

Contemporary Worship Music

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April 29, 2004

- A. History:
 - 1. The Jesus people.
 - 2. “Contemporary Worship” and the Church Growth Movement.

- B. Various Genres
 - 1. Soft, and harder rock.
 - 2. Gospel
 - 3. Jewish (The Liberated Wailing Wall)
 - 4. Bluegrass, Country (Christ Community PCA, Franklin, Tn.)
 - 5. Jazz (The 6:30 Band, Redeemer PCA, Manhattan)

- C. Obvious Virtues
 - 1. God-centered.
 - a. Narcissistic, because of the use of “I”? See Psalms, as 18.
 - b. Declaring intentions to praise, rather than praising? The line between these is fuzzy.

 - 2. Scripturality
 - a. Words often directly from Scripture.
 - b. Often in the *style* of the Psalms, “Lord I Lift Your Name on High.” Archaic, rather than modern.
 - c. Snippets?
 - (i) Some songs contain larger portions of Scripture.
 - (ii) Even those that don’t probably contain more Scripture than the average traditional hymn.
 - (iii) Aid the memorization of Scripture. Rev. 15:3-4.
 - (iv) CWM is improving in its doctrinal coverage: “Days of Elijah.”
 - (v) Wide variety of styles: celebration, laments, prayer.

 - 3. Freshness and Communication: becoming more so.

- D. “Draw me closer, dear Lord”—Gnostic? Theology of glory?
 - 1. But Psm. 73:28, 69:18, 119:151, 148:14, etc.

 - 2. God is both transcendent and immanent.

E. CWM “too repetitious.”

1. In the abstract, repetition is not necessarily good or bad. We must speak of degrees and contexts.
2. Expressions of love and allegiance are almost necessarily repetitious, as opposed to academic lectures.
 - a. What would your spouse think if you only said “I love you” once?
 - b. Schoolgirl to teacher, “I pledged allegiance yesterday.”
3. Repetitiousness of biblical praise.
 - a. Similar themes through the Psalms.
 - b. Parallelism, often synonymous.
 - c. “Holy, holy, holy.”
4. Repetitiousness of traditional liturgy.

F. Does CWM capitulate to modern culture?

1. A general analysis of modern culture (Wells, Myers, Horton, Guinness, Hart, Postman).
 - a. Subjectivism: basing one’s life on human experience, rather than on objective truth.
 - i. Many exceptions in CWM.
 - ii. And there is a legitimate scriptural emphasis on the subjective.
 - b. Humanism: man-centered life-and-world view.
 - c. Anti-intellectualism: appeal to feelings, rather than to intellectual understanding. “Dumbing down.”
 - d. Psychologism: using psychological therapy as the chief way to deal with deep human needs.
 - e. Professionalism: preoccupation with business management and marketing techniques as the model for achieving any kind of common enterprise.
 - f. Consumerism: the notion that in all fields of endeavor we must have the goal of giving people what they want or what they can be induced to buy.
 - g. Pragmatism: the idea that results are the ultimate justification for any idea or action.
 - h. Temporal chauvinism: belief that the present time is superior to all past times.
 - i. Focus on entertainment.

- j. Myers: High, folk, and popular cultures.
 - (i) Gourmet restaurant, home cooking, Burger King.
 - (ii) Pop culture largely worthless, nothing of transcendent value.
 - (A) From industrial revolution, filling up the increased amount of leisure time.
 - (B) To be “used,” rather than “received.”
 - (C) Mainly for profit.

- 2. Rejection of anything perceived to come out of that culture.
 - a. Contemporary worship (CW)
 - (i) seeker sensitivity (Hart/Muether: “not an option for the people of God,” 35).
 - (ii) dance, drama, etc.

 - b. CWM

- 3. JF: too simplistic.
 - a. Genetic fallacy.

 - b. Is the culture as bad as they say?
 - (i) I grant many of their criticisms. The Fall has corrupted human culture since Gen. 4.
 - (ii) Important to distinguish “world” from “culture.”
 - (A) Culture: man’s reworking of God’s creation (Gen. 1:28).
 - (B) “World”
 - 1. Sometimes used to designate the created earth.
 - 2. Often, especially in the NT, the collected evil of depraved people and institutions.
 - (C) So “world” in this sense is entirely bad, something we ought not to love, 1 John 2:15.
 - (D) But Scripture does not say that everything in culture is bad or to be avoided. To the contrary:
 - (1) Common grace
 - (A) OT vs. paganism, but borrows
 - (1) Marduk in Isa. 40-66
 - (2) Psalms related to pagan songs
 - (3) Proverbs and Egyptian wisdom (22:17-24:22)
 - (4) James and Jewish wisdom trad
 - (5) Paul on Mars Hill
 - (6) Cretan poet, Tit. 1:12
 - (7) Hellenistic ethics, Tit. 2:12.
 - (B) Music from Cain’s line.
 - (2) Special grace
 - (iii) The Christian culture critics noted above don’t do justice to the good things in culture.

