

WORSHIP BEYOND MUSIC: STYLE vs. CONTENT

Moses Lalrohluia Sailo
Master in Church Music (MCM),
Asst. Professor, AICS,
Aizawl, Mizoram.

Introduction

From the latter part of the 20th century, the contemporary praise and worship style had been a great influence to many countries. The influence of worship leaders such as Don Moen, Bob Fitts, Darlene Zschech, Michael W. Smith, Chris Tomlin and many more from the western countries is very strong. This influence also greatly affects the youths in the North East India among many others.

However, we need to consider the culture this contemporary praise & worship movement carries. We must be aware that this worship style is rooted from the western culture and is based on the tradition and lifestyle of the western countries. If we are not careful about using this style of worship in our local churches, there can be adverse effects and even chaos among the church members. Therefore, it is important to dig deep first and have a thorough study on the effects of this contemporary Christian music on the western churches before we introduce it to our respective local churches.

Debate on the contemporary Christian music

There has been heated debate even among the western churches regarding this contemporary praise & worship style. Members of several churches separated due to disagreement on music taste. Senior members who were used to worshipping through traditional hymns and gospel songs preferred to follow their tradition and stuck to the old hymn singing. Meanwhile, young members in the churches were fed up of singing the old traditional hymns and preferred to worship through contemporary style. Separate church buildings were constructed to segregate the different worship styles and music. The youths of the church prefer to attend churches where contemporary music is played with live worship band while the older members prefer to attend churches where traditional old hymns are played with piano or organ only.

Studies on church growth shows that several churches that shifted from traditional worship style to a more contemporary music style have a quicker growth in size as more young people are attracted to the style.¹ However, many theologians and critics still argue that the Contemporary Christian Music (CCM) lacks biblical truths in its lyrics and that it is more of an entertainment than a ministry. Several others stated that since CCM is linked with rock music and rock culture which is associated with sex, rebellion, drugs and alcohol it should not be entertained in churches.²

The biblical patterns of worship in songs

According to Colossians 3:16, Paul mentioned three primary song forms endorsed by God – Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Christian music is not only about styles or form. Worship through songs and its contents must be taken seriously and must be studied from the biblical context. We need to have an in-depth study of its context before we apply it in our churches. Churches that have their

own taste in music and songs concentrate on one particular type of song with the exclusion of the other song form. Charismatic churches sing mostly contemporary Christian songs and rarely sing traditional hymns. On the other hand, traditional churches sing hymns in most of their services and rarely sing choruses or other contemporary songs. There are churches that blend the hymns and contemporary songs and choruses in their services. Some music directors rearrange the old hymns and play them with a new taste in a contemporary style thus adding flavor to them. There are few churches that experience the spiritual song form.

Let us look at the three song forms mentioned in Colossians 3:16 one by one. A study on church music shows that a hymn, in general, carries a greater sense of reverence than the other song forms.³ A hymn corresponds to the God who was – the God of history. It is also said to satisfy our hunger for truth and depth of understanding better than the others. The term ‘*hymn*’ literally means ‘a song of praise (to be sung to God)’. Some scholars stated that hymns normally do not have refrain (chorus) and that songs having refrain (chorus) are termed ‘*gospel songs*’.⁴ One notable thing about hymns is that they last very long and are consistent in comparison to the other song forms. They are also translated in many different languages and have been sung all over the world for hundreds of years. Some of the popular hymns we sing in the churches today were composed in the 18th century, more than two hundred years ago. This clearly shows that these hymns are inspired by God much like the Bible.

Eric Routley, a composer and musicologist, pointed out that hymnody has the contents to convert unbelief, strengthen faith, and bind together the Christian community.⁵ The writers of the popular hymns had been through hard times and battled their way through before the songs were written. The fact that Fanny J. Crosby, the writer of many popular hymns was a blind person, clearly indicates that these hymns were not merely out of human life-experience but sources of revelation of God through songs. Therefore, they deserve to be revered and protected by us, Christians.

Psalms are collection of poems (songs) in the Bible sung by the Israelites. They are set into tunes many of which remain unknown to us. Most of the tunes are in a minor key. The psalms in today’s context may also be included in the contemporary music section. These forms of songs are more personal. They are about personal experience with God. It will speak to our present need for encounter with God. The psalms or contemporary songs have shorter life-span than hymns. It also corresponds to the God who is – the God of the now. The spiritual song is more of the song of the moment and it corresponds to the God who is to come – the God of the future.⁶

According to Colossians 3:16, God’s Word urges us to use the three song forms for worship, not just one or the other but the three – Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. And in John 4:24 we are told to worship God not only in spirit nor only in truth, but we have to apply them both. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 14:15 “I will pray in spirit; I will also pray in truth. I will sing in spirit; I will also sing in truth.” Therefore, true worship is both spiritual and intellectual. Today, some churches emphasize singing in spirit with the exclusion of the other. And some churches concentrate primarily on singing about truth. Charismatic churches will prefer the first one, and traditional and conservative churches will prefer the later. But God endorses not just one style of singing, but the two of them together.

