

Then Sings My Soul: The Power of Contemporary Song

Colossians 3:16

Introduction – Experiencing Something New

One of the biggest challenges I face each week as I prepare a sermon for the morning service is to identify an experience I've had and with which you might resonate. That's not always easy. But when I identify that common experience, we can set out on the sermon path together. As I was considering how I might begin today's message, I thought I might relay my experience with opera in honor of our new friends from California.

How many of you really like opera? That's what I thought. I didn't grow up appreciating it either. Most middle class Americans don't have much of a clue when it comes to opera. And because the experience they may have had with opera was diminished from its ideal, many, if not most Americans would rather pass. I had exposure to opera in school through music appreciation and music history classes. I watched a little on PBS. I also attended a few amateur and student productions. The combination of high skill demand for opera and the not-fully-mature abilities of amateurs and students left me underwhelmed. I wasn't terribly impressed.

That wasn't the case with my in-laws. They were bona-fide opera buffs. For many years they held season tickets to the San Francisco Opera. They knew the names and the stories of the popular stars and the well-known operas. On one occasion, they could not make a performance and gave their tickets to us. That was no small deal. They were \$50 tickets back in the early 80's. Well, I was a music major and was supposed to appreciate it, so I agreed to go. It was a big night out on the town. A classy event for this blue-collar boy.

I was surprised and enthralled. Professional opera was like nothing I had ever experienced before! Here was the pinnacle of artistic performance. The combination of vocal virtuosity, a sensitive but powerful orchestra (that played in tune), dramatic story acted out with passion, fantastic visual sets, and, in the opera we saw, expressive dance was a tour-de-force of artistic presentation. I was swept away into another world. I was also surprised by the enthusiastic engagement of the audience. The rich elite were acting like common folk at a baseball game. When one of the primary singers would finish their song, the audience would clap, whistle, hoot,

and throw flowers up on the stage while the singer would take multiple bows. I fully expected ice cream and popcorn hawkers to appear in the aisles at any moment. I will never forget that experience and I will never again disparage opera. Given the chance to attend a professional performance, I would go in a heartbeat.

Most people have some experience in their life that has surprised them. It is not unusual for many to be afraid of something only to end up loving it after they've experienced it. The fear or disdain we may feel for something is generally born out of ignorance or misunderstanding. But once we begin to experience the thing and understand it, we may indeed come to fully embrace it and value it in our life. Those are wonderful turning points. We would be all the poorer for it if we refused to take a chance and experience something new.

For many older Christians, the worship songs that began to appear in the 1970's and blossomed in the '80's and '90's to become a dominant voice in worship today have always been a problem. For the WWII generation that raised teenagers in the '60's, guitars and drums have symbolized rebellion. Contemporary praise and worship has always been a hard sell to them. For those a bit younger, it has still been a difficult transition, because the musical style wasn't what you grew up with. And even if you grew up with Rock 'n' Roll and you prefer praise and worship songs, I believe there remains a good deal of misunderstanding about the genre.

Our text this week is the same as two weeks ago. Let's read it together:

“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.”

Colossians 3:16

In my last message, I contended that all three forms:, psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs were gifts from God through creative people to assist us in engaging with God in worship. As no parent should prefer one of their children over another, I believe that Christians should embrace

all three. Two weeks ago, we celebrated the richness of hymns. This week, I want to explain the power of contemporary song.

Prayer

This message is the fifth in our series on worship. In the first message we considered worship in a general sense: just what is it that is supposed to happen during this hour? In the second and third sermons, we dealt with worship in the Old and New Testaments, respectively. Two weeks ago, we celebrated hymns. Throughout the series, in order to receive the most benefit, I've maintained that we must be:

- **Committed to the authority of Scripture**
- **Learners**
- **Servants of one another**

A Look Back – The Origins of Contemporary Praise and Worship

The church has probably always had popular and contemporary song. This is good and right, as the gospel must be relevant in every culture. Part of the genius of Martin Luther's Reformation strategy is that he wrote German hymns in the musical style of the day. Charles Wesley, writer of over of 6,000 hymns wrote his words to be set to the popular songs of the day. Along with psalms and hymns, the gospel should be set in the musical language of the people.