- (iv) Is culture much worse now than at earlier points in history?
 - (A) Babel, Sodom, Tyre, Chorazin, Bethsaida.
 - (B) Rome, Enlightenment, totalitarian societies.
 - (v) Even in Roman times, Paul can become “like” the Jews and Gentiles in various ways to save some.
- c. Popular culture not as bad as Myers says.
- (i) Edgar vs. Myers: “But at best it is an elitism, and at worst it is Marxist or dialectical” (377).
 - (ii) Some high art escapist, some pop art deep and meaningful.
 - (A) Easier to see quality in the pop tradition from a distance: Jazz artists, Sinatra, big bands, Bob Dylan, Simon and Garfunkel, the Beatles.
 - (B) Democratization --/→ degeneracy.
 - (C) Don’t confuse density and seriousness with meaning and beauty.
 - (D) Receiving/using: but why can’t art be used?
 - (1) To decorate
 - (2) To help kid get to sleep
 - (E) What’s wrong with pop setting agenda?
 - (F) No emphasis on common grace, Christian influence. All doomed. Any wheat with tares?
 - (G) Sez all rock irrational, primal instincts. E: blues-rock is first cousin to jazz, which M. likes. Both pop.
 - (iii) M: the *medium* of TV is the problem. E: no; its use. Popular culture has made quality entertainment and education more accessible. Even TV (200 channels!) produces enough quality programming to fill 24/7.
 - (iv) Sez some good in pop, but presents no positive elements.
- d. Does this analysis apply to everything influenced by contemporary culture (Amish argument)?
- e. Can any form of Christian music or worship be completely independent of cultural influence?
- (i) Certainly not, especially when we consider that language and communication are part of culture.
 - (ii) Historically, such independence has never existed. But Christian music and art have often transcended their cultural forms, raising them to a higher level of content and profundity.
 - (iii) Scripture doesn’t call us to flee from culture, but to take dominion over it in the name of Christ. That involves rejecting some things, placing others into a new framework.

- f. This analysis isn't sufficiently precise.
 - (i) When, for example, does a focus on the subjective become *subjectivistic*? There is a legitimate biblical concern for the emotions and other aspects of the inner life.
 - (ii) Is there not in our society also a tendency toward the opposite error? A lack of empathy for others?
 - (iii) Where do we draw the line? Shouldn't there be much more interaction with Scripture to determine this?
 - (iv) Are there not legitimate analogies between, say, marketing and evangelism? These are not the same; but mustn't we take more care in distinguishing them, lest any appeal to the community be dismissed as marketing?
 - (v) Similarly with entertainment and worship.
 - (vi) We should distinguish between "pragmatism" and a legitimate biblical setting of goals.
 - (A) Much of God's work is done through human means: preaching, teaching, witness, prayer (Rom. 10:17). Do not oppose divine sovereignty and human responsibility.
 - (B) In Scripture, these are goal-directed.
 - (C) We cannot accomplish the goals (repentance, faith, sanctification) on our own; but they must be the goals of our communication of the gospel. Paul becomes all things to all men "that by all possible means I might save some." Divine sovereignty and human responsibility.
- g. CWM should not be put in the same boat with CW.
 - (i) You can have CWM without CW.
 - (ii) CWM emerged independently of CW: the Jesus people revivals.
- h. There are other factors as well in the genealogy of CWM: spirituals, folk music (American, African-American, Jewish).
- i. It cannot be established that all CWM reflects and/or promotes the worst cultural trends.
- j. As a potent means of Christian edification, CWM is profoundly counter-cultural.
- k. The argument ignores the biblical emphasis on being *like* the culture in some ways.
 - (i) Gentiles need not become Jews.
 - (ii) The Great Commission; communication in human languages.
 - (iii) 1 Cor. 9: "All things to all men"

(A) Paul's sensitivity to Jewish culture. (Thanks to Reggie Kidd.)

