

Music in Church



Some weeks ago there was a Music Conference in one of the Burlington churches. The purpose of the Conference was to think about how we use music in our church services and consider whether there were ways to improve on our present practices. Dr AJ deVisser and Rev T Lodder each presented a paper to help our thinking progress. A week later ROOTS organized a youth symposium where (as it turns out) one of the papers was again on Music, this time from Dr J. vanVliet. I had reason to attend both these conferences, and I think it's fair to say that these three papers helped crystalize some thoughts on the topic in my mind.

I'm aware that the wish is out there –not loud in our congregation, but present nevertheless– that we ought to “jazz up” our worship services (that's a term I learned at the Conference; I'd never have thought of it myself) with some better use of music. The reference is primarily to the music that accompanies the singing (and so includes also how we sing), and is secondarily to the songs (or lyrics) we sing in church. The speeches I heard do, in my opinion, assist us on both those points. That's why I think it may be beneficial to share something of what I learned in this *Bit to Read*.

Church Service

The music we're talking about occurs in a particular setting, and that's the church service. The church service, we need to note, is not our idea but the Lord's, and so He sets the standard of what's to happen there. This, we were told, is the first principle that needs to be understood.

Primary Speaker

Eternal God, Creator of heaven and earth, was so gracious as to establish a bond of love between Himself and the people He created. Though we rejected that bond of love in our fall into sin, the Lord in mercy reestablished the covenant so that sinners become His children through Jesus Christ. That's the glorious gospel of redemption that warms the heart of every sinner. Part and parcel of that restored relation with God is the fact that He would have us appear in His presence in worship – and that's the church service.

In His covenant relationship with us God wants communication, a two-way dialogue. But since He is God, it is *He* who is the primary speaker and we the respondents. He determines the topic of conversation, and He sets the tone in which it happens.

That's why the central part of the Sunday worship service is not the stage but the pulpit, is not our contribution but is *God speaking to us*, be it in the form of His greeting, His law, the Bible reading, the preaching or the blessing. Yes, His Word in the preaching interacts (must interact) with and necessarily addresses the needs of the congregation as daily life shapes them. Even so, it is clear that people do not determine the message heard in church or the manner in which it's brought; the Lord God is and remains the primary

speaker – and so His Word necessarily is the chief element of the service. Nothing may detract from the reading and preaching of His Word.

Response

In the dialogue of the church service, God's people *respond* to what the Lord says. Obviously, our response is not to be off-topic in the sense that we've ignored what God said to us so that we bring up what we think is important. He's the primary speaker, we're not; He sets the tone, we don't. That's why it's instructive to note that He actually taught His disciples –and so us– how to pray. The first petition sets the dominant motif in prayer: "Hallowed be Your Name" (Mt 6:9). Given God's *Godness*, our response to God is never to be self-centered, or selfish, but always God-centered. His gospel of redemption in Jesus Christ –and that's ultimately what the preaching is all about– draws out His glory, His majesty, His honor – and that's why our response to His Word also needs to draw out His glory, His majesty, His honor. Worship: He is *worthy!*

Our response, however, is not just in prayer in the fold-your-hands-and-supplication sort of prayer, nor even in the fold-your-hands-and-praise sort of prayer. Our response is also to come in the open-your-mouth-and-sing sort of prayer. Just as Jesus in the Lord's Prayer taught His disciples how to pray the supplication sort of prayer, so God taught His people how to pray the song sort of prayer. He gave His Old Testament church 150 song-sort-of-prayers in the book of Psalms, prayers that Jesus sang in the course of His earthly ministry. After the Holy Spirit was poured out, the saints at Pentecost "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and ... the prayers" (Acts 2:42). Under the guidance of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, "the prayers" invariably refers to the sort of prayers Jesus prayed, be it what He learned from His Father in the Psalms, be it what He taught His disciples to pray in step with the Psalms.

