn't the most important factor in congregational worship the voice of the congregation?

Yes, absolutely. It is not about slick sound systems for bands and accompanying multimedia presentations; it is not about the well-rehearsed choir or awesome soloist; it is not about reverent arrangements of sacred music played on classical guitar, piano, organ, or violin; it is about the congregation singing their heartfelt praises as well as their victories, their challenges, their fears, to an Almighty God in a manner that exalts and raises up. And let me be clear: *any and all musical instruments are optional*. The congregation's singing - our singing - is a poetic language that retells the great story of Christ's mission - the "Paschal Mystery" as it is called - which envelopes His suffering, death, Resurrection, and glory. It matters not whether we all sing in the exact same cadence or if our notes are all on perfect pitch. What does matter is that what we offer through music selection and our own fallible efforts is our very best for Him.

I once heard it said that if we focus too much on hitting all the right notes, we might miss out on the true music. The emphasis in congregational worship is on the human voice joyfully singing praises and prayers, with the heart and mind fully engaged in cooperative participation - not on choices for musical accompaniment.

Not including traditional hymns or sacred music in Sunday worship services - preferably as congregational singing with or without choir accompaniment - in Sunday worship services removes from the people the ability to find their own "song" as a church; instead, they just sing along with the band. It runs the risk of creating the illusion among young people and people new to the faith that the present generation invented the concept of church or church music. Many people growing up in a post-modern church environment view church history as a sequence of discrete events from the past that bear little resemblance to their contemporary paradigm. It sets aside the notion that the church - including its

traditions and music – has been left to us by those who came before us, and that it is our responsibility to pass it relatively intact, and not upended, to the next generation—as it was given to us. We must teach others that the church extends *before* and *beyond* our place today, and it welcomes us into its body corporate with the same prayers, praises, and songs.

The word, “traditional,” means “time-honored; long-established; customary.” When traditional music is removed as an option for the congregation’s participation, they become disconnected with the time-honored, long-established tradition of The Church that has gone forward over centuries past. Richard Resch writes in an essay that:

The true church-militant of our Lord Jesus Christ knows that the church is not a business, is not entertainment, and is not about trendy, simplistic, pragmatic approaches that soon fade. The church I speak of knows that she is to be steadfast and faithful in all things. That faithfulness includes a vibrant sung confession for the saints to taste now, as a foretaste of heaven’s eternal music-making around the lamb.⁶

What effect has the rapid growth of non-denominational, evangelical churches had on church music?

That question can easily be the subject of another book, and has been addressed by other authors. The traditional liturgy guards The Congregation, protects the memory of The Church, and allows The People to exercise their duty to sing praises to God – with or without musical accompaniment. These reasons are why Martin Luther in 1526 was adamant in his work entitled, *The German Mass and Order of Service*, about holding fast to fundamental practices because doing otherwise would lead to chaos and confusion, which is a danger whenever secular-cloned practices are brought into sacred space. Good worship is considered by many as faithfulness to the church’s historic and foundational creeds.

One of the controversies with many contemporary non-denominational churches is that they serve up no traditions at all.

But they can learn from traditions and incorporate fundamental practices, which can be as simple as a lay Scripture reading every Sunday prior to the sermon or scheduling "5th Sunday services" (once per quarter) that integrate traditional hymn singing, special music, and choir. Such services should not be seen as another way of splitting the congregation but as a way of integrating Christian tradition into the worship service.

But then aren't people just going through the motions without the emotion?

The focus here is on faith-driven tradition, not on works, and not on empty religious ceremony. Without traditions being carried forward from one generation to the next, people do not understand or learn why they believe what they believe; they can not defend their faith. To many Christians, the definition of *Christian apologetics* means "I'm sorry - I don't know - I can't answer that."

I once attended a conference of church musicians from all denominations, and a few representing non-denominational churches. When the topic of selecting music for different celebrations of the Christian seasons came up, one young man from a small contemporary, non-denominational church said: "Christian seasons? In my church, the Christian celebrations of the year are Christmas, Easter, the church picnic/softball tournament, and the annual budget meeting."

That got a good laugh from us all, but his comment struck at the heart of the problem: people not knowledgeable about church history or theology that plays a role in shaping their faith. A.W. Tozer said that the devil is a better theologian than the rest of us, but he remains the devil nonetheless. That is a disconcerting thought. How many people know the significance of *sole fide*, or the *Diet of Worms*, or the *Apostolic Fathers*, or the *First Council of Nicaea* to the current practices of Christianity? It would be disappointing to ask for a show of hands, yet these concepts and individuals are fundamental to Christian church doctrine. Yet fewer still

understand the role and significance of sacred music and traditional hymn singing in worship services.

