

Music Myths June 9, 2019 John Howard

A number of months before we came up with the idea of a myth buster series of sermons, of which this is the last, I had been asked to speak today and had begun to think of what I might present. Usually, if asked to preach, I do not speak on music at all, because, as music director, everyone would expect me to, and I don't like to fit in their preconceived little boxes! However, this time I was thinking about how many people probably have misconceptions about the church and its music, so I considered discussing some of these. When I mentioned my idea in our worship planning meeting, Jason came up with the idea of doing an entire series on "MythBusters," and here we are!

As I thought of the most common misconceptions, or myths, of music in church, I was reminded of something I was taught in a church music course in college. Our teacher stressed that we each study, think, and then develop a personal philosophy of church music... one that was based on the Bible and sound reasoning. He always would say that not just musicians, but pastors, and to some extent, every Christian in church should have at least SOME understanding of why we do what we do, and why we do it how we do it. Tradition can be a good thing, but we simply must have a better reason for doing something as important as worship music than "that's the way we've always done it!" I believe, to be followers of Christ, we should recognize that His Word should be a guidebook for all we do and therefore all we do should be in harmony with, or at least not in conflict with that Word.

We have read in the scriptures today of God's direct instruction to make music, with voices, and all kinds of instruments. We have read that music is powerful in worship, so powerful at times that the book of II Chronicles tells us that the glory of God came down thick like a cloud when the musicians all played and sang. The glory of that moment was so strong that the priests couldn't even stand up to minister. You know that the music is pretty powerful if a pastor couldn't even get up to preach afterwards! We also have seen in the new testament passage to "sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to the Lord, making melody in our hearts." The Bible tells us all this and more. Psalm 33:3 tells us to "play skillfully, with a loud noise." We can even learn something from the small printed "ascriptions" at the beginning of many of the psalms. Some of them say "to the choir director" or "to be played on stringed instruments," or they list the Hebrew name for the style of song, or of the tune that it should be sung to. The

Bible makes its statements about music simple, but if we study them carefully, they are profound.

Well, now that I have tried to show a need for us all to check our ideas about church music with the Bible, and that we have reviewed some of what the Bible tells us about music, lets look at what isn't true.... The Myths! I want to share five myths of music. Some of you may have heard, some maybe not, depending on the church culture in which you were raised. Trust me though, they are all out there! Buckle your seatbelts, here we go!!!

MYTH number 1.

The musical part of the service is the “Praise and Worship” time.

I believed this to be true from the time I was a small boy until I went to college as a church music major! I was wrong. Did you know that EVERY PART of a worship service is or should be an act of praise and worship to God? Giving offerings shows God we love Him and want to obey him. A pastor preaching is using his gifts to explain God's Word to the people and as he does so, he is worshipping. As we listen to a sermon, if our hearts are in a posture to think and learn and grow, we are glorifying God. As we gather to worship and are friendly and welcoming, we are being the family that God wants us to be and so we are praising Him. When we give announcements about activities related to Christian discipleship, fellowship, or outreach, we are inviting people to participate in events that honor God! It's all worship! Worship means to attribute worth to something. In this case, we are saying “God you are worthy of all we can do for you or give you and so much more.” I think this myth came about in the second half of the 20th century with more charismatic style services where to create a mood or good feelings, many songs were sung in a long succession until people were really focused on God with their heart and emotions as well as their mind. Then the good feelings that developed were considered worship. I don't doubt that they were worshipping, but that emotional experience got elevated above the other elements of worship which were less emotional and more cerebral. The good news is, it's ALL worship! “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might. It all counts!

Musical myth #2. Music is a preliminary “warm-up” activity to prepare people for the sermon.