Jesus said that true worshippers must worship God in spirit and in truth, not just one or the other. If we simply follow our emotional feeling and apply worship style that we are more comfortable with without considering the content – worshipping in spirit and in truth, it’s time to ask the Holy Spirit to lead us into all truth. Jesus says that the truth shall set us free from bondage (John 8:32). This leads us to the conclusion that we need to equate traditional hymns that contain more about the truth, and contemporary praise & worship songs whose contents are more personal and relating to the Holy Spirit.

What is praise and worship all about?

The terms 'praise' and 'worship' are mentioned several times in the Bible. However, they are mentioned separately and are rarely mentioned together in the Bible. The phrase 'praise and worship' is seldom found in the Bible even though this phrase is commonly used by Christians all over the world today. Though praise and worship are linked with each other and are closely associated, praise is not identical to worship. Praise is the prelude to worship.⁷ We praise God for what He has done for us, and we worship Him for who He is. Praise is an act of showing our gratitude and thankfulness to God; it is a magnification of God's greatness. Worship, on the other hand is showing our reverence to God and a submission to His authority.

Soren Kierkegaard, a Danish philosopher and a theologian stated that worship is like a divine drama where God is the audience and the congregation members are the actors or performers, and the worship leaders or song leaders are the prompters.⁸ The people attending a church must realize that they are the performers, and not observers of worship. If the congregation members feel that they are treated like an audience instead of actors or performers, they will settle back and cease to be performers. There is no such thing as an observer of worship. Remember the phrase 'where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom' (II Cor. 3:17).

Everyone must worship God out of their own free will without being manipulated or out of compulsion. They must be given freedom to do so. When we participate in worship in wholeness, we move from being observers to participators. Worship is not an entertainment or just a normal service. It is a conversation between God and us. God speaks to us through the delivery of a sermon and through the reading of His Holy Word; and we respond with praise, prayer and thanksgiving.

Responsibilities of a worship leader

Worship leaders or song leaders are given the responsibility of creating the right atmosphere for worship. They must know that gifted people can lead songs and music with no difficulty, but only those touched by the Holy Spirit can lead effective worship.⁹ They should not try to control the congregation or the worship service itself. Rather, it is their responsibility to invite and let the Holy Spirit be in control.

The worship leader also must understand and should be able to explain why actions like clapping and raising of hands are done during worship and why they should be done meaningfully.¹⁰ The reason we raise our hands is to praise Him and magnify His name. And the reason we lift up our hands is to show our love and commitment to Him, to lift up His name, to seek His presence, to ask for forgiveness and to receive His blessings. Worship leaders must be able to explain these to the congregation. Otherwise, many young people tend to believe that this clapping and raising of hands has merely become a style of worship without considering the reason for doing it.¹¹

A worship leader must first be a worshipper before leading others to worship. He/she must know that the best way of leading worship is to be a good example of a worshipper rather than trying to be a cheerleader or using manipulative means to draw the attention of the people. If the congregation sense that the leader is truly in a worship mood, they will simply follow his lead. The church musician has great responsibility in the spiritual uplift of the congregation, helping them to be firm in the faith. He/she must choose carefully the music and songs to be used in the church or other worship services using theology as its basis for the choices.

Worship beyond music and its styles

Studies on strategy for mission field show that missionaries work best if their approach for mission work is based on the tradition and culture of the native people. That includes the type of music and other forms of art. For instance, the traditional music of the Mizos (in Mizoram) is singing folk songs using only drum (made from cow skin). Even though contemporary music greatly influenced the people and the churches in particular, the Mizo people, in general, best express their spirituality and emotion with their own traditional style of worship. This particular style is called 'lengkhawm zai' where two drums, one big drum and one smaller drum are used as the main instruments. Nowadays, bass guitar, piano/keyboard, acoustic/electric guitar and drum set are added to enhance the sound.

In this 'lengkhawm zai' the smaller drum is struck or beaten twice for every beat of the bigger drum with a constant tempo (speed). Most of the syllables have flexible pitches (degree of highness or lowness of a tone) that can be bended upwards or downwards. Most of the revival campaigns among the Mizos are associated with this 'lengkhawm zai' as the faster beat of the drum raise their emotion. In churches that experienced revival, the Mizos love to express their thankfulness to God through dancing. Therefore, this style of singing is best suited to raise their emotion and keep the people dancing on their feet. A big space is usually provided in the church in the area between the pulpit and the first row of benches where the people dance and move in circles without disturbing others.

