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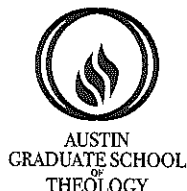
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The Changing Sound of (Worship) Music

Wendell Willis

Surely it is a surprise to no one that “worship” is one of the most widespread and impassioned discussions among Christians today. For the last two years I have been working on a book about Sunday worship, and while there have been changes in many areas related to Christian worship, none is so much discussed—and so controversial—as church music. Perhaps the major reason is that music is so conspicuous; you can’t ignore it. This may be one reason that the *a cappella* music in Churches of Christ is so often regarded as a defining belief, although many other groups also use *a cappella* music. Also, singing is the major part of public worship where all those present participate (not everyone can/will lead prayers, make announcements, preach).

In this essay I will reflect on the changes in music which is sung, the way it is sung, and other shifts in church singing. My comments largely draw upon personal observation and reflection on recent trends. While there are occasional references in this article, it is more essay than research study.

Describing the Changes

There are a number of factors which have led to shifts in worship music in Churches of Christ.¹ One force for change is the shift from the

¹It has been suggested that the recent change is just the current manifestation

“social world” of the old hymns to that of modern times. Geographically and culturally, we moved from the farm—and then the memory of the farm—to the city. So “beyond this land of sowing, planting and reaping” has less meaning and power for us than for our ancestors. We are more interested in “investment strategies” than “cotton futures.”

Another force is that sociologically Churches of Christ have crossed the tracks into the “middle class” and have become somewhat embarrassed by our old hymnody. Just as you don’t see men wearing plaid work shirts with ties to church today, many members today regard older songs as lacking sophistication.

Yet another force is an interest in a greater spirituality, especially in an individual sense. Historically, Churches of Christ have not placed strong emphasis upon one’s personal spiritual walk (in contrast with, e.g., our Baptist friends). This has been a serious omission, and for many members has even become a “felt need.” Just as some members have come to emphasize a personal prayer life and devotional readings, so also more personal music and worship has become appealing.

Finally, I suggest that a major force has been a concern for our youth. I am certain that all Christian parents have worried whether their children would remain believers. That worry has increased to almost neurotic proportions among many contemporary Americans, who rightly recognize the great strength of the secular culture and the widespread power of dangerous attractions for the young. That worry is exacerbated for many by a sense of guilt for neglecting our children. We have often been willing to ask our

of inevitable cultural swings (the pendulum effect). Of course, if it is inevitable, there is no reason to reflect on it or discuss it since it will just happen. Another common explanation is that attitudes toward church music are shaped by personal emotional involvement (nostalgia for older members). No doubt sentimentalism is a strong influence, but it is not decisive. I enjoy many old songs which I still deem inappropriate for worship.

children, "What would interest you enough to come to church?" Then we try to provide that "interest."

Sources for Change

In the early 1980s a tremendous effort was put forth for the revision of the most popular hymnal in Churches of Christ, *Great Songs of the Church*.² This hymnal was revised when many churches were shifting away from the "gospel" music of the previous generation from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America and reclaiming the greater European hymn heritage. The new hymnal never achieved the popularity of its predecessor and is a classic example of unfortunate timing. But just as that revised song book was appearing, the worship landscape was shifting in another direction.

The trends in church music in the last twenty years have been to the "praise songs," most of which are musically simple and often contain words which are taken from Scripture or paraphrased. Most of them have found their way from youth groups familiar with Christian recording artists into Sunday worship. This new source of music itself represents a change, I think, in how religious music is produced. When I think of my high school/college days, religious music was not a significant interest to young people. I listened mostly to folk, a few "crooners," and some rock, none of which was overtly religious. But in the last twenty-five years, the Christian music industry has taken off, and church young people are as likely to go to a "Christian concert" as to a "rock concert."

When this new form first appeared, given the content of much popular music (and the lives of the musicians!) in the 1970s, many parents, I am confident, breathed a sigh of relief and were delighted that their children were interested in Christian music. (I do wonder how much was an interest

²The history of "Great Songs" is itself inspirational. See Forrest McCann, "A History of Great Songs of the Church," *Restoration Quarterly* 38 (1996): 219–228.

in music and how much was an interest in being with other young people with whom you felt more comfortable.)

Within Churches of Christ a singing group called “Acappella” first hit it big in the 1980s. They were featured at many gatherings, and especially youth rallies. I suspect that there were two reasons for their popularity and acceptance by adult leaders in Churches of Christ. First, the group was made up of Christian young people coming from Churches of Christ. Second, they were—a *cappella*! So this group became very popular around many Churches of Christ.

