

SING UNTO THE LORD

A POSITION PAPER ON WORSHIP MUSIC

"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord." Colossians 3:16

To know God the Father through Jesus Christ His Son is the greatest mercy man can know. Through that mercy, the grace of God is vividly displayed with the salvation of each soul. No wonder the apostle exclaims, "Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God." (I John 3:1). Man's only response can be grateful praise.

SINGING IN SCRIPTURE

Throughout their history God's people have celebrated their salvation by singing to their Savior. After passing through the Red Sea, Israel sang, "I will sing unto the Lord, for He hath triumphed gloriously" (Exodus 15:1). During their wilderness wandering they sang, "Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations" (Psalms 90:1). Temple Levites sang to God, and Israel's holy days were marked by music (II Chronicles 29:30). During her national greatness Israel sang, "Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord" (Psalms 33:12). In Babylonian captivity, the people of Israel sang, "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" (Psalm 137:4) From the exodus to the wilderness through centuries of national existence and captivity, they sang to God, and some God-breathed, infallible songs are eternally preserved in the Psalms.

On the night of His betrayal Christ sang, quite possibly one of the Psalms that foretold the sufferings of Messiah. In Philippi's prison, Paul and Silas sang praises to God at midnight. Paul exhorted the Ephesian (5:18-19) and Colossian (3:16) saints to sing to the Lord with "psalms, hymns and spiritual songs." James instructed the scattered people of Israel to sing Psalms (5:13). The last scenes of Scripture include multitudes in heaven singing a new song to Christ, the worthy Lamb of God (Revelation 5:8-13).

SINGING TODAY

Man's musical ability is a gift from God by which he is to honor the Creator ("Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God." I Corinthians 10:31). But like all God's gifts it has been marred by sin and perverted. Sinful man now sings to man rather than to God. He sings for his own pleasure, not for God's. Rather than singing about God's glories and saving works, man sings about his own experiences and evil exploits. Consequently not all music is acceptable to be sung unto God, and believers must be discerning about worship music.

Much "Gospel Music" has followed the temporal musical model, speaking of man's religious experiences and desires, not of God. It is produced for its effect upon man, not for God's honor, and features religious sentiments sung by many who never experienced them. In that setting, man (rather than God) quickly becomes the subject. God's truth is replaced by human feelings and intuition, and the result is sensual music sadly reminiscent of those the Bible says "worshiped and served the creature more than the creator" (Romans 1:25).

This phenomenon is relatively new to Christian hymnody. It took shape during the past two centuries

in North America as the entire culture moved away from God's intrinsic truth and instead exalted man's rights, "self-worth" and individuality - and thus his arrogance. Those humanistic values have replaced Scripture in influencing much of the North American church, even its most conservative bodies.

Music which sounds worldly and speaks predominantly *about* man and *to* man, rather than God, is telling evidence. When man becomes the subject and object of worship music, then the fundamental reason for singing is man's pleasure, not God's honor. Hence, "gospel" musicians have gradually adopted secular styles, a trend which became increasingly obvious after the North American rock culture entered the picture with its mega-productions and concomitantly huge profits, leading logically to the commercialization of "gospel" music.

Music industry economics rather than Scripture ultimately dictate how the product will look and sound. On that point, the Scriptural picture is plain: the love of money is a root in every evil (I Timothy 6:10). Discerning Christians grieve at what is done in the name of their Saviour.

THE CHARACTER OF MUSIC

Music, as all communicative arts, is ideologically laden. A culture and a philosophy are behind every painting, sculpture, and every piece of music. Our personal values are transmitted through our artistic expression.

Those personal values are obvious in rock music, whose composers and performers readily affirm its twin emphases of sensuality and rebellion, two thoroughly anti-Christian themes. Even without profane and suggestive lyrics, incessant rock rhythms dull the senses and stir base passions to the point of lowering moral inhibitions. The message, gleefully touted by the promoters, is sex. Is it any wonder that Christians wince when rock music is brought into the church and re-titled *Asacred?* Music communicates through three media: lyrics, music and style. The physical performance of rock musicians, their words, and their music consistently communicate the same messages: sensuality and rebellion. Rock music is cited because it illustrates these facts so conspicuously, but even in less blatant forms, *all* music communicates its creator's values and beliefs through these three media. That is why it is imperative that when seeking to glorify Christ through song, we do so biblically, paying close attention to the messages conveyed by the words, the music, and the performance style (lest we dishonor God through offering praise that is corrupted).

THE WORDS

Biblical music is distinguished from all other music by its biblical content: its words. They express the indwelling word of Christ ("Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord." Colossians 3:16), communicating biblical truth about the persons of the Godhead and their attributes. They *exclude* man's religious feelings, aspirations, and ignorance. Doctrinal correctness and precise terminology are carefully guarded ("Be thou exalted, LORD, in thine own strength: so will we sing and praise thy power." Psalm 21:13).

