

## Citylife Church: Reflections on Worship and Music

Human beings are inveterate worshipers. With every word and deed we declare something to be worthy<sup>1</sup> of being the purpose or goal of our actions. The question with which we must all grapple if our lives are to have any sense of purpose is: who or what is the object of my worship? And a second follows: of what does this worship consist?

As Christians, we believe that the sovereign and loving God, our Maker and Redeemer, is the only One worthy of our lives' worship. Corporate worship ought to be the overflow of the worship of our moment-to-moment lives and as such should be eminently *genuine*: words not supported by the testimony of daily life are a hollow declaration of the allegiance of the heart. But that alone is an incomplete picture of Christian worship because, if we are honest, the genuine worship of our sinful hearts is not necessarily worship of the God revealed in Scripture; authenticity alone is insufficient.<sup>2</sup>

Another critical element of worship, then, must be *variously and consciously confessing the worthiness of this true God*, whose objective worthiness is not contingent on the state or loyalties of our heart. While we do strive for authenticity in worship, it must not come through compromising our confession to conform to the state of our heart but rather through the sanctification of our heart by the Holy Spirit to be conformed to the likeness of Christ: we must not presume that God is the variable in the equation. The disparity between our confession of God and the actual state of our hearts is a sad fact of the human condition, but it is not something that ought to be swept under the carpet in worship, as if God delighted to see His church assembled each wearing identical smiling-face masks. It is entirely too easy and comfortable to use religion to hide from God. On the contrary, it is fitting that in worship we openly admit our weakness and brokenness, because to do so while acknowledging God's steadfast love is in essence to praise the radical grace of the God whose mercy comes to us in our weakness for no merit of our own but purely by the good pleasure of His own loving nature.

Such a realization, refreshed in our spirit by consciously confessing it, ought to deeply *involve* us in the act of worship, stirring in our hearts a profound and deeply personal love and awe of God for who He is and what He has done: and though this love and awe experienced during worship will excite in us a desire to serve God, the purpose of a worship service has more to do with our marveling at the fact that *God* should serve *us* utterly beyond our ability to reciprocate.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The word "worship" is related "worth" and was originally a noun indicating a state of being worthy [Douglas Harper, Online Etymology Dictionary, <http://www.etymonline.com> (accessed August 26, 2010)].

<sup>2</sup> Rev. Jeremy Mullen, "Surprised by Worship" (sermon, Citylife Church, Boston, MA, August 2, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> Rev. Dr. Stephen Um (Citylife Church, Boston, MA, August 2, 2010). Dr. Um has said that "worship is not fundamentally about our serving God but about being served by God."

While this marveling is indeed deeply personal, the involvement in worship which it compels transcends the individual: Christ has served His bride, the church, and it is as a body that we respond in joy and adoration. Corporate worship must therefore also be *unifying*: where an awareness of the Body is sacrificed to total individualism, an important aspect of the gospel is overlooked. The unity which Scripture repeatedly exhorts from the church<sup>4</sup> is, after all, far more than a lack of conflict (as there is no surer guarantor of conflict-avoidance than isolation, the ultimate in multiplicity). Rather, unity is many becoming as one, pointing toward the perfect unity that exists within the Trinity as well as the relationship Christ has secured with His bride.

But the fact that Christ has betrothed us to Himself indicates that our union is not only with one another but with Him. True worship, then, must also entail participation in the desires of the heart of God, which includes the salvation of the lost: it is necessarily *missional*.<sup>5</sup>