This is also not true. The idea comes from the old revivalist traditions in mid-19th century America. America was having its second great awakening. Preachers called Evangelists were going all over rural areas, and in cities too, setting up large tents to have evangelistic services, designed with the aim of getting people to commit their lives to Christ. The service started with several gospel hymns that were sung by the congregation. Then it was followed by a song leader singing a solo or two, an offering, a sermon and an altar call, which was an invitation to commit one's life to Christ. A gospel hymn would be sung as people came forward. These services were different than the more formal church services of the day. A church service was designed for believers to come and worship God. Evangelistic services were designed to attract and compel non-believers to the faith. With that goal, evangelist-pastors and song leaders used to write or select songs that were not standard church hymns, but gospel songs telling a compelling testimony. They sang these to get people's hearts warmed up before the preacher's sermon, so they would be receptive. It worked, and many came to Christ... The problem was, that when all these thousands of new believers started attending churches across the nation, people didn't separate the fact that the service which drew them to Christ in those camp meetings was a different kind of service than one would worship God within church. So, churches gradually became more like camp-meetings and less like worship services. In worship, we aren't trying to warm people up for a sermon, we are trying to give glory to God. The sermon is important, BUT the music is also important. The sermon helps us hear what God may want us to know, the music gives us a chance to respond back to God. The music can and should be thematically tied with the sermon and other parts of the service. But the goal should be to use preaching and music to elevate Christ, not music to elevate a sermon.

Musical Myth#3. Investing money in music is not as good as investing in outreach, evangelism, or children's and youth ministries because its "inward focused."

The churches of our day and culture are usually broken into departments. The children's ministry department, the Youth department, the Outreach department, the Music department. And so on. Church resources are usually somewhat limited and those responsible for finances have hard choices to make when it's time to allocate money for various needs. Often times really well-meaning outreach minded people, in an attempt reach the world for Christ, to save the church from eventually closing, or sometimes a combination of both, tell us that investing in the music ministry is not as important as outreach or children's and youth ministries, or some other department. I support the importance of funding those departments of course, but when I hear this myth, I think that such people either don't understand the role that a vital music ministry can play in every part of the life of the church, or perhaps I wonder about the music ministry in question.

A church music ministry should exist to add value to every aspect of a church. In worship, glorious music enables people to exalt in the glory of God. In children's and youth departments, a music ministry creates worship, service and discipleship opportunities. In the church's desire to outreach, a music ministry's concert series breaks down barriers to the unchurched of the community. In discipleship, believers are able to grow in their faith as they reinforce the great truths of the texts in sacred music by singing them. In the church's desire to build fellowship opportunities, the music ensembles of a church are perfect examples of small groups that worship, learn, grow, serve, pray, and have tons of fun together! I could go on and on. A good music ministry is like a good church. It does it all! Perhaps people who buy into the myth don't see these things, or perhaps the music ministry itself needs to take a hard look at itself and find out if they are not being what they are supposed to be. Either way, when a church invests money into a healthy music ministry, it is investing in children, youth, adults of every age, and many people outside of the church walls as well. First Pres is soon to be making some major renovations to enhance sound and beauty in the sanctuary, and I firmly believe that the money spent will only magnify our ability to worship and serve our church and community.

Musical Myth #4. As long as the words of a song are good, the music doesn't matter.

This is an argument that I have heard time and again from non-musicians trying to defend a poor choice of worship music. Such people may have theological knowledge enough to determine if a text is Biblically sound, but they don't have the musical knowledge to determine if the music is appropriate. So, they say music doesn't matter, only the words matter. It stems from the idea that music is totally subjective and therefore, "what I like" is as equally valid as "what you like." I'm here to tell you that this is a MYTH! There really is good music and bad music and it can be quantified objectively. The problem is, to explain this properly, I would have to send you to study music in a university for at least about 6 years!