While I am not saying that they were a “fifth column” movement, I do think that “Acappella” had two effects on church music (initially with youth groups). First, by their style of using their voices to imitate instrumental sounds, they softened the boundary between vocal and instrumental music—in the ears of many. Second, young people who first got interested in Christian youth music with “Acappella” went on to other groups who gave Christian concerts. This musical interest produced interdenominational youth rallies under the name of a “concert.”

Once our young people—and their youth ministers—got very invested in going to Christian concerts, they were exposed to the people who wrote and performed much of that music. Many of these people come from the Pentecostal tradition. One reason for this is that music has a very dominant role in the Pentecostal churches. The impact of Pentecostal music, both in the content of the songs and in the use of instruments, has gone into a large number of non-Pentecostal churches (Baptist, Catholic, Anglican). Again, I don’t regard this as a fifth-column move by Pentecostals. They simply had success in popular Christian music and were imitated in what they were doing even while they were looked down on by the “mainline churches.”³

³Robert Webber, *Worship Old and New* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994),

There were also some residual effects on church music coming from the Pentecostal singers. One will notice that many songs only had one verse originally. Why? Because having a “new song” is a charismatic gift, and is frequent (even expected) in Pentecostal worship.⁴ The song is considered almost like a prayer.

This “gift” theological outlook also explains why the new music is so very individualistic. The song was believed to be given by the Spirit to an individual to be sung by him or her in the worship. It was not understood as being for congregational singing; that is a later appropriation of the song.

Of course, Pentecostal churches also have a strong tradition of instrumental music as well as creating original songs. The ability to play an instrument is also considered a gift; not just an organ or a piano, but a variety of instruments. When we lived in Springfield, the Assembly of God had close to a full orchestra. So whereas in our churches persons capable of playing instruments do not consider that a religious gift, in the Pentecostal churches they do. So it is absolutely predictable and consistent that Pentecostal worship music and concerts employ instruments.

A critical question is whether we can appropriate the music because we like it, without also taking on the underlying Pentecostal theology. (I recognize that some in Churches of Christ are even interested in the theology as well, but I think a real minority.) Obviously we can appropriate it at some level without absorbing the theology, but I suspect very few in our churches who like to sing “There’s a Sweet, Sweet Spirit in this Place” know it is the national anthem for the Pentecostals.

127–132, describes the impact of charismatic worship on mainline churches, its relationship to the later praise movement, and the theologies undergirding both.

⁴Jack Boyd, *Leading the Lord’s Worship* (Nashville: Praise Press, 2002), 113f. Boyd offers some critique of praise teams and gives suggestions for their best use. He is not criticizing their historical roots.

Rationales for Change

I have suggested that a major source of change has been the rise and growth of a commercial Christian music movement that includes songs from the Pentecostal tradition.⁵ But I have never heard any give that as a rationale for changing music in Churches of Christ. One reason for the changes in “worship style” which is often expressed is evangelism. Many have thought that a better worship service, both song selection and singing, would be more attractive to “seekers”⁶ who might not be drawn to sermons, but whose enjoyment of popular music would better “connect” with newer religious music.⁷

Whether and to what degree this has worked as intended is at least debatable; but apart from pragmatic evaluation of results, let me offer some critique of the stated rationale.

- A. First, it mistakes evangelism for enticement. If someone comes to worship because he is drawn by the music, that does not equate with being drawn to the gospel message—unless just getting him to come is understood to be evangelism. Attendance is not conversion.
- B. Second, to draw people by the music program and then try to direct them to being baptized looks like a “bait and switch” (as some churches have seeker services for outsiders; worship services for insiders). This is always

⁵Bryan Belknap, “What Makes Music Christian?” *Group* (October 2000): 79–84 reflects very thoughtfully on the commercial Christian music industry. In what seems a fair treatment; I find very interesting his comment, “I believe the word ‘Christian’ is often simply a marketing term used to describe products and services—it is not necessarily indicative of a life style modeled after Jesus Christ.”

⁶The “seeker service” represents a new form of service. There are differences among those who employ them. For some a seeker service is not worship, but for others it is the way worship should be formatted. For an analysis of this new form of service, see Lester Ruth, “Lex Agendi, Lex Oreandi: Toward an Understanding of Seeker Services as a New Kind of Liturgy,” *Worship* 70 (1996): 386–403.

⁷Marva Dawn, “Worship Is Not a Matter of Taste” in *A Royal Waste of Time* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 186–193, critiques the idea of worship as a “point of entry” for outsiders. She also makes some important criticisms about the argument for having two distinct worship services for different groups.

a potential problem with “needs”-based evangelism, but I admit that it depends upon how we describe what people are invited to attend.