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Scripture repeatedly describes music as a vehicle for the worship of God. It follows, then, that worship music should be marked by the attributes of worship itself: it should be God-centered, gospel-rich, genuine, involving, unifying, and missional. But what does that look like in practice? At the most immediate level, it means that the musicians leading worship must desire not their own glory but the glory of God and the edification of the church. Music should be played—as words should be sung—as an expression of God’s greatness and the love which He has shown in the worshiper’s own life: it should, in essence, be a testimony, and as such it must be sincere. This means that the music chosen must be a fitting vehicle for the communication of such a testimony. It is self-evident that music communicates, so we believe it is important to be sensitive to *what* it communicates, particularly in the setting of corporate worship. We recognize that some people legitimately associate certain styles or elements of music with godless worldviews. However, we also recognize the tendency of those associations to become eroded in the collective cultural consciousness through widespread acceptance of the musical-stylistic elements in question independently of and beyond the philosophies that originally accompanied (and in some circles still do accompany) them, to the point that we may rightly question to what degree the music necessarily communicates the philosophy that spawned it. If such music can be participated in without evoking its once-concomitant philosophy, then we must also consider the question of the accessibility of the given musical style to current and prospective worshipers, because it is important that congregants be able to worship in a style that is relevant and meaningful to them, provided this meaning can be channeled to reflect the glory of God. Keeping such issues in mind, Citylife, being a young and urban congregation, variously incorporates classical music, jazz, and indie-rock into its worship.

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<sup>4</sup> e.g. John 17:22-23, I Corinthians 12:12-27, Ephesians 4:3, etc.

<sup>5</sup> cf. Isaiah 6:1-8

It would be naïve to ignore the fact that objections have been raised in the church to the use of such styles as jazz and the various types of rock within the context of worship on the basis that some associate them with godless philosophies. But if what is now generally considered “classical”<sup>6</sup> music is categorically exempt from such criticism, it is only because the comparative antiquity of its popular mainstream has largely buried the memory of its influences, many of which were distinctly anti-Christian.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the vast majority of “classical” composers most popular today were in no sense Christian, and the music of many bears the stamp of the false philosophies which drove them. What then? Must classical music be rejected as well? Would no music be acceptable but that whose elements, from the scale up, are necessarily derived from the Christian faith, or at least are the product of Christian minds? Becoming thus divorced from all influences of tainted human culture would surely be impossible. But to leave the matter there is to overlook two crucial aspects of the gospel. Firstly, it is not only culture that is tainted, as if (to adapt an idea from Solzhenitsyn)<sup>8</sup> we could merely separate ourselves from the world and its culture and exist as a pure, unspotted Christian enclave: rather, sin and its effects corrupt every human heart, even those sealed for salvation.<sup>9</sup> A Christian enclave—or a culture hypothetically developed from the ground up by Christians alone—would still bear the marks of sin and error. Secondly, if Christians were to exist in isolation from the world (which would surely be the prerequisite for developing a culture that is free of subtle secular influences), we would be failing to live as Christ calls us: He sends us out<sup>10</sup> to be salt and light to the world.<sup>11</sup> This does not mean that we embrace secular philosophies. But in order to understand how it is possible to repudiate

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<sup>6</sup> In one sense, “classical music” is generally used to refer to art music from Europe (or deriving from the European tradition) prior to the rise of jazz in the Americas, and to music continuing to evolve from that tradition into the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries (though the last century has seen considerable blurring of the lines between “classical” music and other genres.) In another and more proper sense, “Classical” refers to a style of composition that flourished in the latter 18<sup>th</sup> century into the early 19<sup>th</sup>. The Classical style is a sub-category of what today is generally called “classical music.” For the sake of clarity in what follows, I put “classical” in quotations when using the term in its broader and less precise sense, and capitalize Classical when referring to the style.

<sup>7</sup> It is certainly true that much “classical” music was a product of Christian fervor in the wake of the Reformation (though the Reformation cannot be credited for the fundamental musical language of these composers). But we must not forget that the ideals of Classical music proper—the age of Mozart and Haydn—were shaped largely by the Enlightenment; the principles of mature sonata form, the structural backbone of much of the “classical” canon, constitute a veritable analogue of the philosophy of thesis/antithesis/synthesis that figured so prominently in post-Kantian thought (Fichte et al.); and the Romantic movement that birthed the style of Brahms, Schubert, and Tchaikovsky offered a plethora of alternatives to the Biblical God. Such a description as this would paint in unpardonably broad strokes if the issue at hand were to discern the precise influences on specific aspects of the musical communication of any given composer or even movement; but as it is, the intent is simply to establish that many secular or even overtly anti-Christian streams of thought have historically joined the cultural current whose assumptions have necessarily informed the stylistic template of “classical” composers.

