

Worship (25)

Corporate Worship - Music – the Training

Martin Luther tended to have some rather strong views on things. He wasn't very shy in his writings, and didn't usually beat around the bush. This is what he said about music:

"I, Doctor Martin Luther, wish all lovers of the unshackled art of music grace and peace from God the Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ! I truly desire that all Christians would love and regard as worthy the lovely gift of music, which is a precious, worthy, and costly treasure given to mankind by God. The riches of music are so excellent and so precious that words fail me whenever I attempt to discuss and describe them.... In summa, next to the Word of God, the noble art of music is the greatest treasure in the world. It controls our thoughts, minds, hearts, and spirits... A person who gives this some thought and yet does not regard music as a marvellous creation of God, must be a clodhopper indeed and does not deserve to be called a human being; he should be permitted to hear nothing but the braying of asses and the grunting of hogs."

I trust there are no clodhoppers reading this, as we come to the final aspect of music – that is the training. Part of the reason we have to have messages on music is because long ago, the church dropped the ball when it came to music training.

Sometimes it helps us to reflect back from where we have come to help us to know where we are. Kevin Mungons provided the following:

‘Frederick Winslow Taylor wrote a book called *Principles of Scientific Management* (1911), where he tries to describe the changes that were happening in the early century by using the example of an imaginary steel American ironworker named Schmidt. Schmidt unloaded tons of pig iron every day but had enough skill and energy to continue building his own house when he returned home from work. His wife stayed at home, planted a garden, and bought basic food ingredients - but she did most of the preparing and preserving herself. The home was still at least partially a centre of production rather than consumption. Family structure was extended; grandparents often lived with adult children and grandchildren

Schmidt would return home at night, work on his house for a bit, and then pull his violin from the case. Or increasingly often, he would sit at an upright piano, whose price was dropping due to mass production. The family would gather for informal singing and music making; the parents would pass on to the children a heritage of music production. There was no radio, no recordings - no automated music of any form. Music was experienced only as a producer or a listener - at the live theatre, at town band concerts, on the music hall stage . . . and certainly at church.

But the changes in culture – with mass production were changing life for Schmidt as well. Mass production meant his job was now one task repeated over and over again without any variation or downtime. Schmidt would come home exhausted and unwilling to continue his production at home. So he used his increased pay to hire someone to complete his house, he purchased furniture rather than building his own, and soon his wife began to purchase packaged food from the grocery.

But at the same time the economy was revolutionizing mass production, these changes influenced the music world as well. By 1920, Schmidt's new factory job also left him too tired for nightly music production in the parlour. But not to worry - mechanical devices such as player pianos allowed Schmidt's children to attach a paper roll and pump the feet to sound like a concert, a barroom, or even a church. After this came recorded music: wax cylinders and shellac disks played on the hand-cranked Victrola. And when the Schmidt's family left the parlour for a night on the town, they discovered that live performances in the music hall and

on the vaudeville stage had given way to moving pictures of essentially the same material. Soon these were followed by radio programs featuring live performances of music but coming from a disembodied box. Eventually the live broadcasts on radio gave way to broadcasts of pre-recorded music. Family music-making in the home parlour was a thing of the past; Schmidt was a music *consumer*, not a music *producer*. At first these media commodities were enjoyed together as the family gathered around the radio or Victrola or television in Schmidt's parlour. Later, each family member put on his headphones, made his own choices, and retreated to separate rooms. Schmidt's grandchildren could download tunes to their iPod, *but they could not play any of the instruments they were hearing.*'

We are those grandchildren and great-grandchildren. We are the generation who cannot read music, who have very little understanding of music, who in rare cases can play an instrument, and who are almost completely disconnected from a heritage of Christian music passed onto us for centuries. Today music is something we consume – in the car, on our stereos at home – but it is seldom something we try to learn, understand or produce.

