

A Church Snapshot and Ensuing Thoughts

When I was a kid, we went to church for two hours on Sunday morning. At 10:00am we went to Sunday School. The whole congregation met in the Church Sanctuary and sang some hymns and listened to the choir sing a few hymns and then we dispersed to our Sunday School classes. At 11:00am we all returned to the Sanctuary for the “Worship” service. The worship service consisted of a couple more hymns, an offering, and then a 45-50 minute sermon followed by an altar call. It was clear that the couple hymns we sang before the sermon were meant to bring us back together and settle us down before the message which was obviously the focus of the service. Since the 11:00 o’clock hour was called “worship”, it follows that either the entire service – singing, giving, preaching and responding- were called worship; or the sermon was considered worship and the other elements served as sermon preparation. We sang only hymns –or songs that were published in the hymn book. It was the 1970s and there was new phenomenon out there somewhere called, “contemporary Christian music”. And Bill Gaither was writing what we called “choruses”.

Somewhere along the way, the term “chorus” received the prefix, “worship”, the hymn books found their way to the closet, and the description “worship” began to apply only to the singing. And to all singing.

Throughout church history, music has served different functions at different times. One of the more obvious and understandable was the purpose of Luther’s tunes. Many were written to provide simple melodies that would remain in people’s ears and facilitate remembering the truths that were conveyed in the texts. Luther was looking for a way to make the scripture available to a largely illiterate congregation. More recently, hymns have expressed testimonies of the writers, sharing with the reader or listener of the great love of Jesus, attributes of God, His character, etc.

If one studies the texts of the repertoire of the church songs of any given period in history, rather than just the style of the music, one finds that congregational singing has served different purposes at different times. These functions range from expounding theology, to expressing attributes of God, to teaching truths and doctrine, to community and fellowship of believers, to pouring out *to God* in man-to-God verbiage and prayerful language. The last function in this list, vertical, personal worship – expressing *to God* my love for Him, asking God to rule my life, confessing *to God*, my desire to be cleansed – is so very different from the most immediate preceding function of congregational singing that only its failure to fulfill that function is noticed. Not the fact that it has a function of its own. The immediately preceding function of music in the church seems to have dealt mostly with community and fellowship. Singing harmonies as a congregation was very important. Hearing those around you singing was very important. Some of the most popular congregational songs used texts that encouraged believers as a congregation and encouraged community. These songs were often written in testimonial style. Songs tended to speak of one’s love for God, but not *to God*. It was enough that God would overhear us singing about our love for Him. Songs spoke of our thankfulness but did not use wording that expressed it *to God*. He overheard us singing of our thankfulness. If

this seems like a minor point, imagine that prayers were worded to other congregation members rather than to God. Well, they often are - usually in a corporate prayer setting, we spend 80% of our time expressing needs and praises, and then 20% of the time taking those needs and praises before the Lord.

Songs often approached worshipful themes but never actually managed to worship. We would sing about worshiping God, but did we actually approach Him personally? Songs seldom managed to shake the “community” function in the way that they were worded, no matter what the topic of the song. Consider the lyric, “we have come into His House and gathered in His name, to worship Him¹.” The second verse states, “lets forget about ourselves and magnify His name, and worship Him”. I think that this song could be effectively followed by a song that is directly focused on God. But that rarely happens. Usually it would be followed by another similar song like, “Let’s just Praise the Lord”². There was rarely thematic, purposeful movement toward a worship experience. I am not saying that there is something wrong with how this music functioned, only that it was not the same as the music that its adherents are contrasting with it and finding less than worthy. Since the singing portion of the service has been deemed worship, in retrospect, we have given that title to the singing of the past. Observe the themes of, Bind us Together, I love you with the Love of the Lord, The family of God, “Face to face, brother to brother, face to face, one friend to another, growing together, we are building the kingdom of God”, and many more. All these songs are encouraging Christian community. Other songs would serve as encouragement to the corporate body of believers. Consider, “He is Able... to accomplish what concerns me today.”

There are older songs that do approach God personally and there are newer songs that encourage community, but they are expressed in a quite different lyric style. Because the underlying function was fellowship and people oriented, song lyrics tended to often focus on the human side of worship. Consider the lyric, “Lord of love, I come to You and I give to You my life, Lord of love, I surrender all, I make You King of my life”³. Contrast it with, “Take my heart and form it, take my mind, transform it; take my will conform it to Yours”⁴. Consider, “Like a rose, trampled on the ground, You took the fall and thought of me, above all”. Contrast it to, “We are here, because of You, ... You are here because You”⁵.

¹ *We have Come into His House* by Bruce Ballinger ©1976 SOUND III, inc.

² *Let’s Just Praise the Lord* by William Gaither, ©1972

³ ©1983, Word Music

⁴ *Take my life* by Scott Underwood, ©1994 by Mercy/Vineyard Publishing

⁵ *Wonderful King* by David Crowder, ©2002 by Sixsteps records.