The praise and worship music of today had its beginnings in the Jesus People Movement of the late 60's and early 70's. Music, for that generation, became their prophetic mouthpiece. The protest songs of the 60's drove the anti-war and hippie movements of that day. It was natural, then, that music would play a very important role in the formation of the Jesus People Movement. I lived in Southern California at the time, which became the vortex of activity in the revival. I attended a number of festivals where different bands would play for three or four hours and then an evangelist would speak for twenty minutes and give the invitation. In a sense, the musicians became the preachers and the preacher the one who brought clarity and closure.

Just south of Los Angeles, in Orange County, a little church called Calvary Chapel began to explode with new young converts. Their growth was so rapid they had to assemble under a large tent for over a year before a building that was large enough could be built. Unlike most of the

evangelical churches in the day, Calvary Chapel encouraged musicians who were new believers to use their music for evangelism. The church built a large stable of bands like *Love Song*, *The Children of the Day*, *The Road Home*, and *Daniel Amos*. These bands, which were a mixture of folk and rock would tour around the region singing the gospel. Thousands of young people came to Christ through those concerts.

But not only did they use their music for evangelism, some of the songwriters began to produce songs to be used in corporate worship. All of these early songs were very simple. Songs like *Alleluia*, *Seek Ye First*, and *Father, I Adore You* were typical. In their corporate worship, they were also experiencing a whole new dynamic as they sang to God rather than just about God. Through this new music, the evangelical church was waking up to actually engaging with God in worship. Music was now not just a warm-up to “prepare the hearts of the people” for the preacher. Music had its own worth as a conduit of engagement with God in worship. I cannot emphasize that point too strongly. This is the great gift and paradigm shift that happened in evangelical corporate worship. People actually began to connect with God through their singing. It would be arrogant to assert that this kind of worship never happened before. Tozer speaks of it as he sings classic hymns. But after several generations of being fed on a full diet of testimony gospel songs, these new “praise choruses” ushered in a whole new understanding and experience in worship for evangelicals.

Why Context is Critical

Now it is critical to understand the spiritual dynamics that were in place during the Jesus People Movement and Calvary Chapel, in particular, where the Praise and Worship Movement began. This was a movement in which people were not ashamed to publically express how they felt about God. It was an environment in which people were not afraid of the mysterious work of God and were willing to take a risk to experience more of him in their lives. The hunger and desire for genuine connection with God through the music is at the heart of the Praise and Worship movement. Worshipping through contemporary praise and worship music is, in a sense, a transcendent and mystical experience. And it is, almost always, an emotional experience.

Performance Practice

It is important to understand the roots and essential qualities of praise and worship music. You cannot sing praise and worship songs the same way that gospel hymns were sung – to prepare hearts to hear the sermon. The person who sings praise and worship songs with the same expectations that he sings hymns will be disappointed. Generally, hymns express compact theological truths through profound and beautiful poetry. While they engage the emotions, their primary value is in the substance of their text; they engage the intellect. Most praise and worship songs, on the other hand, express a theological concept simply but in a way deeply emotional way. They engage the affections.

Now in our modern world, we are prone to exalt reason over emotion. You see it everywhere in our culture – even our Christian culture. It is acceptable to demean and marginalize our emotions. But such hierarchy between intellect and emotion is unfortunate and it is definitely not biblical. Read the psalms. They're drenched with emotion. We are to love the Lord with all our heart, soul, and might (Deut. 6:8). Praise and worship songs can help to give voice to our emotions and affections toward God. That's why people in praise and worship cultures lift their hands, close their eyes and are not afraid of tears. Some of them even jump around and dance! That's why it is not a problem to repeat a phrase over and over and over again. Not a problem at all if you are emotionally engaged. But if you are not engaged emotionally with the song, then the repetition is boring and irritating.

Problems with Contemporary Song

Two weeks ago, when we discussed the richness of hymns, I also listed some of the challenges, namely, archaic language and a musical style that doesn't resonate with the popular culture. Contemporary praise and worship has its serious challenges as well. Obviously, I'm a very strong proponent of the genre, but I want to temper my promotion with these cautions.

