

A Few Thoughts on Music for our Congregation

Introduction

Yesterday I spent a few minutes discussing with our Newcomers Class why we use the type of music we do in our church. I tried to stress the importance of relying upon Scripture to answer this question. Too often in discussions regarding church music, Scripture is relegated to the back seat, while arguments regarding music theory and the historical roots of musical genres take the seat of honor.

I began by pointing out that when we go to our New Testament for instruction regarding worship in the church we find no passages specifically addressing musical style. This means that any conclusions we draw about musical style must be based on principles. Anytime we are working with principles as opposed to explicit Scriptural statement, we will have differences in application. We must be willing to work through the principles and seek to apply them in a Scripturally faithful manner, while recognizing and allowing for differences in application.

Colossians 3:16 and Ephesians 5:18-19

The two clearest passages regarding music in congregational worship in the New Testament are Colossians 3:16 and Ephesians 5:18-19. Paul is addressing churches in these letters and the commands to speak to “one another” and address “one another” in both passages indicate that he is specifically addressing congregational worship. A few observations can be made from the text (the main points are the textual observations, while the sub-points are the applications we are drawing to guide our congregation):

- (1) The emphasis is on congregational singing. We are singing to “one another.”
 - (a) The evident musical emphasis of our worship services will not be on “special music,” but congregational singing.
 - (b) We should strive to sing music that is accessible to everyone. Any music that demands that you be a classically trained musician or a pop star in order to sing, we will try to avoid. Further, we will seek to avoid songs with complex rhythms, wide ranges, etc.
 - (c) The emphasis then, is on the human voice singing. We want to cultivate a kind of simplicity in our singing that emphasizes our voices singing to one another, as opposed to an organ/praise band “blasting grace” from the platform.
 - (c) We want to sing **accessible** songs, congregationally.
- (2) The result of the singing is that we are taught and admonished.
 - (a) We must be primarily concerned with the texts of the songs we sing. We want to sing the best songs available to us. We will strive to sing songs that are theologically oriented. We will strive to sing songs that are in whole or in part, the text of Scripture. We will strive to sing songs that speak of the character

of God and the essence of the Gospel in greater proportion than we will sing songs that speak of our own Christian experience.

(b) In keeping with the motto of our church, we will strive to sing songs that are **Christ-exalting, Scripture-centered, and Gospel-proclaiming.**

Summary

When we bring these two observations together, we start to see the goal a bit more clearly. We are looking for singable, accessible, doctrinally-rich, Gospel-centered songs. Historically, this has best been found in hymns. Therefore, the emphasis in our congregational singing is on singing hymns, both ancient and modern. Sometimes we may sing an old hymn of the faith, sometimes we may sing a hymn only recently written (e.g. yesterday morning in our worship service we sang “Come Thou Almighty King” and “O Great God”). In every case however, we are looking for songs that are congregationally accessible and Scripturally faithful.

One of our deacons has described the style with which we sing these hymns as “comfortably conservative.” We have found that this is the best way for us to arrive at unity across generational lines. In a time when church music is often a divisive issue in churches, our desire is to view this issue through the lens of our responsibility “to endeavor to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3).

We also must be clear that these are the Scriptural reasons that we choose to use the music we do, in the generally conservative style that we do. We do not base these decisions in music theory, music history, quotes from musicians, or supposed effects of music on the human body. Scripture must drive us in our decisions in this area.

Finally, while this is the application the leadership of our church has settled upon for our church, we recognize that among individuals there will be differences in application. This is not a problem. We are happy for the individuals in our church to search the Scriptures and through the leading of the Holy Spirit make applications for their families regarding the music they listen to privately. There has historically been a broad spectrum of application on this matter amongst the members of our church and we are happy to maintain this. Paul’s instruction regarding debatable matters was to “let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind” (Rom. 14:5). Nowhere in Scripture is the unity of the church described as being found in monolithic sameness. Unity is found in the Gospel, despite sometimes tremendous diversity in secondary matters. In God’s good providence He has seen fit that in this unity-despite-diversity, His glory is reflected through the church.