

Corporate Worship - Music – The Tensions

Music, as far as Christians go, has always, and probably will always be a battleground. Controversies over music are nothing new. For over 1000 years, there were little to no instruments used in church music. When the organ was first introduced, there was controversy over it, likewise with the piano. Spurgeon refused to have instruments in his church. There were controversies over the use of purely instrumental music. There were controversies over singing anything except the Psalms. There were controversies over such things as using choirs and soloists. There were controversies over the hymns of Isaac Watts and Martin Luther.

Now a superficial look at church history will make the lazy interpreter say, ‘Oh, well the worship wars of our day are just the same old battles. The church will adjust as it always does. It’s just fear of change.’ But as we’ll see, it is not that simple.

The fact is – controversy means there are tensions. There are opposing forces pulling in their own direction, and this eventually causes tensions. Tonight I’d like to talk about two areas of tension which directly affect music. The first I call Accessibility vs. Elevation, the second Tradition vs. Contemporaneity.

I. Accessibility vs. Elevation

The first is accessibility vs. elevation. Accessibility suggests – something which is open, easily reached, it is on one’s level. Elevation suggests something which is somewhat out of reach – it will require a stretch, a growth, a lifting up from where you are to reach it.

This tension between what is accessible and what is elevated touches almost every area of ministry. Some examples – your public services, if you aim for them to be accessible they will be more informal. If you aim for elevation, they will be more liturgical and formalised. The architecture to be accessible will be down to earth, functional, and user-friendly. If you want it to be elevated – it will be classical or ornate

Dress – accessible would be casual; elevated would be smart or formal. If you want an accessible Bible translation – you go for a paraphrase or a dynamic equivalence translation. If you seek an elevated sound – you go with the King James or a more formal translation. If you seek to teach in an accessible way – it may be in more small groups, with a lot of interaction, whereas preaching is an elevated approach.

Now you bring this over to music. One tension in music is – should it be accessible, or should it be elevated? Accessible is music which is simple, easy to understand, familiar – it can be learned and played without much technical skill. Music which is elevated takes more time to learn, understand, sing, or play. Accessible music we might call folk music, and elevated we might call classical – though that is a vast generalisation.

To help us understand how we should choose in this – consider the advantages and disadvantages of accessibility vs. elevation. Accessible music, of course, meets people where they are. Like the Lord, it humbles itself to break truth down to where people

can understand divine truths. Beauty can also be ordinary, simple and everyday – and this kind of music honours that.

Elevated music is able to carry concepts of truth, beauty and excellence in a way which simpler music cannot. Elevated music preserves high views of God and guards against oversimplifying the truth. It keeps alive our pursuit of things excellent. It can touch emotions and ideas which more accessible music cannot.

Both kinds also have disadvantages: Accessible music can become indifferent toward being disciplined and excellent. It opens the door to laziness and carelessness; it tends to dumb down the life of the mind, and moves the emotions with shortcuts and stereotypes. Accessible music is seldom a preservative for truth – because it always exalts what is popular and what works. It measures its value not by objective excellence but by wide appeal and practical effects. Accessible music minimises what is rare because it wants to exalt what is shared by all – but some experiences in the Christian life are rare and need to be sung about.

Elevated music also has some disadvantages. It is easy to become snobbish, and look down with contempt on simpler music. It can start to exalt technical excellence in music above the larger issues of life. It can tend towards performance more than participation. It is less accessible to people and can create an atmosphere of distance and aloofness. People can become frustrated by music they do not understand.

So you can see why there is a tension. Accessible music reaches people where they are – and that is definitely part of ministry. But it lacks the ability to pull people up to a higher level of understanding of God. Build a church solely on accessible music – and it will be immature in its concepts of God, soon lose any heritage of godly music, and fall away from the truth. It will lack a whole dimension to its worship. Elevated music can do that – but it is sometimes already out of reach for the average man. Build a church solely on elevated music – and you will frustrate people and lose them, possibly developing a snobbish attitude amongst the people.

It sounds ‘wise’ to frame a controversy with two opposing views, and then plant your flag in the middle. However, this is not necessarily wisdom; it may just be wise-sounding ambivalence. And it will not do to simply make an arbitrary decision like – we are going to have 50% accessible songs and 50% elevated ones. How do we solve this tension Biblically?