The classical education model of the Middle Ages was made up of seven subjects divided into two. First the trivium taught grammar, logic and rhetoric. Following on from that – the quadrivium taught Algebra, Geometry, Astronomy and Music. Music was even in modern education for a while, but seems to have disappeared.

Sadly, the church of the last 100 years has been the church eager to copy, mimic and please – and has not resisted this trend at all. Right through the Middle Ages, into the Reformation era – the church was the centre of musical education – teaching its people music, instruments and vocal training. In the time of J.S Bach – the church was the primary place where you heard the greatest of music. Entire schools were partially operated by the church and taught children music from an early age.

Today if you want music lessons, you must hire someone who is seldom a believer. Today if you want to hear great and serious music, you must purchase a ticket to hear highly skilled unbelievers play in professional orchestras. Somewhere, someone dropped the ball. The blame, in my view is on seminaries and pastors who allowed the spirit of the age to consume them and themselves became musical consumers – relegating skill in music to something for those who really wanted to pursue it in an extraordinary way.

Martin Luther said "I am strongly persuaded that after theology, there is no art that can be placed on a level with music; for besides theology music is the only art capable of affording peace and joy of the heart...the Devil flees before the sound of music almost as much as before the Word of God. Next to the Word of God, music deserves the highest praise." And then for that matter, the attention it should receive from the church should come second only to the attention we give to the Word itself.

Today no one bats an eyelid at the fact that little or no musical training is going on in the average church. This is the way it's always been, so we do not expect anything else. And we are the worse off for it.

Firstly, because we are then like children musically, just like immature believers cannot detect false doctrine, musically immature believers cannot detect false or inferior music. So much of the debate today about music will never be solved because you have a church largely ignorant of what constitutes good, well written and well performed music. You've got blind people debating over shades of blue. You cannot ever resolve the debate about music when the large majority of the participants lack the basic tools to understand what they are arguing about.

Secondly, it explains the actual musical experience of our churches. We end up impoverished – one or two piano players, one folk guitar player, one ex-drum player; very few who are proficient on an instrument, even less who understand the theology of music.

Now if you are the average evangelical church – you rush to involve anyone and everyone in your music, so if a man can play three chords on a guitar, you get him up, if a man was a drum player somewhere – you buy a set and put him on them. And very often, the pastor who is not trained in any way musically, and has not tried to learn, hands the whole thing over to these sincere, but nevertheless immature folk. Usually these people have little to no understanding of theology, and so will have poor discernment in their choice of songs. They are often still immature in their faith, but are thrust into a place of public leadership. The music ministry has a teaching aspect to it – particularly a song leader, or the one choosing songs, yet they are novices. There is a tendency to performance instead of pastoral guidance. Very often, the musicians have received their training at the feet of Hollywood, the party scene, or perhaps a seeker-friendly mega-church. Their whole theology of music is one of creating hype, manipulating emotions with chord progressions, volume changes and combinations of sounds. Such people do not need to teach, they first need to learn, regardless of their gifts.

And what happens is an increasing dumbing down. Since congregations can't read music, hymnbooks are taken away and words projected on a screen. The great hymns of the faith are replaced with trite choruses. Instruments requiring skill are replaced with ones needing very little. You have a spiral downwards into ever flattening shallowness – incapable of raising true affections for God, capable only of amusing.

And when we get used to this, our churches no longer look for excellence; they look for entertainment. The musicians become a band, the production becomes a performance; it is more about mood, lighting, energy, than about excellence.

Moreover, we start to care little about quality, and place all the emphasis on motive. As long as a person loves God – that is all. Now we are not saying that technical perfection is necessary to play in church. But we should also avoid the opposite extreme – where people whose gifts are better spent elsewhere are leading in music and ultimately bringing the whole tone down away from excellence. As Paul Jones put it – 'We all have different roles in the body, and musical leadership is for Christian musicians, not Christian karaoke.'

Now here is why this is an issue for all of us: the Bible commands all of us, in some form to be making music (**Col 3:16, Eph 5:19, Psalm 92:1-3; Psalm 98**). Some understanding of music is required, because we are commanded to make music, one way or another. An obligation has been laid at our feet – make music for the Lord.

