

Biblical Music

Contemporary or Southern Gospel – What does God say?

By Elder James A. Keen

Note: *This article was written in response to a committee question posed at the 2000 Bethel Missionary Baptist Association. The writer was part of that committee and wrote the following response to the highlighted portion of the question below. This report was not contained in its entirety during its presentation at the 2000 association, but is included here for your consideration. May God bless you and lead you to the truth on this issue. – J.A.K.*

With the numerous religious resource materials available today for organized religion, is it scriptural and acceptable, and is there benefit in **blending traditional and contemporary elements of word, music,** skit and drama in our Churches as a medium to reach people with the gospel for their spiritual needs?

To answer this question from the musical perspective, there are two issues that need to be addressed. First, there is no single style of music that God directly tells us to sing. The music that the early church sang probably sounded nothing like the songs we sing today. Four-part harmony and country music is a more modern invention. However, there is a more serious issue unveiled in the study that led to this report. Does the music we sing fulfill the entirety of God's instruction to us concerning singing? The other issue that is alluded to in the question concerns the use of music as a medium to reach people with the gospel. This is a question with serious implications and will be dealt with in a separate section.

Before we consider these points in detail, let us look at the instruction God's Word gives us concerning singing.

Biblical Instruction Concerning Singing

God's Word certainly does give us instruction, which we can apply to our singing. There are four universal points that every song we sing should be evaluated against.

1. Any song sung in the church must have words that are true (Philippians 4:8, John 4:24). While this sounds like an obvious point, you are encouraged to do a thorough analysis of some of the songs that we sing. There are some songs within our hymnals, even some which our people sing, which have questionable theology.
2. Any song sung in the church must have words that are clear, understandable, and "above" the music (1 Corinthians 14:8-9, 14:15, 14:26). "Above the music" means that the words must be louder than and distinguishable above the accompaniment. This standard eliminates much of the heavy metal and hard rock "gospel" music, which emphasizes sound volume rather than the message. The Apostle Paul was very clear in his admonition to the Corinthians that edification is the standard by which things in the church should be judged. Edification literally means, "to build up". It can practically be defined as something that promotes one's growth in Christian wisdom, piety, happiness, or holiness. If we cannot be edified from the music through its message, we should not sing it.
3. The musical accompaniment to the song should also be appropriate to the message being conveyed by the song (Psalm 4 (intro), Psalm 5 (intro), Psalm 8 (intro)). If you look at the intro before these passages start, you will see words like, "Neginoth" or "Gittith". These are instruments that David prescribed to be used when singing those songs. Obviously he envisioned that a certain mood be portrayed when these songs were sung. When we sing exclusively about the crucifixion of Christ, it really isn't fitting that we are upbeat. However, it would not be appropriate for us to sing a slow and sad sounding song about His resurrection either. A songwriter should make sure that they are supporting the words being sung by the music they are playing.

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In addition, it is also inappropriate for us to sing songs that are “showy” and designed to promote the singer or musician rather than God. There are many songs from both traditional and contemporary music that fall into this category. The words of the song may be wonderful, but the way that they are sung detracts from their message. These songs might be fine for entertainment purposes, but they really have no place in our churches. Church is not a place to come and be entertained.

4. Biblically, we are exhorted twice in the New Testament to sing Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs (Ephesians 5:19, Colossians 3:16). Study of the original languages provide us with the following definitions:

Psalms – in the Hebrew, it literally means a sacred song accompanied with a musical instrument. However, in the New Testament, the word “Psalms” refers to the collection of songs in the Book of Psalms.

Hymns - a song in which the prominent thought is the praise of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Spiritual Songs - songs that contain religious truths but which are not included in the two previous categories. These songs can be very personal in nature.

As you can see, all three of these categories are good. However, what we need to consider is whether we are singing songs from all three categories as Paul admonished us.

Fulfilling God’s Instruction Concerning our Music

For the duration of this report it is assumed that the songs we are speaking of are true, understandable, and have the appropriate musical accompaniment. Our focus instead will be on fulfilling Paul’s admonition to sing Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs.

Southern Gospel Music (SGM) predominantly falls within the "Spiritual Songs" category. Most of the songs are extremely personal in nature, with a strong emphasis on "I" and "we" and "me". They also focus predominantly upon heaven and the future state of glory. However, there is an almost total absence of Psalms within SGM (according to the biblical definition of the word). There are also relatively few songs within SGM that can truly be called Hymns. This isn't to say that there are not some Hymns in SGM. There are some wonderful examples like “Praise Him, Praise Him”, “The Lily of the Valley”, “Oh What a Savior”, etc... However, most SGM falls within the “Spiritual Songs” category. This isn't bad, but it shows us that we need to broaden our musical interests in order to comply with the Word of God.