1. Because contemporary praise and worship is an expression of popular musical culture it is also subject to its worldly influences. As is the case in the secular world, we are prone to idolize worship artists. Nothing could be more repulsive to God (and I would think the artists, themselves) than to steal glory that is due to Him and give it to the artist. And we are often naïve, unreflectively using the techniques of the world to highlight the artist and

promote a performance culture in worship. There may be a place for stage lights and fog machines in worship, but they must be used to draw us to God rather than the platform. It is very easy in praise and worship to draw attention to yourself if you are on the platform. It goes with the musical culture. The burden of the worship leader is to lead the people in engaging with God through music. Too often, the engagement is only with the artists as they become performers rather than prompters pointing the congregation to God.

2. A second problem with contemporary praise and worship is its tendency to reflect the cultural values of the world in the content of the text. Here is where we need more theological reflection in our songwriting. And I'm happy to report that worship song texts have been improving in the last several years. One example, however, of how easy it is to fall into worldly cultural patterns of thought in our song has been the over-emphasis on self-fulfillment and "making me feel better" that has been pervasive in our contemporary worship songs for the last twenty years. Often, these texts have been romantic in nature – you could easily sing them to your boyfriend or girlfriend. The pervasiveness of these kinds of songs is an outcome of a self-focused and narcissistic culture. Unfortunately, that is the state of contemporary American culture, but it shouldn't characterize the church. Those kinds of songs are the result of immature theological reflection. We need to get out of spiritual adolescence and grow up. I'm happy to say, also, that songwriters are becoming more aware of these problems and are giving us texts that are more spiritually nutritious.
3. Finally, because praise and worship music is, by nature, emotionally engaging, it is subject to emotional manipulation. This is a great danger and pastors and worship leaders need to be aware of this negative potential and put a stop to it if manipulation becomes a regular pattern. It is very easy to shape your musical technique to move people emotionally. Build it up here, break it down here. We've got formulas. When that happens, our worship is being empowered by manipulation and emotion rather than the Holy Spirit. We must take care to be sure that it is the Spirit that empowers our affections which can be expressed in music rather than the music manipulating us to shallow and meaningless worship.

In Layman's Terms: Enter into the Song

Many have said, with all of the dangers of contemporary praise and worship music, we should abandon its use in our churches. That would be unfortunate. I believe God was at work in the Jesus People Movement and has brought the church into a deeper understanding of worship through the Praise and Worship Movement. Like hymns, praise and worship music is one of God's gifts to the church. How then, can we most benefit from this expression in worship?

(Here it is. This is going to challenge us. Remember...be a learner. Be willing to be changed.)

In order to understand and engage with God through praise and worship music, you've got to be willing to release your emotions into the song. You've got to emotionally engage. You have to enter into the affect – the feeling of the song.

I know. It's a risk. But there is a whole world that opens up to you when you risk emotional engagement. Those of you who are married: what would your marriage be like if you were emotionally disengaged with your spouse? There would be no intimacy and the relationship would eventually die. Why then, should we be emotionally disengaged with God in worship? Praise and worship music offers one avenue to passionately engage our affections with God. I can talk about it. But it's probably a lot more effective to see and hear it and then I'll make a few comments to close.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=huFra1mnIVE> (*Forever (We Sing Hallelujah)*)

Conclusion

I'm not a young man anymore. Most of the people in the video are less than half my age. God forgive me, but I don't see myself jumping around like that in public. But I wish I could. The glory of God is worth my embarrassment. The glory of God is worthy of all the enthusiasm and emotion I can muster. So beat those drums with all your might for the glory of God! Play the guitar with all your might. Raise your hands lift your voice for the glory of God! I've often been accused of playing too loud. Can't help it. Sometimes, I'm just overcome in the worship of God.

I began this message with my experience with opera. I didn't really appreciate it until I saw and heard a professional opera, as it was intended to be experienced. Praise and worship is an experience that must be entered into emotionally. Friends, I'm not asking you to become like those we saw in the video. If you can worship like that, God bless you. Lead the way. But I'm old enough now to have earned the right to say I believe God is in this. Praise and worship has its shortcomings, as do hymns. But I believe with all my heart that God has given these songs to us at this time in our history to learn to engage fully and emotionally with him in worship. All I can do is explain the songs to you, which I have done. All I can do is invite you to risk releasing yourself into the song – no matter what your age. But it is up to you to enter in. This I do know: when we as a people are willing to enter into worship and fully engage with God with all our heart, soul, and strength, then we will experience the manifest glory of God in our midst. And once we experience that, we will never be satisfied with anything less.