What's Music Got To Do With It?

BY MARTY KAISER

A few weeks ago a young worship leader who was contemplating some of the mechanics of leading worship asked, "On issues like music, style, volume, congregational participation, lyrical content, where is the radical middle that will bless God, be a true expression of our hearts and culture, while inviting the people to join us in worship?"

Certainly a good question, and one that I've found myself wrestling with early on in leadership. What part does music play? What is our goal? How do we find a balance between the One we worship and those we are leading in worship? Over the years I've learned a few things that have allowed me some freedom in this area.

If broken down to its most basic form, our job description as worship leaders is two-fold. Our first priority is that God is worshiped. This begins with our own response before God as we worship Him with all that is within us. Second, we are to lead the people to do the same. In light of the above asked question, let's examine what part music, style, rhythm and volume play in accomplishing the first half of our job description: God being worshiped.

More Than Music

When we gather in a corporate setting, whether large or small, we set out to exalt our God. We do this in many ways; prayer, the reading of His word, giving, etc. Music (volume, style, rhythm) just happens to be one of the vehicles we use to accomplish the goal of exalting God.

However, the "music" is not the worship. Music, in and of itself, is nothing if not offered from the right heart and attitude. Is God more blessed when our worship is done with music than worship through acts of kindness? Is He pleased more when worship is done with music than through spoken words of praise? The answer is no. It is the act of worship, giving our all to the One who loves us, that is important.

This needs to be accomplished through every part of our lives. Music is just one medium that we happen to use. Too often I've found myself looking for the style, song or rhythm that will capture God's heart. However, the truth is what captures God's heart is my heart. Whatever style we choose is far less pleasing to Him than our sincere expression of love through the song. I stress again, music is not worship. We can use music to worship, but the melody, instrumentation and sound are nothing without one's heart behind them.

More Than Style

Musical styles have changed drastically throughout history. If it was the style of a song that blessed God, we would have to ask this question: For every time there has been a change that affected the sound of worship music, was God no longer glorified? Was there a period of time that He had to adjust to a "new sound"? Did it take time before the new style was a fragrant aroma to Him?

Of course not! Musical styles, however packaged, are just that. A package. The true expression lies within how it is used. If the rhythm or style is what's pleasing, we have reduced our King to a "Top 40" God, who sits upon His throne waiting for His favorite songs to be sung, not caring who or how the songs are presented before Him. Just so long as He hears His favorite tunes.

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On the contrary, God sits upon His throne waiting for a heart to approach Him in worship with sincerity and love. If this is done wrapped in the package of music, wonderful. If through prayer, fantastic. Giving, great. However the means, the importance of worship lies in our personal response and heart attitude before Him. Is music important in our worship? Absolutely! We are even told to use musical instruments in our worship. However, the emphasis is not on the sound of music, it is on what the music represents and expresses.

So what does this mean to you and me as leaders of worship? Hopefully it allows a bit of freedom. In reply to the initial question, if all else is stripped away, the musical elements of a song really don't matter as it applies to the first part of our job description, God being worshiped. Use whatever style, volume or rhythm you like. Assuming that lyrics are biblically sound and your heart is being offered to God as a sincere expression, He will be well pleased.

This brings us to the second half of our job description as worship leaders, leading the people. As already stated, if God is not truly worshiped, then all is for loss. But it is here, in the leading of people, that musical style comes into play.

As worship leaders, we are being used to lead. That means the people need to be able to follow where we are leading. If we do something that the people cannot follow or relate to, we've failed in the second half of our job description. Do we need to take into account culture, musical style, volume and rhythm when leading others? Most definitely; they assist us in leading the people.

Who Are You Leading?

Back to my friend's question. On issues like music, style, volume, congregational participation and lyrical content,



where is the radical middle that will bless God, be a true expression of our hearts and culture, while inviting people to join us in worship? We've discussed that God being blessed is not dependent on the type of song used, so I would ask this simple question. Who are we leading? Young, old, new believers, seasoned believers, conservatives, etc.?

Identifying "who" we are leading will, in part, determine the style used. Remember, God is exulted with all types of music. Pounding drums, a cappella, jazz and country are all acceptable as long as our hearts are for Him.

Determining Style

So what style can the people grasp hold of and relate to? What would best serve and lead the congregation or small group? The answer to these questions will change over time. In some churches, it may change from one service to another.

We recently had one of our youth bands lead worship for a Sunday night service. They are a decent band and well equipped to lead worship for an adult crowd. However, they saw this as a good time to introduce the "style" of worship that works well with their age group.

As you might guess, from a worship standpoint it did not go over too well. Musically the band was fine. However, their song selection, style, volume and so on was not what the majority of the people related to. Thus, the people had a hard time following. Was the music bad, off base, lacking in content? Definitely not! The style just didn't fit the people they were trying to lead. The end result, the second half of their job description (leading the people) was not accomplished.

So, use a style that will bring the people before God, whatever that may be. This may take us down many roads. The good news is this. We're free to travel those roads. Knowing that if our heart's response is genuine before God, the music is theologically sound and the people can participate and follow where we're leading them, God will be pleased, whatever the sound may be.



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