

“Worship Wars”

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February 24, 2019

Let me start with telling you a bit about myself. When RevSuz asked me to preach, little did she know that I come from a family of preachers. My uncle was a missionary and evangelical minister, and two of my grandfather’s brothers were ministers in the baptist church. Get ready for a sermon that’s at least two hours. Maybe not... In the last few months, RevSuz and I have been discussing music in worship. My sermon is titled “Worship Wars”, which is about the potential divisiveness that music can have in worship. There are many different styles, and many ways that music can be used in worship. Music has a way of speaking to us in ways that words alone cannot. I would suspect most of you have memories of different types of music that your parents, grandparents, family, and others listened to growing up. This personal history guides our feelings about music in worship, and what we do and do not like. I’d like to share a quote from a minister that was written in a newspaper about music:

“There are several reasons for opposing it –

One, its too new.

Two, its often worldly, even blasphemous.

The new Christian music is not as pleasant as the more established style.

Because there are so many songs, you can’t learn them all.

It puts too much emphasis on instrumental music rather than Godly lyrics.

This new music creates disturbances making people act indecently and disorderly.

The preceding generation got along without it.

It’s a money making scene and some of these new music upstarts are lewd and loose.”

When was this written and about whom? Would it surprise you that this quote comes from 1723, where a minister was writing to complain about the great hymn writer, Isaac Watts? Who is Isaac Watts you ask? You know him -- as he is the writer of “Joy to the World” and “O God our Help in Ages Past”. Interesting isn’t it, as I doubt any of us would consider this music controversial, and in fact, these are some of the “old standards”. In fact, most of us would consider this part of our history of music in the church. It is nothing new to our decade. As long as we have had organized churches and people with personal preferences, there has been

conflict about music. Each different era and time has regarded the previous era's music as less than ideal, or somehow inappropriate. In fact, a decree in the 1920's even banned the use of the piano from worship in the Catholic church as it was considered to "worldly" .

I like to think of musical styles and service preferences are like a jacket that can be taken on or off depending upon the temperature. It is used only when needed. When we think we're debating styles and techniques and forms, are we really defending our own affections and deeply felt preferences?. Most often we defend what is nostalgic rather than what is new. Over the years, I have heard comments such as "we don't sing enough of the old hymns," or "I don't like the new music," or "the hymns are too slow". As congregationalists, we are a diverse group and have many opinions, yes? What is interesting to me is not the comments per se, but the meaning behind them. Maybe what we are saying is, "I wish we could have the kind of music that I like, or that I am familiar with, just like an old comfortable jacket.

Think about the following, only a hundred years ago, the primary means of communication was the spoken word, not the radio, not television. The principle form of entertainment was being read to. The most familiar form of music was choral singing. It makes sense that these would make up the primary forms of worship in the churches of those times. People loved to sing hymns led by an organ and a piano.

TODAY, we live in a vastly changed world. Ours is a media saturated, technologically driven, visual culture. Many people don't read books anymore, they surf the web and watch movies. Most people are not used to listening to long speeches—they catch sound bites and look at graphics that portray information visually. Few people today listen to music like you would hear in a traditional church today.

It would not surprise you then, that when you use the mediums of communication of 100 years ago, or even 40 years ago, many people are unmoved. We are speaking a cultural language that people do not understand. We must seek more effective ways to engage their minds in worship.

Does that mean we should change to a contemporary style of worship just because of these things? Not necessarily, but I would ask are we connecting to God in worship and reaching the community? Are we being missional and intentional? And if it was a 'contemporary' service, we would likely be listening to rap and r&b!

Consider this, would we expect a missionary to go to a tribe in Africa and ask them to worship with an organ and piano singing Western hymns? Yet we find nothing wrong with asking the

people in our communities (who may never encounter music of the type we use in our churches) to come and worship God in forms that are very foreign to them. If we truly want to reach those that are not part of “church world,” then we need to seek ways to speak a language they understand. The message never changes nor is it watered down, but the delivery system of that message must stay relevant to reach people today.

So what is the solution? Well, I don't have answers, but I do have some thoughts about it. Singing new songs is not simply for the sake of novelty. New songs are beneficial because they keep us out of a rut, bring us a new sense of freshness and enthusiasm, force us to think about what we are singing, expand our worship vocabulary, and help us capture what God is saying to the body at the time. Newer, contemporary songs generally will connect to today's culture in a language they understand better than songs several decades or centuries old.

Many churches offer two types of services ‘Traditional’ and ‘Contemporary’. I don't think that this is the right approach. If we offer, for instance, a contemporary worship service for the younger people and a traditional worship service for the older people, we are not only feeding tribalism but we are saying that the Gospel can't successfully bring these two different groups together. It is a declaration of doubt in the reconciling power of God's Gospel.

I would propose that we consider exploring what is known as “unified” worship. Unified worship is a philosophy of multi-generational and multi-cultural congregation worshipping together so that we can appreciate, learn from, and impact one another in a setting where all the elements of worship, including music, are uniquely us. Let me give you an allegory that shows how this might be successful. See if you can see this in your mind's eye.

A band starts playing a contemporary song with musical accompaniment appropriate to the times, and a grandmother finds great worship expression in the song as she sees it connect with her teenage grandson. Realizing that he is finding an expression for his worship through that song, she sings the song out with all her heart. Later in the service, the congregation sings The Old Rugged Cross with simple accompaniment. This time, the grandmother sings with the tears flowing, thinking of the great sacrifice of Jesus on the cross and how that has meant so much to her over the years. Her grandson, sees how his Grandma is connecting in worship, and he, too, begins to sing with all his heart. Unified worship is about putting aside personal preferences and coming together in a unified expression of our worship.

Sung worship is important to God. The Bible is littered with over 100 references to music in the place of worship. God obviously believed it had a place at the heart of the church amongst His

people. Maybe it's because music has this ability to speak to us and through us when we struggle to find the words ourselves.

As we gather in worship, whatever it may look like in the future, we have an incredible opportunity to sing of the truth of who God is. We get to come before him and proclaim Him in the midst of our own lives – fears, failures, hopes, dreams, hurts, pains – and ask Him to move. Ask Him to draw near. Ask him to heal. Ask him to change things in us, through us and around us. And music can stir us and speak where we can't. Ephesians 5:19 speaks of "...addressing one another in Psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart."

Worship, when it's true, is about something that happens in the heart.