Church music leaders and church musicians must teach the congregation through music selection about the traditions that have brought them where they are today, and to carry forth those traditions for future generations. I suggest church musicians read Dr. Paul Westermeyer's book, *The Church Musician*, for an excellent prescription for reviving the office of cantor and the role of the church musician as teacher.

Music has been written for specific times of the Christian year – Advent, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Pentecost, Christmas; and music has been written for specific times and places within a single worship service – preludes, offertories, solos, and postludes, for example. Not all churches celebrate these seasonal or liturgical events, but they are still part of the history of the Church. This knowledge, to varying degrees and depth, needs to be conveyed to congregations regardless of denomination because it is the history and tradition of The Faith Universal. The Christian seasons and special music embody within them a sense of the sacred.

Congregational hymn singing teaches biblical truths through song as well as the power, the glory, the grace, and the love of God as revealed in history and in people's lives. The danger of using Christian pop music exclusively and not incorporating those critical elements as a sort of "reminder" into the liturgy could relegate Sunday morning worship to just being an empty Christian pop-music singalong.

It seems odd that with your music background and experience that you haven't embraced the current popular music paradigm many churches use today. Are there any other factors that might have influenced you to gravitate toward more traditional church music?

Perhaps my New England and Nova Scotia/Cape Breton ancestral roots reconnect me to the hymns I sang growing up – many of which were the same hymns I remember hearing when my

92-year-old great-grandmother hummed to herself in her rocking chair while she knitted for hours on end. And she probably hummed those old hymns because they are what *she* sang as a little girl growing up in Skye Glen, Cape Breton, and in Nova Scotia in the 1880s and 1890s, and that's what *her* parents sang when they journeyed over from Skye, Inverness Scotland during the great Scottish/Irish/English diaspora of the late 1700s and early 1800s, and so on.

Did my childhood and environment influence my worship music choices later in life? Perhaps to some degree; but listening to traditional hymns as a child no more guarantees my worship music preferences as an adult than people who grow up in loving, caring homes are guaranteed to create the same environment as adults themselves.

For me, one moment I was playing lead guitar in a praise band that was performing Christian pop music for worship, and in the blink of an eye the Holy Spirit convicted me *to my marrow* that I was to use my musical gifts in a different direction.

It seems that people tend to revert to the old hymns or spiritual songs to help them through desperate or difficult times. Why do you think that happens?

Beverly Howard, editor of *The Hymn: A Journal of Congregational Song*, writes that:

Hymns are a precious gift to us, helping us as we struggle through periods of personal or communal hardship. For many people, simply recalling hymns of courage or comfort enables them to persevere.⁷

A friend of mine once visited an area near his hometown in the Midwest of the United States that was devastated by a series of tornadoes. He recalled one scene in which congregation members of a church that was destroyed had gathered among the rubble to comfort each other and salvage what they could from the debris. Young and old alike, they broke out in spontaneous, joyous

unaccompanied song with the hymn, “’Tis So Sweet to Trust in Jesus.”

Why did *these* people select *this* traditional hymn instead of a contemporary Christian pop song by Third Day or Mercy Me? Not to take anything away from these fine artists, but people embraced the hymn because it embodied within it the rock-solid spiritual strength offered by the church that has been built up and passed on to other generations over centuries.

Leanne Van Dyk, academic dean and professor of reformed theology at Western Theological Seminary, writes about the nature of hymn singing:

Hymn texts are super-concentrated theology, treasures of compact theological statement. The church that sings excellent hymn texts – even more, the people that are fortunate enough to memorize excellent hymn texts – are being formed in a fine school of faith.⁸

The hymn itself does not have to be a hundred years old, but lyrically it has to embrace and embody all that the church was, is, and will be. Christian pop music has great difficulty addressing that need because of its largely uni-dimensional nature.

I remember a conversation I had with one of the backup vocalists from my former church’s praise band on incorporating more traditional church music for congregational participation. She told me that she never liked those “old hymns” because they didn’t convey the emotion and feeling that the contemporary worship music did. I wasn’t that surprised at her response as this twenty-something young lady had not been exposed to anything other than a contemporary church paradigm for most of her life.

Her belief about hymns being devoid of emotional content is a common misunderstanding that is prevalent in many traditional and contemporary churches. Unlike much of the contemporary worship music in use for worship services that relies heavily on personal emotion, the message embodied within hymns is multi-dimensional. The poetic structure engages emotion and intellect simultaneously; the literal meaning of the lyrics themselves, the

universal associations those lyrics ascribe, and the unique, private associations that each person singing draws from them are absent from most contemporary praise compositions.