But what do people say today to these commands of Scripture? 'I'm not musical.'
This shows we have misunderstood the nature of things.

Don't attribute to a lack of natural talent what might actually be a lack of effort to develop even a basic musical knowledge or skill. A person of average intelligence can learn a basic minimum about music, but most people choose not to. Music is mostly a skill – a skill which can be learnt, and at the very least – a skill which can be understood.

The average church goer today figures music is for some strange people who 'have talent' like some people have webbed toes. They figure it's all genetic, and ought to be left up to the specialists. This is a new and unprecedented opinion on the church.

Who is usually trained in music? The pastor's family are the ones. Why? Because everyone feels, these are the professional religious people and music is part of their job description.

Yes, musically, some do have five talents. That won't excuse you burying yours. God commands us to discern and discover and pursue excellence.

God's seeing the heart doesn't excuse sloppiness, it reveals it. God can see where we have been slothful, careless and wasteful – where we refused to improve, learn and do something about music. As we said, there is musical ignorance, but it should never be mixed with musical arrogance – a refusal to learn and grow.

Increase Your Knowledge

If we are to sing and make music for the Lord we need to know more of what that means. What are some basic things which we should all seek to learn?

Learn a basic appreciation of music. Perhaps read Copland's book "What to Listen for in Music" There are some very basic books which introduce you to music – its composition, its makeup, its forms, how to read music.

Begin to branch out. Try your hand at listening to some more serious music. Instead of switching on the TV, or putting in some wallpaper background music, listen to something which will stretch you, something which perhaps doesn't immediately amuse you – but you can tell it is serious and requires concentration.

As an individual, have you considered learning an instrument, taking vocal lessons? Nothing will help you more than to steadily grow in this area as well.

There are ways that we as a church can grow in increasing our knowledge corporately.

Sing Hymns

By singing hymns we keep on growing our understanding of doctrine and truth and we also grow musical understanding. This means singing hymns in our services. It means learning new hymns. It may mean some Sunday school classes helping us to understand the context of the hymns we sing, and even how to understand the notation. This is one of the reasons I am in favour of printed hymnbooks over overhead projections. Overhead projections mean people do not have music in their hands – and yes, some can still read music. Moreover, how can you ever *learn* to read music if you never have an opportunity to do so?

Over time, developing and training choirs – choirs that are committed to excellence – and consider it a ministry to which they will sacrifice hours of training, practice time and prayer.

Instruct Your Children Ps 78:1-18

Parents – it is our job to make sure our children are musically literate.

Sometimes you hear people say, 'Well my children just aren't very musical, so they never took any lessons.' Or they say, 'Well, my children weren't interested in taking an instrument, so they never did.' To try and get that into perspective, imagine meeting someone whose teenage children cannot read – not a single word. You ask why and the parents say, 'Well, my

children just aren't very literate, so we never had them learn. They were never very interested in books – they preferred sports and games, so we never forced them to read.'

Now you would regard such parents as not only misguided but fairly out of touch with the world. The fact is, in this world, a child needs to be literate to understand the world, to function. You don't leave it up to a child's personal whims, nor do you look for some hidden verbal or linguistic talent before you teach them the skill of reading.

And so in a church where we need to obey the command to sing and make music, where music is a vital and essential part of our worship of God – a certain amount of musical literacy is essential. You don't leave it up to a child's whims or wait to see if, like Mozart, they will start playing the piano by ear at age four. You teach them basic skills. Researchers say that a lot of musical aptitude is settled by age nine, so training before then is ideal.

Let your children learn an instrument. Decide for them. They will thank you for it years later. They may not become virtuosos. That's not the point, nor is it the goal. The goal is to be at least musically literate.

