

Music in Worship Traditional or Contemporary?

by

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In Colombia, South America, a believer came to understand the doctrines of grace largely through our literature. He has been involved in planting a reformed church in his region. He wrote asking about which kind of music is appropriate for reformed worship, whether contemporary worship music or traditional hymns. He and his co-worker had differing views. What follows is my letter to him.

My dear brother,

Music is central to worship, so your question is not trivial. Worship, in turn, is a primary focus for the believer, according to John 4:24. For this reason, it merits thorough attention.

Your difference with your partner's views may result in moving you both to do something that led you into the reformed faith in the first place... that is, to *re-examine your presuppositions*. Reaching a solid conviction is a much more pleasant feeling than mere personal taste. However, unshakable conviction does not come easily.

I propose three principles on which to base your decisions about music style. All music in the worship service should contain three elements: It should be God-centered, culturally relevant, and artistically sound.

Each merits a thesis in itself. Each is defensible from scripture.

God-centered

The purpose of a worship service is worship. This seems self-evident but apparently it is not obvious to some churches. The purpose is not entertainment, to make us feel better, nor attract sinners. All of these may occur during worship and frequently does. Yet they must never be confused with the purpose of worship.

In a worship service, the only audience is God. We are there for His pleasure, His honor and His approval. We are performing for Him, not He for us. We are there to return a blessing we have already received.

Some reformed people feel that contemporary worship songs focus too much on "me" and "my." They argue that the current songs are too man-centered because they emphasize personal experience with God, rather than God Himself. I'm not convinced of this. The Psalms are full of expressions about our experience with God.

I love the LORD, for he heard my voice... Psa 116:1

Psalms like these are plentiful and I count them as God-centered, even though the pronouns "I" and "me" are central. They glorify God through man's experience with God. Is a song God-centered if it focuses on our personal experience with Him? Yes indeed!

God-centered means theologically sound. Songs must be free of doctrinal error, no matter how pretty or popular the melody. It is easy to end up preaching calvinism in a sermon, then arminianism through music. I've seen it done, including in Reformed churches.

All worship should glorify God's attributes, particularly those He emphasizes in His word. Some attributes receive more emphasis than others.

In order of frequency these seem to be His holiness, His faithfulness to His covenant people and His all-sufficiency. All of these are summed up in His Son, Jesus. I like to see these reflected in the music, whether in traditional hymns or contemporary songs.

God-centered music is reverent. The concept of reverence is so central in biblical worship that worship cannot be defined without it. However, reverent does not mean *solemn*. Nor does it mean *traditional*.

Reverence has to do with an attitude of great respect. It is possible to express great joy in a reverent manner. Reverence may even be loud.

Shout unto God with the voice of triumph. Psa 47:1

Some imagine that because a melody is sung with rhythm and gusto, it is irreverent. Not necessarily so.

Culturally relevant

What sense does it make to translate 16th century Scottish hymns into awkward Spanish rhyme and sing them in Columbia? Those hymns reflect a culture, dead for generations. How much less can they relate to Colombians? Although our focus is on pleasing God, we must avoid the impression we hold to beliefs and practices totally foreign to the community around us. That does not honor God either.

If we desire to translate hymns from another culture into Spanish, at least do them in a way that one might assume they were written in Columbia.

Artistically sound

I abandoned the violin many years ago, to the relief of friends. So, I claim no expertise in music. However, I recall taking a college course in Music Appreciation. The professor explained the criteria used to evaluate the artistic merits of a piece.

These are: Originality, melody, rhythm and balance. The piece must contain a melody or it is not music. It must have rhythm as well. These two must be in balance, the one not overpowering the other.

We've often heard songs in which the percussion drowns out the melody. This is artistically unbalanced. It can easily occur when immature musicians are allowed to play without artistic and biblical parameters.

Young people are often eager to participate in the worship ensemble because it gives them an opportunity to perform before an audience. We tolerate such immature motivations as we do other areas of youthful zeal. Putting them in charge of what music is to be used at the worship service, or play it in any manner they wish, is unacceptable. They often lack the spiritual maturity, theological understanding and artistic discretion to discern what is appropriate. This may be true even of those who play an instrument well. Their participation should be under the supervision of the church leadership.

You and I know how music is done in many evangelical churches in Latin America. The youth group, with a few fledgling musicians, picks out some lively songs at random and plays them at the worship service. The result often appears more like a second-rate rock group than a worship team. It is hardly honoring to the Lord.

Should the rhythm be fast or slow? Most worship leaders start with lively music and then lead into more solemn pieces, to prepare the people for the sermon. This seems to be a pattern that works well for many.

Now back to your question: Should you use contemporary songs or traditional hymns? Why not both, as long as they meet the criteria above?

True, some contemporary music is superficial and egocentric. Some traditional hymns likewise lack spiritual depth.

Whether you choose traditional or contemporary, remember:

Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage. Gal 5:1

May the Lord encourage you there in Colombia.

In His bonds,
Roger Smalling

Smalling's articles and essays are available at www.smallings.com