- C. Third, to lure people with music is much like an addiction—you have to keep raising the ante. Audiences quickly bore of all entertainment, so it has to be changing. This is easier if the audience remain spectators (and auditors), which will happen if the music continually changes so that members cannot learn the songs comfortably.
- D. Finally, the Restoration Movement went through this same experience over a century ago. I recently discovered that the stated rationale of those who favored having the organ in Restoration churches was part of a larger appeal to improve the quality of worship—both to attract outsiders and to keep our children in church!⁸

Praise Teams and Choruses

A friend who is a very accomplished vocal musician and leads singing widely once observed that praise teams (or worship teams) in Churches of Christ are not the genuine article. It is probably true that the “praise teams” found in Churches of Christ today are only pale shadows of what the real item looks like in a church where the worship is built around the praise service and the song service is not just an “added” segment. But it is probably less useful to critique what others are doing than to focus on what we do.

Tom Olbricht once commented that in his youth in south central Missouri quartets and other groups were often featured at church gatherings. I have observed the same for years, although most often at the old “monthly singings” (which perhaps were more entertainment than worship, at least to the participants). But the more recent trend has been to use a small number of individuals, usually with microphones, as the foundation for the entire song service. Since generally the worshipers are to join in the singing as well, these are usually called “praise” or “worship” teams, not choruses. I suspect the model has followed the music into worship. We incorporated

⁸See Wendell Willis, “The Sociological Factors in the Music-in-Worship Controversy,” *Restoration Quarterly* 38 (1996): 193–203.

first the songs, then the method of leading because the songs were often written without parts.

My own reservation about praise teams and choruses is three-fold. First, there is the temptation for singing to become a performance. This temptation is both for those who do the singing and for others who listen. (I grant that it is not different for those who preach or who lead prayers—both are areas where temptation to seek applause are present and strong.)

Second, the temptation is for the other worshipers to become only auditors, rather than participants.⁹ If my poor singing detracts from the sound of the group, and if we are making efforts to improve our sound quality, there is a temptation to let others do the singing. I have always been aware that I cannot sing well, and that leads me to sing softly even when there are many other poor singers around me.

Third, very often the new “praise songs” are too simplistic in theology (and/or too self-focused in theology) to be able to rightly teach Christian faith or form Christian character. They are not un-Christian but sub-Christian.¹⁰

Conclusions

I have sought to sketch the growth of the current “praise chorus” form of music in Churches of Christ, and in doing so I have suggested that the route taken was from “youth songs” in youth devotionals to a rise of professional musical groups who performed such music (and became the source for much of it). Then I argued that the next step was when the youth

⁹Both of these last two points are insightfully developed by Marva Dawn in “Do they really want such banality” in *A Royal Waste of Time*, 231–233.

¹⁰See “Throwing the Baby Out with the Bath Water,” in Marva Dawn, *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 172–179. She also raises questions about whether there are criteria to evaluate worship music and offers some suggestions.

groups (especially youth ministers) began to participate in cross-confessional concerts, in which many of the influential musicians came from Pentecostal churches.

What I find especially intriguing, if my historical sketch has validity, is that recently churches have looked to their youngest members for guidance in what to sing. We should pause and consider Charles Wesley's insistence that what most people know about the Christian faith comes from what they sing. The content of our hymns is much more important than we may suspect. Would we want the young people to determine what would be the proper topics or content of sermons? Or as an analogy, do we think the young people should determine the curriculum at their schools? We send them to sports camps where they do not decide how to be trained, what skills are needed, how much practice is necessary—we assume that older, experienced teachers know better than the young how to do some things.¹¹ So at the risk of offense, I suggest that we not—in effect—put the youth in charge of worship planning or hymn selection. To state the obvious, they are immature and not knowledgeable.

A similar point could be made about allowing non-Christians to shape music (or worship) for Christians. They do not understand the truths of the faith, have no means by which to evaluate the theology of hymnody, and have no commitment to the need for music to sustain and nurture faithful

¹¹Obviously the analogy could be carried on in many fields: music, art, and others. The point is that in most areas adults recognize that young people do not have sufficient experience and learning to decide what is best for them. Perhaps we really think that Christianity is simple enough that there is not much they need to learn, master, and practice to develop as Christians.

Christian lives. Would we permit those who neither understand nor value a language to decide what we need to do to learn that language?¹²

¹²Again Marva Dawn has some profound (and provocative) comments on "Criteria by which to Plan" worship and especially music. This essay is also in *A Royal Waste of Time*, 296–312. Dawn is Lutheran and so is both familiar with and supportive of instrumental worship music in a way I am not—but this difference does not diminish the value of the questions she suggests need to be asked in planning worship.

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