Another important issue is the placement of hymns within the structure of the worship service to enhance their effectiveness as a mnemonic device. (A *mnemonic device* is a visual or auditory technique that is used to enhance memory.) Should they be placed at the beginning of the worship service as a preface to Scripture or sermon themes? Or will they find better utility toward the end of worship services when they help cement the content of the sermon from a sung versus spoken perspective? As it were, people will remember lyrics from a hymn long after the content of the sermon has faded from memory partly due to the brain's affinity to hang on to less complex information.

So, what does this tell us about hymn singing? How does a hymn transcend generations? What are the essential elements for a hymn to have such power? How do our children, our brothers and sisters, and grandparents all know the words and melodies to “Jesus Loves Me”, “Amazing Grace,” “Old Rugged Cross,” or “Praise God From Whom All Blessings Flow” – even when perhaps its been years or decades since they sang them or been in a church?

From a larger perspective, the hymns we sing, hum, whistle, or lament come from throughout the church's history; maybe they connect us who are here and now to those who have come before us, and they will do the same for future generations so long as we guard them as the sacred music treasures that they are.

Henry Ward Beecher, the contentious first minister of the Plymouth Church of the Pilgrims in New York City, wrote about the power of song in worship:

I see, I feel, I know what power there is in singing. ... Singing to the Lord was meant to open up the hearts of those who participate in it, and carry them near to God. There is no time when we come so near to God's face, and speak to him so nearly, as when we sing.⁹

Dr. Paul Westermeyer wrote that there are several properties of hymns that make them memorable. Here are four of them: First, hymns must be *accessible* – not obscure – to the congregation. Second, they must be *singable* – melodic – by the congregation. Third, hymns must be *simple enough* so that the children and the elderly – and everyone else in between – can remember them, and fourth, hymns must be *sufficiently challenging in their message* to bear repeating or memorizing as time passes.¹⁰ Many hymns do not reveal their splendor immediately; some require time or circumstance to unfold. For others, it is more like the lightning strike of an epiphany.

We should also ask about music selection for the congregation: Does the hymn still possess value after two, three, or four generations? Is a congregation's choice of music more likely to represent a heritage, or is it more of a contemporary commodity that can be easily cast aside next year when the new crop of pop-culture-influenced Christian music arrives?

What would constitute a proper balance in choice of music for worship?

Each congregation has to work out that formula individually for itself based on its religious tradition. Assuming traditional music choices for worship, the balance would consider such elements as the appropriate mix of special music/choir singing alone/choir singing with congregation/ congregation singing alone comprising the largest portion. To not consider traditional hymns and/or sacred music at all leaves a void in the collective soul of the congregation. Many have difficulty embracing the idea that the only music being performed in many church services as “praise and worship” music – if that includes congregational singing – is the same music being played on Christian pop music radio stations 24/7. Outside of broadcast church services on Sunday and public radio programs, very little hymn and sacred music is being played on the radio with anywhere near the same frequency as Christian

pop music because there is little or no audience for it outside of its defined purpose: use in worship services.

Some old hymns might have outlived their usefulness for some congregations; however, is that alone reason enough to replace them with Christian pop tunes while there are other genres of “contemporary Christian music” from which to draw replacements? It is not so much the music as it is a question of the theological embodiment in many church services or lack of it in many church services and heritage at their foundation.

Can you explain what you mean by “theological embodiment” and “heritage”?

Here is an example of what I mean. The lyrics to “How Great Thou Art” were written by Swedish Pastor Carl Boberg in 1885. Several years later, he was surprised to hear his poem sung to the melody of a Swedish folk song. Years later, English missionary Stuart Hine expanded the verses after being inspired by experiences in Russia’s Carpathian Mountains.

Decades later, the hymn was published and recorded. During the 1957 Billy Graham Crusade in New York, George Beverly Shea sang the hymn 99 times. Today, it remains a popular piece, both for performance and congregational song in churches around the world. *That* is an example of theological embodiment and heritage.

The hymn, “Praise God, From Whom All Blessings Flow” – also known as “Old Hundredth” and “Doxology” – has been sung *every* Sunday in churches around the world since about 1710 (the hymn stanza was written around 1674 by Thomas Ken). The melody, attributed to Louis Bourgeois, is reportedly based on a Flemish church tune from the early 1500s. Such a hymn sung today by congregations embodies with it centuries of tradition, of carrying forth the torch of the Christian Church, of being part of the People’s Song. It is a fine example of theological embodiment and heritage.

But can't an exceptional contemporary worship song qualify as a heritage piece?

That question is an ambiguous one. An exceptional contemporary worship song - and there are some, let me be clear about that - would have great difficulty qualifying as a legacy piece because a characteristic of any contemporary tune based on the pop music formula is its short life. How many Christian pop songs can meet the four criteria for memorable hymns? Who can remember what the top 10 Christian pop songs were last year? I can't name one because it is the nature of temporal things - the things that the Bible cautions us against. When too much effort is placed into becoming culturally relevant, we run the risk of creating cultural Christians rather than more biblical ones.