Expose them to great music at an early age. Don't think because they are children they have to listen to *Praise Songs for Kids Volume 2* with 'Praise Him in the Morning,' 'Kumbayah My Lord' and 'It's Love that Makes The World Go Round' as the main songs sung by other children with flutey, syrupy voices and a bouncing 'boing-boing' beat in the background. They may not understand the best music. At least they will know it is there and aspire to understand it. They don't understand all the sermons or even all our conversations – but we want them to learn.

As a family, sing hymns. Teach your children nine hymns in a year.

Here is a second area the church can help - by introducing musical education for the children in church. This could include teaching children to sing in tune, to have proper rhythm, and to be able to read musical notation. They could learn proper vocal technique as they sing in children's choirs. Included in this could be to teach children a biblical view of music in worship and an historical perspective of church music, and teach them some of the great hymns as well.

But the church's efforts will be undone if parents are not committed to this as well. Parents need to recognise that we have an obligation to our children and to the church of the future by educating them musically.

Invest Your Finances

God's people often drive very nice vehicles, eat out at fine places and go on enjoyable vacations. We have money to spare. The question is – do we see the need to invest it musically? An increase in musical ability will cost money.

As a church, it is going to cost money to purchase new hymnals, probably a large amount of money, but if each family gave the equivalent of what it would cost to buy and ship one hymnal, it could be done with ease. As the church goes along it costs money to repair instruments, to purchase additional ones, to have things repaired; it costs money to purchase printed music for offertories. It may cost money to eventually bind and print specific hymnals and, as individuals, it may cost us money to learn music or instruments on our own. It may

cost us money to teach our children. It may cost money to purchase music which is more serious.

But let me suggest to you a way which will test your financial commitment to the music of your church - by supporting a full-time music pastor. Sometimes people call such a person the minister of music, or the song leader or the director of music or worship leader. I prefer the term Pastor of Music - a qualified elder given to the teaching, writing, selecting, conducting and performing of music. And if he gives himself to it as a calling, there are Biblical grounds to support such a person.

That might surprise you, but turn for a moment to **I Chronicles 23**. At the time of David's order for the Temple, there were 38000 Levites over 30 (v3) who lived totally for the service of Israel's worship. Of these, 4000 selected and trained for Temple service as musicians (v5). Out of those, 288 were skilled in singing the Songs of the Lord (25:7). Remember that Israel supported the Levites. They lived in tax-free cities, where their needs were taken care of by the rest of Israel. Musical praise was their occupation, and they were compensated for it.

This was resumed when the Temple and the wall of Jerusalem were rebuilt after the Babylonian captivity. **Nehemiah 12:27-29** – entire villages where Levites, devoted to music, lived, practiced, trained and served God's people in music. How is it that we battle with the idea of supporting just one man devoted to music in the church?

We have to realise that the music of the church is not a 'filler' before the sermon. It is not wallpaper sound to mask the noise of latecomers coming in. It is part of the discipling and teaching ministry of the church. This is why I prefer the term Music Pastor. A person given over to this is shepherding the congregation through his choice of music, through guiding the musicians themselves, through helping people approve the things that are excellent.

It does not mean that musicians cannot volunteer, or that we have to pay them all. But to have at least one person, a trained musician, who is also an elder in heart and life qualifications, there to shepherd and lead – but particularly lead and shepherd in music. And **I Timothy 5:17** tells us that the labourer is worthy of his hire – it would not be wrong to compensate a pastor devoted to this.

Such a person would teach people to sing and play, write new music, preserve a musical heritage, carefully select music used in worship, instruct people in Sunday School courses and in Bible studies about hymnody, and music, and collect and collate a hymnal which the church is happy with.

To some churches this may sound very ambitious - picturing a church where children are trained in music alongside Biblical studies; where individuals are learning instruments, perhaps even being taught by people in church, and enhancing the music of the church; where choirs are trained well and a source of great blessing to the church; where a man whom the church supports devotes his life to enhancing the music of the church.

But should we be content to stay where we are? Is it not right to pursue excellence? As we reach out to these things – it may be that God will bless our efforts.