The New Testament church is, then, a psalm-singing church. Paul's words to the Colossian saints are telling, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God" (3:16; cf Eph 5:18f). Note that the psalms come first, as our primary means of responding to the word of God. Paul adds that the singing is to go beyond "psalms" to include also "hymns and spiritual songs". It would take me too far afield now to unpack what the exegetes say about the three (possible) categories of songs mentioned here. For now it's enough to note that the lyrics of the "hymns and spiritual songs" certainly cannot contradict the words of "psalms" the Lord Himself has given us. Rather, whatever we sing as our response to the words of the primary Speaker must be in lock step with His word. The church service, after all, is a dialogue – and God as the primary Speaker sets the tone and the emphasis.

Which songs?

So: what are we to sing in church? We won't sing "My Grandfather's Clock" because that's obviously not *responding* to what God has said to us. No matter how well we sing it, or how moved we are by the music, that song obviously doesn't belong in that setting. We also won't sing Brian Doerksen's "Come, Now is the Time to Worship" because it too is not *responding* to God's Word; after all, *God's Word* doesn't teach us to sing, "*Come, just as you are to worship. Come, just as you are before your God.*" God's Word teaches that He does not appreciate the contribution of an unrepentant heart (cf Ps. 50) – and "*just as you are*" can be unrepentant. No matter how well we sing it, or how moved we are by the music, that song is never a response to God's Word because it's not in step with His Word, and so does not belong.

God is *God*. He told people what He wants to hear from His people-by-covenant. Our prayers-of-song need to be in step with the prayers-of-song He Himself taught us. That is why the Psalms of Scripture are optimum responses, and our yardstick in measuring the appropriateness of whatever else we sing.

Together

We need to take this a step further. The worship service is a dialogue between God and His people, where God holds the primary voice and His people respond. God gives His word of grace to the *entire* congregation, and so the *entire* congregation is to respond. That is why Biblically faithful churches –and that’s what Reformed churches historically are– have the entire congregation sing together, and not a soloist, or even a choir, on behalf of the people. Singing by definition allows for that *together* response. Persons highly gifted in music and those with few gifts in music are all able to respond together as one body and one voice to the Word of life the Lord has caused the congregation to hear.

So the speed of the singing should be set at a pace that accommodates the older and slower comfortably; space should be allocated so that each can read the words or catch sufficient breath. Similarly, tone range should be such that men and women alike can comfortably reach the required notes. The point is that all should sing together in grateful response to what God has said. Exactly how the Genevan Tunes fit in on this point is something I didn’t fully grasp; I have, after all, no education in music. But I did understand from the musicologists at the Conference that the Genevan Tunes are actually remarkably suited for unified congregational singing.

Instrumentation

What of instrumentation in church? What instrument should we use? Is there a right or a wrong on this question? The arguments presented (and summarized above) made very clear that nothing, absolutely nothing, may take away from the congregational *singing*. Rather, everything should enhance the singing – for that’s God’s people responding to God’s word. There’s no Biblical argument available that will restrict instrumentation to an organ or a piano. In fact, in a congregation I served some years ago, a part of the congregation rented a hall with a view to instituting a new church. That hall lacked a piano or organ, so a sister of the congregation played a trumpet to assist in the singing, and later another sister played a flute. For the size of the hall those instruments worked sufficiently well. As it is, we’ve been blessed with a magnificent building and instruments of sufficient caliber to lead a multitude of nearly 600 voices. And that’s the point: the congregation needs to be encouraged to respond to the Primary Speaker in singing that befits the God of glory.

To help the congregation excel in such singing takes, of course, much practice and skill on the part of the accompanist. And the details of that, well, that’s certainly outside my league.... I greatly respect and appreciate the dedication and efforts of our accompanists. And it may be good to pray that the Lord endow them with strength and wisdom to play in such a way that the congregation is prompted to respond to God’s Word in song in optimal fashion.

Speeches again

Of the three speeches I heard on music at the two Conferences mentioned above, two went distinctly in the direction I outlined above, namely, the congregation responds to the Primary Speaker, and does so in united singing. The third pleaded for much more instrumentation as well as instrumental variety. Perhaps the speeches will see the light of

day, in which case the reader can judge for himself. For my part, I simply did not find the argumentation of the third speaker convincing.

Meanwhile, I like to think that the above material helps us in understanding the role of music and of song in the church service.

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