Biblical music is to be sung or played "to the Lord," not to man ("... all things were created by him, and *for* him." Colossians 1:16). While it edifies God's people, the primary purpose is not to instruct, but to glorify God. Often missed is the fact that man benefits when God is pleased. "And he hath put a new song in my mouth, even praise *unto* our God: many shall see it, and fear, and shall trust in the Lord" (Psalms 40:3). Edification, rather than being an objective of biblical singing, is a result. To

that end, the words take on critical importance. Audience response and personal taste are erroneous standards by which to gauge worship music. Instead, we should look to the words of Scripture.

THE MUSIC

Although it is not for man's pleasure, biblical music is pleasing to the ear, for that which pleases God will be in harmony with His created order. Because it is sung to God, His people strive to sing with skill and perfection ("Sing unto him a new song; play skillfully with a loud noise." Psalms 33:3).

Biblical music is "a new song" distinct from the music of our Christ-rejecting culture. "Whatsoever is not of faith is sin" (Romans 14:23). It is distinctive because it seeks to glorify God: not to simply make man feel good. Biblical music is free from the distractions of worldliness such as sensual melody lines and incessantly repetitive rhythms that appeal only to the flesh. ("Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him." I John 2:15). It honors Christ and, as "the Lord's song," it is out of place with any other messages or in any other context than that of His glory and work (Psalm 137:3-4). It excludes the cheap, the common and the tawdry. Rather than seeking to entertain men, biblical music seeks the glory of God alone. That is the clear directive of Scripture.

THE PERFORMANCE

Biblical singing hides the musician so that the hearer beholds Christ; it is not performed to make stars out of human beings. Christ is the One made prominent. The concept of a "gospel music star" is a contradiction in terms. Christ is the embodiment of the gospel: not man. He shares His glory with no mortal. Thus, biblical music will not showcase man or his talent, because, "No flesh should glory in his presence" (I Corinthians 1:29).

If the audience response is "Wasn't that thrilling," or "What talent!" the performer has failed. Biblical music will lift hearts and evoke responses such as, "Isn't Christ glorious," "Aren't the ways of God wondrous!" Hence, applause following a gospel song signals a mistaken emphasis by the performer and/or a misunderstanding on the part of the hearers.

CONCLUSION

1. Discerning saints who desire to please their Master with music strive for words, music and a presentation that convey the same message. The message is dedicated, designed solely to exalt the persons of the Godhead, their attributes and glory.

Yet the predominant emphasis in modern religious music is a secular style and a worldly perspective. Non-doctrinal, subjective words expressing man's ideas and feelings have become prominent. This approach is not prescribed by Scripture, but is fleshly and market-driven. Consistent with values of the prevailing new evangelical philosophy in North America (see position paper, "Come Out From Among Them"), it appeals to the flesh on the theory that thereby the spirit of man might be reached. Thus, "gospel rock," along with the styles and values it has engendered in the contemporary Christian music industry, is a counterfeit of biblical, Christ-honoring music.

2. God-centered music is sung *to* God and *for* His glory. The psalms sung in a humble, Christ-exalting manner are surely the best, for they are God-breathed, and we are commanded to sing them (Ephesians 5:19, Col. 3:16). Whereas hymns penned by fallible men have sometimes included

error, the Word of God is inerrant and infallible, perfect for truthful expression to God. According to Scripture, we are to sing psalms as a manifestation of the indwelling Word and Holy Spirit. God is pleased when saints sing His Word.

Hymns such as those which emerged from the Protestant Reformation and subsequent periods of God-sent revival should be highly valued by the Church. They present an exalted view of God and a diminished view of man, realities noticeably absent from most North American hymnody. It is difficult to surpass the words of Isaac Watts, John Newton, William Cowper and Charles Wesley. The melodies used with their hymns support and advance the biblical messages contained in the words.

3. The argument that worldly styles of music must be employed to reach youth exposes the non-biblical thinking prominent in contemporary Christian music circles. Scripture prescribes the **preaching** of Christ as the means for reaching the lost, while mandating **singing** as a means to praise God. We are to *preach* Christ-crucified to man, and we are to *sing* praise to God. When the focus of singing and preaching are biblical, God is honored.

The gospel is "the power of God unto salvation" (Romans 1:16). Unembellished with earthly wisdom, undiluted by earthly means, preaching Christ-crucified is the power of God, and the wisdom of God by which lost souls are converted. "It pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe . . . Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men" (I Corinthians 1:24, 21, 25). Preaching, not music, is the means by which God draws men to conversion.

It is easy to see why Man cannot fathom how preaching "Christ crucified" is the means by which God draws men to conversion. "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord" (Isaiah 55:8).

But to abandon preaching for an approach more appealing to sinners is to discard the vitality and power of the gospel. Such means may attract man to the method, not to Christ, leading him into a false sense of security and into self-deception. It exposes man's lack of confidence in the gospel as the lone power of God unto salvation. Man's heart is reached for conversion solely by the Spirit of God, moving through means He ordained. We will know God's blessing when we employ the means He established.

The recipient, subject and motivation of biblical music is God - not man. He is pleased when His people strive obediently to exalt and honor Him. The pleasure of God is the saint's greatest objective, his greatest reward. "For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory forever. Amen" (Romans 11:36).