EXPLORING OUR ROOTS: THE CONTEMPORARY WORSHIP MOVEMENT



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AN INTRODUCTION

It is the middle of a stormy night on March 9th, 1748. A young captain on a slave ship is awakened by cries of "The ship is sinking, the ship is sinking!" Recalling words from a book he is reading called *The Imitation Of Christ* by Thomas a Kempis, the young man begins a process of conversion that takes years to culminate. Finally, moved by the merciful act of God in extending grace to the worst of sinners – he, a slave ship officer – John Newton devotes his life fully to the service of Christ. A new song is born in his heart, and then into the world. The opening words become a fresh anthem for his day:

"Amazing Grace! How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found;
Was blind, but now I see."[1]

The simple song takes on a surge of life in congregations through England, and feeds both an evangelical revival and the abolition of the slave trade throughout the nation.[2]

WHY IS SINGING SO IMPORTANT?

In a personal interview with Brian Doerksen, respected contemporary worship leader and author of the song, *Come Now Is The Time To Worship,* we dialogued over the question of why singing is so vital to the worshiping life of a congregation. His reflection introduces us to the essential vitality of contemporary worship expression and our ongoing generational urge to sing songs that we know, love and own together. Here are Brian's thoughts:

"Why do we sing songs in the first place? We do it because it is something that we can do together. There are probably other things that we could do to express our love and our worship to God that would be, in one sense, just as valid. But they're not easy for us to do together. Yet we can get ten people, or a hundred people, or a thousand, or a hundred thousand - whatever number we choose - and we can all get together and sing a song. That song reflects what is going on in our hearts and our minds, together. There is truth that we're affirming, but there's also affection that we're expressing. That's why I think that singing as an expression of worship has stood the test of time."[3]

IS THERE A PLACE FOR A NEW SONG?

The fact that music and worship expression are a welcome part of Christian worship is an assumption we may all share. That creative worship must, and should, arise from human beings in response to the character of God is a celebrated idea across church worship forms.

The scripture itself resounds with the music of our allegiance to one King, from Genesis to Revelation, and whether the musical expression of worship is implied or overt, we embrace its vitality in the life of the people of God.

"But I have trusted in Your faithful love; my heart will rejoice in Your deliverance. I will sing to the Lord because He has treated me generously" (Psalm 13:5-6).

"Sing to the Lord with thanksgiving; play the lyre to our God…." (Psalm 147:7).

To a lesser degree, today's Church embraces the fact that other, more demonstrative expressions of musical and music-related worship may have their place as well across the span of history. We ascent, at least mentally, to the reality that dancing and more celebrative music has some type of place historically among the community of the faithful.[4]

"Let them praise His name with dancing and make music to Him with tambourine and lyre" (Psalm 149:3).

Yet, there remains one area of musical worship expression that has tradition-



ally evoked passionate emotions, and even the most virulent of language, within the historic fellowship of Christ. What has inspired such passionate postures of the heart? That arena we might designate as the "the new song." A series of verses from the Old and New Testament highlight the presence of this particular worship phenomenon.

"Sing a new song to Him; play skillfully on the strings, with a joyful shout" (Psalm 33:3).

"He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God. Many will see and fear, and put their trust in the Lord" (Psalm 40:3).

"Sing a new song to the Lord; sing to the Lord, all the earth" (Psalm 96:1).

"Sing a new song to the Lord, for He has performed wonders; His right hand and holy arm have won Him victory (Psalm 98:1).

"Hallelujah! Sing to the Lord a new song, His praise in the assembly of the godly" (Psalm 149:1).

"Sing a new song to the Lord; His praise from the ends of the earth, you who go down to the sea with all that fills it, you islands with your inhabitants" (Isaiah 42:10).

"And they sang a new song: You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals; because You were slaughtered, and You redeemed us for God by Your blood from every tribe and language and people and nation'" (Revelation 5:9).

"I heard a sound from heaven like the sound of cascading waters and like the rumbling of loud thunder. The sound I heard was also like harpists playing on their harps. They sang a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and the elders" (Revelation 14:2-3a).

In each of these Old and New Testament passages the adjective "new" modifies the noun "song." These words together speak of a joyful expression that is musical, vibrantly fresh and born in the moment. "New," in this context, can even intimate the themes of "renewing," and "rebuilding."[5]

In other words, the people of God through the ages are given a gift. That gift is the capacity to respond to the present work of God with a heart song that is fresh, immediate, current, renewing and rebuilding – a song that is pleasing to the One we worship, and by extension is a strength to our souls. That heart-response song, that new song, will take on the both the musical and lyrical languages that we speak in any given moment of acclamation. A new song may be simple and accessible in its music and lyric. A new song may be complex and refined in its music and lyric. A new song may be new, or it may be an old song to which we are newly awakened. Simple or complex, reflective or jubilant, a new song as defined here will always be an honest song – a song that simply flows from a heart responding to God.

WHY MUST WE SING NEW SONGS?

The songs that we love to sing are also songs that we must sing. We sing for the pleasure of God, in words and melodies current to our time, place and vocabulary. We must also sing for our own God-ward orientation in a disorienting world. New songs can orient us to God, as old songs can. Yet songs born in our day and spiritual climate are uniquely branded, among all the riches of historical music that we draw from, as *our* songs of contemporary worship.

Who is giving us the new, contemporary songs with which we worship? Are we so lost in the zeitgeist of the postmodern age that we fail to see that it is the culture handing us our contemporary worship ingredients? Psalm 40:3 above explains clearly the source of fresh, new songs – *God Himself has put the new song in our mouths.* Why? The Lord has given His Church fresh songs over time to enable us to convey the renewed music that is bursting from our hearts. He gives new songs to us for different purposes. One song is a theological wonder, richly and poetically voicing the worship of many generations past and present. Another song is a simple miracle born in a time and in a place, fulfilling the need of a moment (lasting years or centuries), and giving simple voice to a worshipful phrase that we love to sing to God over and over again. God's people will *always* find a fresh song with which to worship Him, because God will give us the new song we need for the moment.

