

A Heart to Heart Talk about Music and Worship
Sermon by Paul R. Powell
St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church, New Orleans
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Church Musician Jim Serian tells of the time when "The Women's League" at his church wanted to announce a new project they had undertaken. On that particular Sunday morning during the announcement time, the President of the Women's League came up to announce their new project and after a brief description, she called for all of the ladies of the league (most of whom were of a certain age to put it politely) to "march up to the front of the sanctuary" so that the congregation could see the earnestness of their endeavor. Serian was the pianist for the church, and decided to give the ladies a marching tune to encourage them as they came down the aisle. He started playing the children's chorus *The Lord's Army* to keep in step with the march. He said: "In MY head, I was hearing the familiar words, "I may never march in the infantry, ride in the cavalry, shoot the artillery..." but unfortunately, everyone else was hearing the words of the original tune, "The old gray mare, she ain't what she used to be, ain't what she used to be, ain't what she used to be..." Well, words and tunes do have messages attached to them, and nowhere is that more evident than in the church's songs and music.

It is both easy and challenging for me to talk about church music, having devoted some 40 years to the ministry of music sometimes combined with other duties such as religious education and youth, and even one five-year stint more recently as an organist. It's easy from the standpoint of loving church music, particularly congregational singing, so much. But it is also challenging as I observe and live through the near universal adoption of a Pentecostal-style form of worship music which seems so "not worship" to me. I know and understand my own bias, yet I have also tried my best to understand the bias of those whose music seems so foreign to me. As both a theologian and a musician it is imperative that I at least make efforts to understand this monumental change and to make an attempt to come to grips with the phenomenon of praise and worship music, Christian rock, Christian country and western, Christian jazz, etc., etc., as compared to the more traditional hymnody of the church. Even the word "hymn" has come

into disfavor, the preference now being for “congregational song.” Even that change reflects something of what’s going on, because so much of what contemporary churches sing congregationally does not fit into the definition of the hymn which is by nature a structured, literary format that does not usually fit into a contemporary style of worship.

What is, I believe, being lost among all the styles of worship music is what it truly means to worship God. On that count, we have clear biblical evidence and directions as to how we are to worship. Jesus says as recorded in John 4:24, “God is spirit, and those who worship God must worship in spirit and truth.” Jesus was saying that the reality of worship and the sincerity of the worshiper are more important than location or liturgy. Dr. Don Hustad who was organist for Billy Graham for twenty-five years and taught church music at both the Moody Bible Institute and Southern Baptist Seminary, claims that this truth seems to be forgotten in our time when worship forms and styles are the central concern of so many people, almost to the point of obsession. Traditional churches refuse to use rock or praise and worship and contemporary churches refuse to use traditional hymns. How can we say that we worship God in spirit and truth when we refuse to use worship music and styles that are meaningful to other Christians of a different viewpoint? This is the point where I have the most difficulty. It is not so much that every song in every style is either acceptable or unacceptable for worship, but rather that whatever songs are chosen for congregational singing must be focused on the truthful and spiritual worship of God, not on the individual’s or the group’s personal preferences. It is very nearly impossible to judge what’s going on in a person’s heart during worship, but you can judge the outward actions that sometimes don’t appear to be worshipful at all. Our beloved Baptist hymn writer B.B. McKinney used to say that there are three kinds of hymns – some appeal to the head, some appeal to the heart, and some appeal to the feet! In his day, it was that “foot-stomping gospel quartet” type of hymn that he felt was just as inappropriate for worship as the most formal hymn that had intellectual but no spiritual impact. Is it any different in today’s contemporary styles that are driven more by the “beating of the drums” than the “beating of the heart” tuned to God? Is it any different in our classically-oriented, formal worship style if it is driven more by its

intellectually or musically respectable character than by the spiritual impact?

We have many more biblical instructions as to what worship and worship music should be as far back as Exodus 28:1 where we find reference to the “ministry to God” in public worship. There, God commands Moses to take his brother Aaron and his sons that they may minister unto God in the priest’s office. Wow, there’s the earliest and best definition of worship you will ever find: in worship we are to “minister to God.” What Jesus told us in John 4:24 is merely an expanded version of the same thing: when we worship we must worship in spirit and truth because God is spirit and truth. When we minister to God, we are truly worshipping. God’s spirit and truth have no limitations, no other boundaries by which to judge whether worship is truly worship or not. It is the attitude of one’s heart that makes worship what it ought to be. So, when we say that rock or praise and worship or any other contemporary style cannot be used for worship, we are denying that the spirit of God can work within any context. It is the same when those who use contemporary musical styles to the exclusion of anything traditional; for that, too, is denying the work of God’s spirit within the heart of the worshiper. It is imperative, then, that if we are to worship God in spirit and truth, both ministers and musicians must choose carefully or else we wind up with little more than Christian-oriented entertainment, regardless of the style.

There is no doubt that music has the power to communicate to us. Sometimes it is a message of love, sometimes it is a message of depression, sometimes it is a message of protest, or anger, or rage, or defiance. But music also has the power to inspire and to change. And all three of these can happen with or without texts. If we look closely at the biblical texts that define worship and instruct us how to worship and put these biblical principles into the context of the power of music to communicate, to inspire and to change us, then we find no place for entertainment in worship.