Now, let me also say, there is room for subjectivity in music. It is not 100 percent objective. We all have music that we like, even when we don't have an objective reason why. In church, some people attend the contemporary service and some the traditional. Joshua can tell you specific objective reasons why he selects the music he does and why his interpretations are the way they are for the contemporary service. I can do the same for the traditional. But many of you who attend these services may not be able to know the objective explanations. You simply come and enjoy. And that's a great thing! It's the same reason that I chose to be an organist and choral conductor instead of a cellist or an orchestral conductor or a concert pianist. I love the cello, the orchestra, and the piano, but for a hard to define subjective reason, I am moved by choral, handbell, and organ music in a church more than anything else in the world. This is true even when my objective knowledge of music tells me that cello music, symphonic music and piano music is just as good and, in some instances, better than the quality of music that I play or conduct. Some things are just up to feeling. When we make a judgement about **our** music, it can be for subjective reasons, but if we are called upon to judge **other people's** music, we should have objective reasons instead of subjective reasons. In other words, don't say to someone, "I don't like that music. It doesn't seem worshipful to me." You may not like it, and it may not seem worshipful to you, but that is likely a subjective opinion. Unless you have theoretical, historical, technical, or interpretive musical reasons to decide that something is not good or not as good as something else, and additionally, unless your opinion has been sought out for some particular reason, its rather best to not say anything critical at all. It's my job here at First Pres to select music for traditional services. After selecting it, I rehearse it with our musicians to make it as good as possible. In both the selection and rehearsal processes, I constantly must make

judgement calls all the time on what is bad, good, better, or even best. These are not made by my subjective feelings toward the music, though. Rather, they are objective judgements based on knowledge...That chord is not in tune. This rhythm is incorrect. The congregation won't be able to sing that hymn successfully in that key, etc. This is what I call making judgements without being judgmental.

There is good and bad and right and wrong, but we should be gracious to others who haven't recognized that, and we should not spread our subjective opinions as if they were empirical. Dispelling this myth can help us respect those with musical leadership in a church and build additional respect for the many different opinions in the grey areas of subjectivity as well.

That leads me to #5 my last Musical myth: I can't sing, so I don't sing. This myth originated with the invention of the Victrola and then the radio and every other technological device thereafter that brought the music of great singers into people's homes. Since time began, singing has been a communal activity. Not only in churches, but in homes people would sing around the piano. There was a time when it seemed most every middle-class American home had a piano and at least one person took piano lessons. It was a focal point in the living room before the radio and television. Before that farmers and even African American slaves in early America sang as they worked in the fields. And this singing culture is not limited to America. To my knowledge, every country and culture in the world has a huge and significant body of folk music... Music of the people. Until the last few generations, rarely would anyone have thought "I can't sing" or she can't sing, or he can't sing." People just sang. It wasn't about having talent, no one was analyzing your tone quality or intonation, people just sang. When we started hearing radio stars from the opera singer Caruso to pop stars like Frank Sinatra and an endless stream of singers thereafter, we started to think of singing as something of a talent that a select few were great at. And, we were listening rather than singing. Listening to music is wonderful, but so is singing. So, keep listening to the radio all you want during the week, but when we are in church, God's Word instructs us to sing. Science confirms it is healthy for us, and history reminds us that is a beautiful way to be a better community. Pride is not a godly trait, and neither is fear. If we are thinking we are too prideful to sing because we are worried of what people will think of us, that doesn't seem like we are focusing on worshipping God, at least in the moment that we entertain such thoughts. If we are afraid to sing because someone has hurt us at some point by criticizing us, then that is something that we can take to the Lord too. He gave us the voice He gave us and he tell us all to sing. It doesn't have to be particularly beautiful. Beauty isn't the point. it's about expressing to God our worship and gratitude for who He is and what He has done. Singing is one of the ways we can do that, one of the ways he asks us to do that, so it also becomes about obedience. It may never be your favorite thing to do. You don't have to join a choir or take lessons or read music, although doing so will help you learn how to sing better and enjoy it more, but we are all called to sing praise to our God. I hope you will take the courageous step to choose worship over pride or fear. "All that hath life and breath praise ye the Lord."

As we have examined these five myths, perhaps only one or maybe two has been something that has been misleading in your life. If you are like me when I was younger, I was misled by about all of them. Its wise for us as believers to examine our lives... every aspect of our lives, to check on all that we believe, think and do, so that it is as harmonious with our faith as possible. Even if you are nowhere near being a musician, music is a part of your life, if only once a week when you come to church. Let's make sure we think and act in regard to music in a way that will honor our Lord as best as we can. We may not always get it right, but at least we will have begun a journey. Let's Pray.