

## Why We Sing What We Sing

One of the most noticeable things about Providence is that we have a very old-fashioned feel. Not only are families sitting together, as would have been standard merely fifty years ago, but the songs we sing seem old-fashioned to our modern ears. Well why do we do this? To answer the question, we will look briefly at singing in the church under a few headings.

### ***What role does emotion play in the Christian worship and life?***

The book of Romans is a glorious work of the Holy Spirit through the apostle Paul. In it is described with great clarity the majesty of our salvation. And as commentators have looked at the book, many have written that Romans can generally be divided into the first eleven chapters - chapters of doctrine - and then the last five of application. Obviously this is not rigid, there is application before chapter 12 and doctrine after, but it is a good general description of the structure of Romans. Well in Romans chapter 12 the apostle Paul opens his section of application with these ringing words:

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, *which is* your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what *is* that good and acceptable and perfect will of God. (NKJV)

What is salient for this discussion is that Paul tells us how it is that we can keep from being conformed to this world. It is by being transformed by the renewing of our minds. An emphasis on renewing the way we think, and conforming ourselves to a biblical worldview is at the heart of Paul's exhortation in Romans. Now that is not to say that emotions are wrong or sinful, but rather that the Bible calls us to control our emotions by the power of a renewed mind or intellect.

Emotions are not bad, they are given by God as a gift to the human race. Yet emotions are very powerful. How many have been dragged into terrible sin because "it just felt so right?" The central paradigm of the bible for our growth is not "be moved by your emotions" to greater love for God, it is "be renewed in your mind," and from that place of a renewed mind, our emotions are freed to follow, and we glorify God with all that is in us.

### ***What then is the relationship of mind and emotion to what we sing in worship and how we sing it?***

One of the aspects of modern Christian culture, at least in the United States, is that worship is often thought of as what happens at the beginning of the service - the 30 minutes of singing - and then the rest of the service is something else. But scripture teaches us that there are many different elements in the worship of God. Singing is only one of them. Prayer is an act of worship, giving is an act of worship, attentively hearing God's word is an act of worship.

Because of this misunderstanding, singing is often contrasted to the rest of worship - singing is about how I feel, the rest of worship is about what I understand. And so we sense that we have

"really" worshiped not when our minds have been well renewed, but when we leave church with a great emotional or adrenaline high. What we sing and how we sing it can either contribute to this misunderstanding, or help to relieve us of it.

In Colossians chapter 2 verse 16 we read this: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord." (NKJV) The singing of the church is described there as having a purpose of teaching one another and admonishing one another. Teaching and admonishing are primarily intellectual categories, categories of renewing the mind. Indeed if we look back to verse 2 of chapter 3, we see that Paul gives the mind a central place in his exhortations of chapter 3. "Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth." (NKJV) What we see then is that our singing serves the overall purpose of a renewed mind.

### ***How then can our singing and music contribute to a renewed mind?***

First, we need to recognize that certain forms of music more inherently appeal to emotion than others. Strong drumbeats and bass lines particularly resonate significantly in our emotions. This is easily observed if you simply listen to a strong amplified beat, even without words and melody. Your body physically responds to the bass. Similarly very repetitive lyrics, often sung many times, do not appeal to intellectual movement and understanding but to an emotional, almost hypnotic response. Even the kinds of melodies employed can either strengthen this intellectual renewing aspect, or weaken it.

If we are to apply Paul's exhortation that we be renewed in our minds to our singing in worship, we realize that the songs should lead with intellect and emotion should follow, rather than the other way around. Words that teach a sound biblical and theological worldview, and call us to greater depth in our Christian lives best serve Paul's purpose. The great hymns of the faith, like the Psalms themselves, are rich in the glory of God and the exposition of biblical doctrine. Similarly music which both matches well the tone of the words and is rich and musically interesting contributes to this overall renewal of the mind in the ways of Christ.

And finally, when choosing instruments to support the singing of the congregation, we should be wary of instruments which produce a strong physical impact, such as amplified drums and basses. Music is enormously powerful in its ability to stir us. This is how we are created by God. But because it is so powerful, and because we are fallen creatures, veritable idol factories, we should seek to carefully control its power. The power of music must serve God's paradigm for growth in grace. And that paradigm is simple - be renewed in your mind, not jazzed in your emotions.

### ***Conclusion***

Yes, at Providence, the hymns and psalms we sing sound old-fashioned to our ears that are tuned to modern forms of music. It is not, however, the age of the songs that is important, but how the songs either contribute to or detract from the renewing of our minds. Nor does our singing seek the absence of emotion, far from it. Rather where God leads through his word, in our singing and the rest of our worship, there our emotions joyfully follow.