

Grace to You :: esp *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Style or Substance?

Scripture: Colossians 3:16

Code: A261

What's the Biggest Problem with Contemporary Church Music?

It should be clear to anyone who examines the subject carefully that modern church music, as a rule, is vastly inferior to the classic hymns that were being written 200 years ago.

And incidentally, my own assessment is that the *style* in which music is written today isn't really the biggest problem with contemporary music. Styles change. Bad church music isn't bad just because it is "contemporary." But *the content of the lyrics* is what reveals most graphically how low our standards have slipped.

This is not a problem that arose with the current generation. It dates back to an era whose musical *style* would seem quite old-fashioned by *anyone's* standards today.

Before the middle part of the 19th century or so, hymns were wonderful didactic tools, filled with Scripture and sound doctrine, a medium for teaching and admonishing one another, as we are commanded in Colossians 3:16. Most hymns were written not by teenagers with guitars, but by pastors and theologians: Charles Wesley, Augustus Toplady, Isaac Watts.

Consider the profound content of this hymn about God's attributes, written by Walter C. Smith in the 1800s:

Immortal, invisible

Immortal, invisible, God only wise,
In light inaccessible hid from our eyes,
Most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,
Almighty, victorious, Thy great Name we praise.

Unresting, unhasting, and silent as light,
Nor wanting, nor wasting, Thou rulest in might;
Thy justice, like mountains, high soaring above
Thy clouds, which are fountains of goodness and love.

To all, life Thou givest, to both great and small;
In all life Thou livest, the true life of all;
We blossom and flourish as leaves on the tree,
And wither and perish—but naught changeth Thee.

Great Father of glory, pure Father of light,
Thine angels adore Thee, all veiling their sight;
But of all Thy rich graces this grace, Lord, impart

Take the veil from our faces, the vile from our heart.

All laud we would render; O help us to see
'Tis only the splendor of light hideth Thee,
And so let Thy glory, Almighty, impart,
Through Christ in His story, Thy Christ to the heart.

Around the start of the twentieth century, however, church music took a different direction. Musicians and singers without formal pastoral or theological training (such as Ira Sankey and Philip Bliss) became the dominant songwriters in the church. Choruses with lighter, simpler subject matter proliferated. Popular Christian music became more subjective. Songs focused on personal experience and the feelings of the worshiper. The newer compositions were often called “gospel songs” to distinguish them from “hymns.”

Consider this familiar chorus, written in 1912 by C. Austin Miles:

In the Garden

I come to the garden alone
While the dew is still on the roses
And the voice I hear falling on my ear
The Son of God discloses.

*And He walks with me, and He talks with me,
And He tells me I am His own;
And the joy we share as we tarry there,
None other has ever known.*

He speaks, and the sound of His voice,
Is so sweet the birds hush their singing,
And the melody that He gave to me
Within my heart is ringing.

I'd stay in the garden with Him
Though the night around me be falling,
But He bids me go; through the voice of woe
His voice to me is calling.

Aside from an oblique reference to “the Son of God” in the last line of the first stanza, there's no distinctly Christian content to that song at all.

“In the Garden” is by no means the only wretched favorite from the gospel-song era, either. “Love Lifted Me” (1912) and “Count Your Blessings” (1897) are two more “gospel songs” without much actual gospel *content*. If you want to see what thin gruel some of the “oldies” offer by way of actual biblical or doctrinal substance, review almost any random [list of favorite old “gospel songs.”](#)

Modern musicians have pushed this trend even further and often see music as little more than a device for stimulating intense emotion. The *biblically-mandated didactic role* of music is all but forgotten.

The effect is predictable. What we have sown for several generations we are now reaping in frightening abundance. The modern church, fed on choruses with insipid lyrics, has no appetite for her own great tradition of didactic hymnody.

We are in danger of losing a rich heritage as some of the best hymns of our faith fall into neglect and disuse, being replaced with banal lyrics set to catchy tunes. It is a crisis, and the church is suffering spiritually. Both pastors and church musicians need to see the severity of the crisis and work diligently for reform.

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