Contemporary Worship Music (CWM) is a medium of song that a few of our churches and missions have started to sing. CWM is stylistically different from SGM in that there is usually an absence of four-part harmony and it has a “folk” or “pop” rhythmic pattern. The rhythms in and of themselves are neither good nor bad when compared with the country rhythm that is often used in our songs. What we need to focus on is how the music is used to support the words that are being communicated.

CWM is also different in content from most SGM songs. Most of CWM could be biblically categorized as “hymns” or praise music. In this way, CWM can supply some of what is lacking. By praise music, we are speaking of songs that simply focus on praising our God and Savior rather than on telling a story or focusing on our personal experiences. One can tell from the names of the songs that there is a slightly different focus: "Awesome God", "Shout to the Lord", "Shine Jesus Shine", "Lord I Lift Your Name on High", etc... In addition, many of the words of these songs are taken directly from the Word of God itself.

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Concerning the biblical category of “Psalms”, there still remains a lot of work to be done. Some CWM authors have successfully taken some of the Psalms and put them to music. However, we do not believe that CWM is the only answer to singing the Psalms.

It is obvious that in the translation process from Hebrew to English, most of the Psalms are not capable of being sung as they once were. Furthermore, we have no idea what melodies the ancient Jews and Christians used as accompaniment. However, we believe that any of our capable songwriters, through study and the leadership of the Spirit, could take a Psalm and create a song from it that our people could sing. If the content and intent of the Psalm remains the same, we believe that we will fulfil the instruction of the Scriptures to sing Psalms. There is a tremendous wealth of encouragement and wisdom we could gain from singing the Psalms. Most of us can memorize a song much easier than we can memorize scriptures. Putting the Psalms to music would be an excellent way to promote the internalization of God’s Word through song.

Music as an Evangelistic Tool

The issue of music being used to reach people with the gospel really transcends the Contemporary vs. Traditional debate, which has been discussed in this article. The question is, should contemporary and / or traditional music be used as an evangelistic tool and if so, how?

Music, even apart from the lyrics of the song, is very powerful. David used music to sooth King Saul when the evil spirit came upon him (1 Samuel 16:23). It is capable of relaxing us, exciting us, and moving us emotionally. Have you ever noticed how many people tap their feet during a song? There is something about rhythm and a melody that strikes a chord within us. We must be careful that we do not use this power of music to entice an emotional response from someone to seek God. The only emotion that they need to feel is that which is caused by the Holy Spirit through the proclamation of the Word of God.

There is no biblical example of music being used either to draw people to the gospel message or to draw people to seek the Lord. This is a modern invention. Many Christian music artists, both contemporary and traditional, use their music to draw a crowd and then proceed to share the gospel with them. Unfortunately, many of these artists deceive those who come. However, the question remains, is it biblical to use music to draw a crowd in the first place?

The apostle Paul addressed this issue very bluntly in 1st Corinthians. In 1 Corinthians 1:17-24, Paul makes it very clear that he presented the gospel plainly and clearly. He didn’t spice it up with what the people wanted to hear. He explained that the Jews were always wanting to see some sign or miracle and that the Greeks always desired to hear some brilliant argument or proof to delight their desire for knowledge. However, Paul would not stoop to those levels to entice them to the gospel even though it might have drawn a crowd. He stuck to the truth of Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. Similarly to the Greeks and Jews, Americans crave entertainment. We must follow the same Pauline example and not give people what they want, namely entertainment, in order to try and draw them to Christ. We must give them what they need, the simple truth of the gospel with no strings or decorations attached.

Conclusion

The real issue isn't Southern Gospel versus Contemporary Music or any other type music for that matter. The real issue is that we use music the way that God intended for us to use it. This includes broadening our song list to encompass types of songs that the Lord clearly wants us to sing and not using music to entice the lost. It also includes gaining a mutual respect for the varieties of tastes that can be freely expressed without violating God's Word. Our African brothers and sisters certainly have songs that sound much different from ours. However, from all appearance, they use these songs to praise and honor God and edify each other.

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Many of us are like Peter, in that we are often afraid to do something that we haven't seen someone else do before. God had to show Peter three times that it was okay to eat of the "unclean" flesh before he accepted the vision and was willing to preach to a Gentile. We must examine the musical alternatives ourselves and allow God's Word and not man's tradition be the judge. Remember what God told Peter in Acts 10:15, "What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common."