Last Sunday as we observed communion, our liturgy was taken from the Orthodox tradition. In the very first recorded version of a communion prayer, Hippolytus (who died in 236) prays “Remembering therefore his

death and resurrection, we offer to you the bread and the cup, giving you thanks because you have held us worthy to stand before you and minister to you. The Eastern or Orthodox ceremony begins with the salutation or *Sursum Corda*, the “Lift up your hearts” recitation; but it ends with the “Holy, Holy, Holy” song of the angels flying around the throne of God as referred to in Isaiah 6:3. This liturgy and these images reveal a vivid and moving picture of the transcendent yet gracious God we worship, and it indeed seems to give us a glimpse of heaven itself:

It is proper and right to sing to You, bless You, praise You, thank You and worship You in all places of Your dominion; for You are God ineffable, beyond comprehension, invisible, beyond understanding, existing forever and always the same; You and Your only begotten Son and Your Holy Spirit. You brought us into being out of nothing, and when we fell, You raised us up again. You did not cease doing everything until You led us to heaven and granted us Your kingdom to come. For all these things we thank You and Your only begotten Son and Your Holy Spirit: for all things that we know and do not know, for blessings seen and unseen that have been bestowed upon us. We also thank You for this ministry which You are pleased to accept from our hands even though You are surrounded by thousands of archangels and tens of thousands of angels, by the cherubim and seraphim, six-winged, many-eyed, soaring with their wings, singing the victory hymn, proclaiming, crying out, and saying: Holy, holy, holy ... heaven and earth are filled with your glory ... Hosanna in the highest ...

Here we see that worship is much more than an attitude; it is our active service, our joyful and demanding work for God, which is the very definition of *liturgy*. And one more thing, it is neither individual nor passive, it is the whole of the congregation, the whole of creation, singing aloud and together in one great voice of praise to the God whom we know in spirit and in truth. And that calls for the best that we have, the best that we can do, for anything less is simply sitting passively and being entertained by ministers and musicians, no matter what the style of worship or music. Entertainment nearly always draws a crowd – true worship seldom does.

True worship is not determined by “traditional” or “contemporary” music or styles, but by our relationship with God and with other persons. No one worships God who does not have a love relationship with God; and no one worships God acceptably who is not in loving relationship with others, most especially those neighbors who are worshiping alongside us. Or, to put it slightly differently, God begets true worshipers through the Spirit, but it is Jesus who makes the Spirit available to those who come to him because of his saving work (John 7:37-39).

I hope that all these Scriptures and statements about worship indicate to you that they are just as true of music in worship because the two cannot be separated. The traditional versus contemporary conflict that has been raging for some years is completely misdirected so far as I can see.

“Formalism” can stem from a stubborn insistence on *change* in worship forms or from a stubborn *refusal to change*. Worship and music forms of every variety ought to be based on all God’s truth. At the same time, worship should not be held captive to objectives such as evangelism, Bible teaching, pastoral ministry, fellowship, politics, or such attitudes as “new is always better” or “we’ve never done it that way.” All of these objectives have a place in the life of the church and its songs, but not in worship that is directed toward God, rising from a true relationship with God and with all God’s people. Part of the problem is that so many of the songs some of us grew up with were completely appropriate for Sunday schools, revivals, prayer meetings, youth groups, and camps but not so much for worship. Yet, when and where do we sing these beloved and meaningful songs since we rarely ever do any singing other than in worship? And is it possible that praise choruses, rock songs, and the like are appropriate for these same kinds of evangelistic, educational and fellowship objectives but not for worship?

The Methodist church I served in Pennsylvania hired a full-time youth director shortly before I left there. He was a good guy in many ways but made it clear that only rock music was acceptable in reaching the youth. In the first conversation we had, he remarked that the pastor told him I didn’t believe in contemporary music. That wasn’t exactly what I said, and I responded that all worship is traditional and all worship is contemporary. If we sing, pray, read the Scriptures and preach, then we are being

traditional. And if we use modern language in any of those, then we are being contemporary. I don't think he was convinced. This may be the greatest fear that I have about both traditional and contemporary forms of worship and music. As Hustad points out, "We should say YES whenever the Holy Spirit invites us to SEE God, first in the traditional elements that are already holy to us, but also in all the actions, words, music, or things that may be used in worship. Worship is more a matter of intent than of accident. We must remember that those sitting nearby in worship are also God's children, even though the elements that help them to see God may be less holy or even objectionable to us. We should share what we can of their expression and experience; this is one way to love our neighbors as ourselves. As Jesus reminded the Samaritan woman, true worshipers will worship God in truth wherever they are. And truth is perceived both intellectually and spiritually through a balance of words, music and symbols both with and without words.

I cannot begin to articulate in just one sermon how I truly feel about worship and worship music. What I can say without reservation and without apology is that we can only worship God in spirit and truth, just as the Bible tells us. And only when our hearts and spirits are centered on God alongside others of God's children can our worship indeed be in spirit and truth. However our worship might be re-tuned in the future, we can only worship when our minds, hearts, souls, our whole beings see God and see our fellow worshipers. Such wisdom can come only from God.

May God grant us the serenity to accept the things which must not be changed, the courage to change the things which must be, and the wisdom to know the difference.

AMEN.