<sup>8</sup> Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago 1918-1956* (New York: Perennial Classics, 2002), 75.

<sup>9</sup> Romans 7:15-24 et al.

<sup>10</sup> Matthew 10:16

<sup>11</sup> Matthew 5:13-14

secular philosophies without necessarily rejecting everything influenced by them, we must understand two things. Firstly, not everything encompassed by a false worldview is necessarily false, as has been recognized by both Christian<sup>12</sup> and non-Christian<sup>13</sup> thinkers. We must therefore exercise finely calibrated discernment in light of the authority of Scripture. Secondly, not everything influenced by a false belief necessarily and exclusively communicates that belief. Music is a prime example of this: it is direct enough to be able to stir the emotions and appeal to the intellect but abstract enough that concrete conceptual communication is more difficult to pin down. This means that even where the philosophical implications and associations of a particular style of music have not been eroded in the popular understanding, the very medium of music lends itself to being redeemable; music written under a false worldview can very often be taken and made to find its place within the broader story of the gospel.<sup>14</sup> And so music itself becomes a picture of the gospel of redemption and a means of reflecting, in some small way, the God whose tapestry of salvation is woven with the threads of a fallen world.

Yet it is still to be expected that not all will be able to conscionably and joyfully participate in all sorts of music, and experience shows that it is difficult, especially in an urban setting like ours, to choose music with which all can relate and none hold negative associations. If I find myself unable to identify with a piece of music which a brother or sister offers with thanks to God, I may nonetheless join with him or her in spirit to praise the Lord, recognizing that worship transcends music because God transcends our worship.

That said, our staff makes every effort to ensure that the music used for worship is indeed felt to be worshipful, and in the interest of accommodating stylistic persuasions to facilitate worship, we differentiate styles of music between the different services. It is our earnest hope that the music we offer will be relevant, meaningful and—primarily—worshipful to all congregants. We try to select music that will not only be deeply moving but creative, pointing to the creative nature of God, and collectively vast in communicative scope, reflecting the breadth of the experience of the gospel-centered life rather than a few pre-packaged sentiments. But to

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<sup>12</sup> cf. C. S. Lewis, “Myth Became Fact,” “The Grand Miracle,” etc.

<sup>13</sup> cf. Clifford Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System.”

<sup>14</sup> For example, Tchaikovsky may have composed a particular piece from the perspective of morbid pessimism following from a life lived far from God, and such may be clearly discerned through the music; but re-contextualized, it may equally lend itself to expressing—in a valuably accessible way—the lostness of the fallen human heart. Moreover, the way in which his music expresses anguish through beauty arguably implies not a belief in ultimate absurdity (such as must accompany a consistently atheistic statement) but a consternation with the sufferings of this world that only makes sense against the backdrop of faith (however unconscious) in a supreme Good, thus making such a musical utterance amenable to expressing the cry of the Christian heart. This, however, does not indicate a formula by which any music may be deemed “redeemable”: it may be that some music is so explicit in its communication that culturally informed understandings prohibit its being understood in any way apart from the overt philosophical intents of the composer.

reflect the nature of the infinite God, He must be known; and to bear the testimony of the gospel-centered life, such a life must be experienced. And so we must humbly recognize that leading or contributing to the worship of Almighty God is a responsibility that no fallen and finite human being can adequately fulfill, and therefore we can only ask the Lord's gracious blessing, that He would keep our hearts and minds directed toward Himself and use the gifts He has given to the body of Christ for His glory alone, trusting that He is indeed faithful.