- (1) Paul goes to Jews first
- (2) Circumcizes Timothy
- (3) Takes Nazirite vow.
- (4) Brings gift to Jerusalem
- (5) Helps purification of four in temple.
- (6) Wants Gentile grafting to provoke countrymen to jealousy.

(B) Accommodations to Gentile culture.

- (1) More Hellenistic theology and ethics in Pastorals.
- (2) Use of Koine, humble style in NT. But variety between Luke, Mark, etc.

(C) Biblical universalism important.

- (1) Hard for Jews to accept Gentiles.
- (2) Vs. worship philosophy based on superiority of one people group."
- (3) OK to prefer some music, but don't draw up in-house, impenetrable language that excludes all but the most persistent of outsiders.
- (4) Mission important, as edification, more than historical solidarity.
- (5) Church is multicultural, international.
- (6) Love important: consider others more important than yourself.

(iv) So we should not assume that likeness to culture in itself invalidates forms of Christian life or worship.

4. So the argument needs to focus on particular songs in particular contexts, rather than the CWM movement in general.

a. I fear that most CWM critics don't know the music very well, so I don't trust their judgments.

b. Hard to identify "cultural origins" of music. "Hallelujah bananas."

c. Many individual songs, in my judgment, unambiguously convey the values of Scripture, rather than those of sinful culture. "Lord, I Lift Your Name on High," "How Majestic is Your Name."

A. Quality

1. I am not a musical relativist.

a. Bach is a better composer than Lowell Mason, Watts a better hymnwriter than Philip Bliss.

b. But in detail, opinions about quality differ much.

2. Quality is important:
 - a. the skillfulness of temple musicians in 1 Chron. 15:22, 28:21, Psm. 33:3.
 - b. Sacrifices of praise should be the first fruits, Heb. 13:15, Hos. 14:2.
3. Kinds of quality should be distinguished.
 - a. Quality is not a simple thing that can be easily measured. If it were, we would have to sing the one "best" hymn over and over.
 - b. Aesthetic criteria (music schools).
 - (i) Beauty and challenges to beauty.
 - (ii) Complexity and simplicity.
 - (iii) Symmetry and asymmetry.
 - (iv) Formal rigor, creative rethinking of forms.
 - (v) Creation of moods.
 - (vi) Creativity, originality, but organic relation to the past.
 - (vii) Memorability.
 - (viii) Repetition: enough to underscore a good theme, but not too much.
 - c. Capacity to communicate God's Word.
 - (i) Coherence of words and tune.
 - (A) Not easily quantifiable. "Blessed Quietness" with a rock beat.
 - (B) But sometimes the dissonance interferes with the message: "Amazing Grace" to "Gilligan's Island Theme." "I Know Whom I Have Believed"
 - (ii) Memorability
 - (iii) Vividness
 - (iv) Singability
 - (A) Not too high nor too low: "Tis Not That I Did Choose Thee"
Usually the highest note should not go above D (fourth line, treble clef).
 - (B) Not too complicated melodically, rhythmically.
 1. "A Debtor to Mercy Alone"
 2. "Come, Ye Sinners"
 3. "Christ Jesus Lay in Death's Strong Bands"
 - (C) Contemporary tunes often a vast improvement.
 1. "Arise, My Soul, Arise"
 2. "At Even, E're the Sun Was Set."
 3. "I Know Whom I Have Believed"
 - (v) Appropriateness for a particular service.

- (vi) Appropriateness for a particular congregation.
 - (A) Culture
 - (B) Socio-economic level
 - (C) Education
 - (D) Spiritual maturity
 - (E) Problem of overuse
 - (F) Problem of associations (Gilligan again).
- d. Should Christian music be “cutting edge?”
 - (i) Cutting edge doesn’t edify usually, just stirs up.
 - (ii) Edification more important than historicity, contemporaneity.
 - 4. Simplicity and inwardness: Yes, but don’t canonize forms that led to this in the past.
 - 5. Place of likes, preferences, experience. But don’t make this non-negotiable. Some ideas don’t make sense until you actually experience them, especially done well.
 - a. Acapella Psalm singing.
 - b. Liturgical dance, raised hands.
 - c. Bach.
 - d. Impact of music on visitors.
 - e. “Blessed Quietness” to beat.
- 6. Vs. fear-driven aesthetic
 - a. Plato’s hesitations influenced Augustine, Calvin.
 - b. Michal—vs. exuberance of Psalms.