

Christian Music versus Sacred Music (Revised)

Written by Calvin Fox

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Christian Music

Christian Music (as all Christian Art forms) is defined as overtly Christ-centered and normally involves lyrics, accompanied by instrumentation, about Christ or the Gospel, Salvation (testimonies), Christian life and witness. Christian music focuses especially on our personal relationship with Christ. An old favorite is a classic illustration of this theme: "In the Garden" (I walk with Him and I talk with Him and He tells me I am His own. Oh the joy we share ...) Some Christian music includes words about God Himself ("Holy, Holy, Holy") but such words are not the primary content of most singing or of music among many Christians. Very few Christian songs are addressed directly to God. If He is mentioned, it is in the third person, even as the Doxology is.) Many Christians will insist that their music is spiritual and makes them aware of God's presence and they become touched, maybe overwhelmed, by that presence when they sing it or hear it. It is, they say, both worshipful and edifying. I have enjoyed and used Christian music of all types all my life.

Christian Music can stir normal human emotions and even be exciting or enjoyable, making the body move (clapping, toe-tapping and dancing). It can also be meaningful and satisfying on some level. But by my definition, it does not accomplish what Sacred Music does. Is this difference important? Yes! This is not a matter of cultural and personal preference and taste. Badson's book agrees that Worship is the center of a Church's Life. The subtitle of the Book says, "Finding a Style to Fit your Church"! There are 5 major styles of Worship (Liturgical, Traditional Protestant, Evangelistic/Revivalistic, Praise/ Charismatic and Seeker-Sensitive/Contemporary. Each Church should choose what fits it. Using this standard is wrongheaded and backward. Who is the God we worship. What style of Music fits Him?

The argument that it is a matter of culture or personal preference assumes that we are all worshipping the same God, but just in different ways. That assumption is wrong. The difference in the music we use in Worship reveals (or is a consequence of) different understandings of the God we are worshipping. Different understandings of God means different "Gods". That is a serious matter.

Theology determines how we worship, including the type of music we use. We are debating the wrong issues when we discuss styles of worship and music. The issue is not about the needs of the congregation or community. The real and first issue is who we understand God to be. That is what determines how we respond to Him, i.e.- how we worship Him, even if we do not realize it! Our worship "style" and the type of music we use reveals what we believe about God. If a church wants to study its Worship, this is the place to begin: "What do we believe about God?"

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God is both transcendent and immanent. In general, contemporary churches of all kinds emphasize Immanence. They also emphasize the corollary that knowing God is subjective, a matter of the heart. Heart Religion is far more prevalent these days in preference to Head Religion. This coincides with the decline of interest in doctrine and the elevation of faith as experience rather than as intellectual knowledge. This emphasis is directly connected to the evangelical revivals of the 18th Century in England and America and the development of Pietism in the Scandinavian and European Lutheran churches in the 17 and 18th Centuries. Faith as experience of the heart has been a dominant influence in both worship and Christian living in most American Protestant evangelical churches and liberal churches since the late 19th Century.

The belief that God is incarnated in the human Jesus and that being a Christian is primarily about being a "imitator of Jesus" and living like Him leads to one style of Worship Service.

The belief that God is primarily experienced in a "personal love relationship" with Jesus leads to a preference for a certain kind of Christian music and worship

The belief that God and His Kingdom are all about love and community leads to a Worship that reflects that belief.

My growing appreciation of who God is has brought me to seek a different kind of Worship than all of these others. In the last 6 years my understanding of God has broadened due to the amount of time I spend in the Old Testament and particularly in the Psalms. I have become far more focused on the transcendent God. Of course, it would be a heresy to reject the immanence of God, but now I see more clearly that it is the Transcendent God who is immanent (or the Risen Christ rather than the human Jesus). The way I understand God now (my Theology) is behind my desire for Worship which features Sacred Music (and Sacred Liturgy), indeed such Theology requires it.

Sacred Music

I use the word "Sacred" in "Sacred Music" to refer to the Triune God who reveals Himself both in Nature (all of it) and in Christian Scripture (all of it). Sacred music, in contrast to Christian Music [above], is that music which conveys a sense of this God. Sacred Music is music that conveys the Transcendence, the utter Holiness of God, His Altogether Otherness. Sacred Music makes you aware you are in the presence of the overpowering Almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth. This awareness leaves you in silence, still and motionless. It is neither exciting nor meditative, but powerful and stirs the spirit within, convicting the heart of personal sin and giving the worshipper a sense of frailty and mortality. Sacred Music leads to repentance and confession and submission to God and an openness to receiving the Word of God and motivation for obeying it. These are the signs of Sacred Music. It is music that leads to an Isaiah 6 experience.

1 I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. 2 Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. 3 And one called to another and said:

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"Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!" [The emotional high point in our Anglican Liturgy for me is singing the Sanctus. It is the one place where I raise up my arms] 4 And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. 5 And I said: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!"

The music that has this effect on the worshiper is a combination of solid Biblical Theology (lyrics) conveyed through appropriate sounds or musical settings. Such music would be "Sacred". And what would be Sacred Music? Primarily, the Psalms, which I assure you contain much about Christ, the Gospel and Salvation. Sacred Music also includes those Hymns whose lyrics (usually based on the Psalms) and music meet the same criteria of great Theology and great arrangements, such as Handel's Messiah or Bach's Oratorios and Luther's Chorales. [Note: I agree with Luther that singing is meant to be congregational. Sacred Music requires that churches make the effort to teach and train their members to sing.]

Worship is an event in which God Himself, not simply doctrine about God, is made known. This revelation is verbal and cerebral, but it is also experiential (which is not to say it is subjective). This experience is vertical, not horizontal and it is with God, not solipsistic (confined within oneself). Worship is God-directed, not other- or self-directed. We are not responding to each other or to our inner self. We are confronted by the Living God who is above, beyond and greater than us, as well as with us in the Sanctuary. Worship is responding to Him. We share this experience with others assembled. It is edifying to all. We have a fellowship, but it is not in ourselves, it is in the God whom we are worshipping.