The same is the case in various mission fields among Adivasis, Gurkhalis, Assamese and Tripuris, etc. People best express their love for God when they worship in their native language, sing their native tunes and play their native instruments. However, this does not mean to exclude other modern musical instruments. Modern instruments like electric guitars, bass guitars, drum set, keyboard/piano and even trumpets, violins, saxophone, harmonica, accordion, recorder and flute, etc. should be encouraged to improve the music of the church without replacing the traditional musical instruments and worship style of the native people. In fact, God commands us, through the psalmist, to praise Him with new songs and all kinds of musical instruments. Psalm 150:3-5 expresses that God must be praised using trumpets, different kinds of drums, timbrels, guitars, cymbals and wind instruments (flute, recorder, etc).

God accepts all kinds of song forms and styles of music as long as they are meant for His glory and the singers keep their focus on God. The black Americans and the Africans have their own way of expressing praise to God based on their culture and tradition. They don't necessarily need the live band to play for them to express their love for God through music. What God requires of us is to give our hearts to Him. Some music may help us achieve that while some may be a distraction. Some contemporary worship music can definitely draw us closer to God if done meaningfully and in time. Just as the drum beats of the Mizos keep their feet up for dancing, some sentimental music can move us to tears and some lively music will keep our feet tapping and hands clapping. But what really matters is - behind all these stuffs about emotion, it's all about giving praise to God and worshipping Him in wholeness. Is it mainly about pouring out our hearts to Him in humbleness and submission? Or is it simply about the style of worship and form of music that matters?

Let me share from my personal experiences. I have been exposed to several countries involving in various music ministries. The contemporary music in the praise and worship moved me to tears and I love to worship through contemporary praise and worship style. In a way, I have been influenced by and adapted to the praise and worship music. But the problem I have been facing is that after going back to my home church, I find it difficult to worship in the way the other people worship. Even though I still play the piano/keyboard in the church, I am not that interested in the singing of

‘lengkhawm zai’ as I ought to be. I know that being in the Mizo community, I have to be adapted to the way they worship. I am still learning to like it though.

However, one thing I learn from this experience is that worship is also a part of culture. And since our culture greatly affects our worship life, the style of worship can obviously change. As I had been adapted to the culture of contemporary praise and worship style, I found myself more comfortable expressing my emotion through praise & worship than in ‘lengkhawm zai’. But I also need to respect the worship culture of my other fellow Mizos who love to express their love for God and show their emotion through dancing along with the beat of the drums. I must not judge or look down upon the style of music they prefer for worship. It is just a matter of difference in styles.

God is not interested in the styles of our worship. He is interested in the effort we make to worship and praise Him. He wants our hearts and our desire to worship Him. If we only depend on the styles of music and the mood that it produces in worship, we need to consider our reason of worshipping Him. Can we still worship Him even if there is no music to support us? Can we still praise Him when there is no drum beat to drive us and no piano or keyboard to set our mood and raise our emotion?

Matt Redman, a worship leader in England and composer of the well-known song *Heart of Worship* mentioned that the reason he composed this song was due to the heartless worship in his church.¹² Many church goers simply worship for the sake of enjoying the music. They thought that the music in the church was their main inspirational source. To show that worship is much more than music, their pastor banned all sorts of music in the churches for some time. Matt Redman composed the song based on this experience. The lyrics say, “I’ll bring you more than a song, for a song in itself is not what you have required. You search much deeper within through the way things appear, you’re looking into my heart. I’m coming back to the heart of worship. When it’s all about you, it’s all about you, Jesus”. The reason we worship is not about us or about the music, but it’s all about God.

Conclusion

In conclusion, let us remind ourselves that the reason we worship God is not to please ourselves and obviously not for our entertainment. But the main purpose of worship is to please God and give Him the honor and respect He deserves. We praise Him for what He has done for us and we worship Him for who He is. Music moves us in a way as it arouses our emotion. But if what moves us is only the style of music, we need to change our attitude of worship. Rather, it should be the lyrics of the song that moves us. Remember that music, worship and culture are closely related. The contemporary praise and worship music has its root in the western culture. Therefore, if you are deeply into the contemporary praise and worship style, you are already adapted to the western culture.

Let me remind you that God’s culture is trans-culture which is the best type of culture.¹³ When God is saying that his ways are higher than our ways (Isaiah 55:9), he is saying that his divine culture is higher than our human culture. God promotes unity in diversity. He approves of the best possible way you can best express your love and adoration for Him. Do not be ashamed of the practice of your native culture and tradition if that is the best way you can express yourself to God. Respect the music culture of every individual. But above all, God is only interested in our attitude of worship, not the forms of our expression.¹⁴ He desires our hearts and our longing for Him. Heartless worship is worshipping in vain. When you sing the song, “Lord, I give you my heart, I give you my soul, I’ll live for you alone”, you really have to mean it before you sing out the words. That’s what we mean by worship beyond music. Thank you and may God bless you all.

End notes:

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