The best example is the Lord Jesus Himself. You couldn’t have a better example of this tension. This is God Himself – reaching down to man’s level to seek to pull him up to God. And looking at our Lord’s example we can say this much – you must seek accessibility without compromise, and elevation without detachment.

When you look at the Lord Jesus, you see there is a clear difference between accessibility and popularity. Popularity does not simply make the way simple enough for people to get in; it tries to make it more attractive to get people in. Our Lord taught in parables using everyday language and everyday metaphors. He made the Gospel accessible. He wanted people to understand but He did not try to sweeten it with false bait. He did not appeal to the lowest common denominator. In other words – He made the things of God accessible – but He did not compromise.

Much music today which is supposedly meeting people where they are, and taking the Gospel to the people is not simple accessible – it is a compromise. It is a worldly mix of shallowness, sentimentality, sensuality, and self-centredness that Jesus would never have used. Simplicity is good. Stereotypes are not. We can use simple music – not stereotyped pop music. We can use music easy to understand – not music so trivial it demeans our religious affections. Anyone can get into a paddling pool. That's not the point. We want accessibility into an experience that will get deeper.

At the same time, Jesus also taught and more often than not, people did not fully understand Him – including His disciples. They had to ask for explanations of the parables. They did not understand what He meant when He spoke of rising from the dead. They did not understand His explanations of His sufferings until after they were done. At one point, He even said to them, “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear *them* now.” (Joh 16:12) In other words – Jesus didn't come to merely meet sinners where they are; He came to pull them up to where they ought to be before the Fall of Adam. That meant teaching them what they didn't know – introducing them to spiritual concepts which they were not aware of like – The Trinity, the church of Jews and Gentiles, His substitutionary atonement. The Lord may have used language they understood – *but He used it to teach them things they did not understand*. Accessibility is just the entrance, elevation is the goal.

Therefore, music which carries truth, which shows forth more of the glory of God is going to be more of our goal than merely music which we understand. We need simple, accessible music, since we are all in different stages of growth. We need it for our children. We need it for newcomers, newly saved believers, even visiting unbelievers. We need it for ourselves because simplicity is at the heart of the Gospel. And yet, nothing in the spiritual realm comes without patient learning and sacrifice. Music which does not provide immediate gratification, which requires we submit to it instead of consume it, is the kind of music which will take us higher.

So in short – the tension between accessibility and elevation is to make accessibility part of your approach, while elevation is your continual goal. I suppose the pool is again the illustration – people might need to get in where there is a ladder but your goal is for them to swim to deeper waters, not perpetually splash around in the shallow end.

II. Tradition vs. Contemporaneity

We come now to the second kind of tension. This is the tension between tradition – what has been done in the past and contemporary practise – what is done today. Sometimes it is framed in terms of a generation gap – what the older people like, their tradition, vs. what the younger people like, their innovations.

Some churches hold a traditional service at one time, and then a contemporary service later. Or for some, the morning service is traditional, and the evening service is the youth service, where the contemporary styles are played. And in truth – then you really have two churches that happen to meet at the same building. If we are not united on what it means to worship God, then we are not united on anything of importance.

Once again, if you are a lazy interpreter of facts, you will say – “Oh, yes, this is just the church’s conservative values – scared of the new, in love with the old, afraid to move. There will always be a fight between innovators, and between stalwarts.’ There is some truth in that, but it misses the main point by a mile.

What are we talking about when we say tradition? Do we mean simply the way our parents did things? Do we mean the way it was done 100 years ago? What is tradition? Tradition is more than the way things were. Tradition is a heritage.

Now think about that for a moment. Heritage means an inheritance – a legacy – something that is given to you by the people who went before. When your father gives you an inheritance of money – he gives you what he worked for his whole life. When your mother gives you recipes from her grandmother – she passes on what was tried and tested by others.

Now tradition, as far as the church goes is more than *the way they did things back then*. It is an inheritance passed down to us by the blood, sweat and tears of 1900 years of church history. A tradition does not only pass on teachings – it passes on a whole culture. It has tried and tested things, and passes on to you what it has discovered. Tradition, as far as the church goes, comes with 1900 years of experience. Through times, through trials, controversies, tests – the church has winnowed out the bad, the weak, the ugly and passes on what it believes is the best. It preserves the thoughtful judgement of thousands of godly Christians. It can provide balance in an apostate age – by bringing in the wisdom of the ages.