WHAT IS CONTEMPORARY WORSHIP MUSIC'S HISTORICAL PRECEDENT?

By necessity, there always must be, and will be, an embodiment of Christian truth that is, in every sense, *popular*, and that is embraced by the common person aided by common language, style and even cultural imprint. The great hymns we sing traditionally today were, at one point, the contemporary music of a season of life in a particular culture.

Contemporary worship music of other ages has been injected into the life of the Communion time and time again throughout our passage on earth. A contemporary worship has always imposed itself on the life of the Church – no matter how hard the organized Church sought to stem the tide of popular worship expression. St. Francis, Martin Luther, the Wesley brothers, Isaac Watts and many others have ruffled the feathers of Church traditionalists in their quest to invoke the common voice of the culture in their crafting of fresh, new worship music.

WHAT FORCES SHAPE CONTEMPORARY MUSIC?

In considering our present age, and the contemporary worship music that is beginning to dominate many streams of the international Church, we turn to the socio-cultural factors powerfully influencing the last 50 years of contemporary worship music. From the counter-cultural music of the hippies to today, our worship music has its roots in some cultural movements that have shaped the worship expressions of our age.

Bishop N.T. Wright, renowned theologian and author of *Jesus And The Victory Of God,* addressed some of the shaping cultural factors precipitating much of today's contemporary worship culture in a lecture at Calvin College entitled "Freedom and Framework, Spirit and Truth: Recovering Biblical Worship." In his lecture he noted three major cultural movements that have skewed our understanding of what the Reformation was essentially about, and have shaped our modern worship paradigm. Firstly, Wright purports that the Enlightenment offered us the split

of religion and real life. Secondly, he notes that the Romantic movement elevated feeling above form, the heart above the head and body. Thirdly, Wright contends that the Existentialist, self-actualization movements of the twentieth century have taken us back to Gnosticism. He suggests that large portions of contemporary culture are built on a pursuit of self-discovery that has been swallowed hook, line and sinker by both conservative and liberal churches.[6]

In other words, we as a contemporary Western people have in many ways privatized faith, elevated feelings and pursued self-actualization – no moreso in the world than in the Church. Add to this strange cultural brew the ongoing fragmentation, isolation and hopelessness of the postmodern individual, and you have a culture that is in many ways less concerned with what is true and substantive, and more concerned with what is real and heartfelt. Some have suggested that this generation has virtually lost its capacity to think long and hard thoughts, and has become fixated on anything that will generate short bursts of euphoria and emotional ecstasy.[7]

Now, on some level, detractors of modern worship might be fairly sure that I am about to take their side in decrying contemporary worship expression on the basis of what Wright has laid out, and indeed I am going to affirm the import of many of the challenges being brought to the modern worship community. However, I believe that the contemporary streams of the Church are not the only expressions of the Body of Christ in dire need of examining the social womb in which they were born.

In other words, given the cultural shifts of the past few hundred years, emotion-filled songs of love may be an appropriate response to God as He course-corrects Church culture, just as complex hymns of praise may have been a fitting response to God in an age renewing its faith in reason. I am allowing Wright to lead us somewhere we may not steadily go, to face a topic we may not steadily face – the integration of Christ and His worship with the reality that He has moored His worship, at least on this planet, in human civilization.

A WORSHIP COUNTERPOINT

I believe that the lyrical simplicity, emotion, sound and values of contemporary worship are serving a purpose of God in the Church. It is possible that the cultural reaction that is postmodernism to modernism is less to be reviled, and more to be understood as a poignant (if not necessary) contra-movement to the modern age. The musical responses of contemporary Christian churches and worshipers to what they perceive to be a more formal, cerebral and somewhat culturally disassociated approach to worship in previous ages may be a necessary interjection on the Church's course. Contemporary worship music, in this light, can be seen as a necessary worship counterpoint, pushing us toward a more integrated approach to the way that we worship a living God active in postmodernity. Again, we come back to our questions surrounding the culture in which the Church finds itself.

If we can approach the topic of Christ and culture with a listening heart, often turning our thoughts to the powerful forms of media involved in music, we may find strong biblical foundations for the values that make simple contemporary worship the vital Kingdom-building force it is in the world[8] of today.



1 John Newton, *Amazing Grace*, Public Domain. This song was written and published in 1779.

2 Kenneth Osbeck, *101 Hymn Stories* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1982), 28-31.

3 Brian Doerksen, Personal Interview, Winter 2000.

4 For an excellent series of articles on this topic, see Derek Morphew, "The Restoration Of Celebration" *Inside Worship Magazine,* No. 51-54 (2003-2004). This full article is also located on the web at: http://www.insideworship.com/library/Articles/2144/1/The_Restoration_Of_Celebration.aspx.

5 James Strong, *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance Of The Bible* (Lake Wylie, South Carolina: Christian Heritage Publishing Company Incorporated), 37.

6 N.T. Wright, "Freedom And Framework, Spirit And Truth: Recovering Biblical Worship," *The January Series Of Calvin College* as transcribed by http://ntwrightpage.com (23 January 2003), http://wwww.calvin.edu/january/2003/wright.htm.

7 For a vibrant dialogue on this topic, read the interchange between authors Brian McLaren and Charles Colson at http://www.anewkindofchristian.com/archives/000160.html.

8 For some excellent thinking on the topic of Christ and culture, and the language we use related to "the world," see R.C. Sproul, *Lifeviews* (Grand Rapids, MI: Fleming H. Revell, 1986), 32-33.