Let's ensure that we are all speaking from within identical contexts here when referencing "tradition" and "ritual." When a congregation participates in singing hymns written five, 50, 100, or 400 years ago, it is partaking of the *tradition* of The Church Universal, which represents the time-honored, collective essence of the people's service. A congregation that participates in singing contemporary praise songs or Christian pop songs exclusively during worship services is involved with a *ritual* with the church local.

Behind many a justification for using Christian pop music for worship services to the exclusion of other types of church music lurks someone's preference for playing music they like. There is a reason why the message in church on Sunday mornings is so very different from what we hear from our culture during the week: it comes from a theistic (Christian) worldview. And likewise, there is a reason why the music we sing and hear in church on Sunday mornings *must* be different from what we hear and sing almost anywhere else: it too emanates from a Christian worldview. I enjoy listening to instrumental rock music in my car and at home, and occasionally "jam" along to it in my recording studio and with fellow musicians, but do I want to hear it on Sunday morning in church? Absolutely not, because Sunday morning is not about *me*.

But the church is for bringing people to Christ and to share with them the joys of having Him alive within us and the gift of eternal life He offers. Doesn't a contemporary church's approach with music makes it less difficult for them to come through the doors and fill the sanctuary to hear those messages?

Let us examine that premise that church is for bringing people to Christ. I Corinthians 12:27 tells us that the church (the people) is indeed the body of Christ, and within the church itself, Christians worship as a corporate body and we receive instruction on aligning our lives as God wants. Ephesians 4:12 states that the church is for "the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, to the edifying of the body of Christ." In other words, the church is where essential growth and knowledge occurs *among Christians*. Of course we welcome all who thirst for redemption, spiritual direction, and Godly purpose in their lives, but to think of the church as primarily a means and meeting place for expanding numbers has no biblical basis.

John MacArthur, in his book *Ashamed of the Gospel*, writes that:

The notion that church meetings should be used to tantalize or attract non-Christians is a relatively recent development. Nothing like it is found in Scripture; in fact, the apostle Paul spoke of unbelievers entering the assembly as an exceptional event (1 Corinthians 14:23). Hebrews 10:24, 25 indicates that church services are for the benefit of believers, not unbelievers: "Let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together."¹¹

I don't want to stray too far off topic, but throughout the gospel, we are commanded to go out into the world to preach it. Mark 6:12 begins with: "And they went out. . . ." This is active discipleship when church members go forth into the community and live the gospel by their words and interactions with others.

Being fishers of men means you have to go out to where the people are, and that can be difficult in many ways. My hometown is

Gloucester, Massachusetts, and it has quite a legacy as a major fishing capital from early the 1600s. Since the town started keeping records in 1623, more than 10,000 Gloucestermen have lost their lives at sea as the fleet sailed to the treacherous waters of the Grand Banks off Newfoundland, one of the richest fishing grounds in the world for cod, halibut, and swordfish. No one expected the fish to jump into nets when the fleet was safely moored in the harbor.

But hymns and sacred music written 100, 200, or 400 years ago use such archaic language. ... Isn't there room for music that uses contemporary idioms?

Yes, absolutely there is, but must we automatically default to looking only at Christian pop music for such alternatives? Why not consider contemporary hymns written in a more contemporary vernacular? We should not sacrifice theological soundness and musical integrity for easy-to-understand contemporary works. Understand that hymn writing was and is highly poetic, where the juxtaposition of words and phrases are meant to embody and elevate concepts to which ordinary language cannot do justice.

Having been a former foreign language major early in my undergraduate studies, I understand the temporal restrictions that are sometimes placed on language. Some of the vernacular from the 1960s (“groovy”; “right on”; “flower power”) sounds almost comical by today’s standards because in its contemporary use, the application has gone beyond linguistic relevancy. The social and cultural constructs from which they were born and were used no longer exist.

Andrew Donaldson writes about such boundaries:

It is difficult to forge a language that can speak beyond the decade in which it was conceived. It is too soon to tell whether the meeting of traditional with contemporary forms of hymn and song will produce a musical offspring that will last beyond this decade or even these fifteen minutes.¹²

A Final Word

Suffice it to say that in the contemporary worship environment and in music choices - in the rush to be more things to more people, to be more "culturally relevant" to "seekers," "boomers," "busters," "boomerangs," and other marketing-labeled masses, to embrace post-modernism or mystical pathways - we must be ever vigilant that we are not caught up in the flotsam and jetsam associated with the pop-culture tide, for it changes often. And change often it must, for that is its nature and how it must survive. Instead, we should be flowing in the one direction with this great living river known as The Church.



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