Does tradition have disadvantages? Certainly. A tradition can be perverted, it can be wrong in the first place. Once it is established, it becomes very hard to overturn. The error in a tradition becomes unquestioned and unassailable. The problem is not tradition; the problem is what the tradition is preserving. If what it is preserving is unbiblical, or specific to an ethnic group or a peculiarity of an age, then it is not preserving something useful. And sometimes, since tradition favours established practices over innovation, it can stifle creativity amongst God’s people today.

And then, standing in contrast to this is contemporaneity. This is the belief that we must reflect our age, our generation with the language, ways and music of the present. Innovations, newness, creativity are more important than preservation. It does indeed give people what they are familiar with. It appears to be relevant and accessible by speaking the language all are familiar with. And it does give people the opportunity to be creative today.

But contemporaneity, as practised today has many serious disadvantages and consequences. It dispenses with the wisdom of the ages. It detaches itself from 1900 years of previous growth, understanding and suffering. It arrogantly favours its own interpretations over older ones, and ignores previous judgments. It uncritically absorbs whatever is happening, rather than what is true, good and beautiful. It is faddish, and more concerned with what is popular, than what is right.

But this attitude toward tradition harms us terribly. A man with amnesia has no sense of identity because he has no memory. His memory helps him recognise objects and

people, and his relationship to them. A church with no sense of tradition has no sense of the identity of the historic Christian faith.

And here is the thing- rightly understood, church tradition provides you not only with doctrine, but a context in which to understand doctrine. You see, we depend on the Holy Spirit to teach us – but no one is going to sit down with a Bible and think it all up. Your parents not only give you facts, they help you to understand the facts. The meaning of the Holocaust will be explained differently by a Jewish father, than it will by a neo-Nazi father. Rightly understood church tradition helps us understand the Biblical facts. This was the view of the Reformers. For example John Owen wrote against the Socinians, who taught that we have no creed but the Bible – but they ended up denying the Trinity. The Greek philosophy in which the New Testament was written was necessary to express the concepts of the Trinity.

The only tradition to be suspicious of is tradition which cannot be defended Biblically. When Jesus attacked the traditions of the Pharisees by saying that they made the Word of God of no effect by their traditions, He was not attacking tradition, but the error in their traditions. Likewise Paul when he tells the Colossians to beware of the traditions of men. But he uses it positively in 2 Theses 2:15 where he says, “Therefore, brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle. (2Th 2:15)

The word means a handing down – a transmission. Every church generation receives something of a transmission from the previous one.

A little bit of church history for you: From the time of the apostles until the time of Edwards, one can trace a continuity of Christian culture in the West. In the nineteenth century a man by the name of Charles Finney caused a decisive break with church history and tradition. Most churches shifted their musical focus away from developing the musical tradition that they had received from the Christian past, and concentrated instead on the newly emerging forms and sensibilities of popular culture. The church since Finney has been the church given to popularity and pragmatism. If you want to know the tradition of the true church you have to read before Finney. As an example, let me ask you how many of the following authors have you heard of, or read? William Law, Madame Guyon, St John of the Cross, Oswald Chambers, G.K. Chesterton, Blaise Pascal, John Bunyan, Jonathan Edwards, Julian of Norwich, John Wesley, George Whitefield, George MacDonald, Bernard of Clairvaux, Augustine, Thomas a Kempis, A.W. Tozer.

How many of the authors have you heard of? How many of their books have you read? A low percentage would not be surprising because the modern church is in love with itself. It arrogates its own wisdom, its own writers, its own views above that of two thousand years of wisdom, some of it obtained through blood.

Unfortunately, modern times have developed a kind of chronological snobbery, as C.S. Lewis put it, where we regard our era as the most developed of all. Because our era certainly has made huge leaps forward scientifically and technologically, we assume that we are likewise advancing spiritually – we must be the furthest point on the developing church. And so, very few people today care much about church history. They assume that the church which is today, must be like the church of the

past, and do not bother to check. They know music has changed, but assume it is much like dress. Dress has changed too, so what?

Here is where we bring it over to music. It is one thing to want to speak to the people of today, in words they understand. It is good and right to encourage creativity today. But when you have a massive heritage of music given to you by 1900 years of blood, sweat and tears, and you spurn that – that is a sin. The music we sing represents the way we understand God. To ignore how the church has sung about God for 1900 years in favour of the music which the world uses to sing about its immorality today is a travesty.

When it comes to hymns there is a simply huge tradition of hymns to draw on – early Christian hymns, hymns of the ancient Greek church, Syrian, Latin, hymns that emerged from Martin Luther and those during that period; the music of Bach, Handel and Haydn; the hymns of the Pietists and Moravians; hymns of the Anabaptists – in England the hymns of Isaac Watts and those in his school; hymns of the Wesleys; the hymns of the Presbyterians. There is the music of the middle ages, the music of the Renaissance, the music of the Baroque era, the music of the classical era, the music of the Classical era.

This is nothing less than an inheritance. That inheritance implies a responsibility. That responsibility is to read and consider what the ancients have said and sung. If you can picture a clock, and the hours of a day represent 1900 years of church history, our era is just the last two hours. Is it right to define ourselves but what has happened in the last two hours, or in the previous 22? Do you know the Bible teaches us to love our past as well as our future? We are told to love our parents as well as our children. Israel was to honour what had happened in the past with their celebration of Passover, with reminders of God's act. They were told not to remove the ancient landmarks. Esau was supposed to love his future by not selling his birthright.

We are to love the church not only of the present, but also of the past and the future. We love the church of the past by honouring what they have said, written and sung. We are to gratefully receive what they have given us as a gift, not spurn it for the latest pop music on the block. We live in a community and that community includes the past. The writer of Hebrews regards the dead saints as a cloud of witnesses – so should we. We are to love the church of the future by not breaking the chain, but by passing on to them what has been passed down to us.

By contrast, you need to ask to what degree do the current, cultural musical forms really reflect what is good, true and beautiful. When Martin Luther drew on the folk music of his day, he was drawing on forms that were not ungodly or evil. Likewise for Wesley. It is one thing to use forms that are contemporary, if those forms are true, good and beautiful. But what if they are not? Must we use them simply because they are new? That is foolish, especially when you have 1800 years of good church music to draw on. (One reason I dislike the term contemporary Christian music is that it is a misleading term. For music to be Christian it must represent a Christian worldview. If music that is true, honourable, pure, just and lovely is made today – that is Contemporary Christian music. But if the music is not true or honourable or just or pure or lovely or commendable or excellent – then it is not Christian. A Christian

might produce it, a Christian might listen to it – that doesn't make it Contemporary Christian music, it just makes it contemporary and possibly only barely as music.)

So how do we resolve the tension? Again – we can't just plant a flag between the old and the new and say 50/50, firstly because we make up just a fraction of the church's history, and secondly, because our age is not an age friendly to the worship of God.

So what should we do? Firstly, we should give more space to godly, biblical tradition than to innovation – because the tradition has the advantage of the winnowing of time, with the wisdom of years of struggle and experience. We should judge the view of our modern church by the view of 1900 years of church history, not the other way around. It is better to lean more heavily on what godly Christians for almost two thousand years have said rather than on the preferences of pop culture.

Second, our creativity and innovation should build on what has been given to us, not depart from it. When we write new music and new songs it should not be a total departure from what has been given to us. In love for the church past and in love for the church future – we should grow and increase what they have said and done. But the only way we can do that is if we read them, and sing them and know them. Instead today we sing the pop songs of our day with little regard for 1800 years of church music, we ignore what the ancients said about music, and we simply do what works, what is popular, what draws a crowd. We need songwriters today. But we need songwriters without spiritual amnesia, songwriters who love the present church as well as the past and the future.

Resolving these tensions is not done by oversimplifying the issue, or by making the kind of vague conciliatory remarks we hear people say like, “Well, we just need to be balanced.” Well, of course we do but it is only when you understand what is more important that you find a balance. The Bible says that Christ's wisdom was that he was able to “refuse the evil, and choose the good.” That's what wisdom is – to know the good from the bad, the better from the not-so-good, the helpful from the useless.

Up to now, the church keeps applying its own understanding, or the wisdom of pragmatism, or the wisdom of church-growth specialists. May we apply the wisdom of the Word to these tensions in church music – so that we may test all things, and hold fast to that which is good?