



Minutes With Messiah

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WHAT'S THE POINT?

Do you ever wonder, “What’s the point?” Not depression; just looking at what people do and asking why. Sometimes people surprise you, like when a friend with Down Syndrome got his degree in culinary science and opened his own restaurant. People asked, “Why go to college with your condition?” He would just hug them and prove that he could do it. Why publish a paper that only a couple of hundred people will read, or write songs that may only be sung a couple of times? (Because you do it for you, and if anyone else benefits, that is gravy.) Sometimes, though, it is a valid question. Given what you claim to believe, or your physical limitations, or whatever it may be, what is the point of trying to do something? It makes no sense. Given a certain theological stance, why do some people do something that seems contradictory to their beliefs?

First a brief history. Shortly after the beginning of Christ’s church, there arose various groups. One of those was Gnosticism. Among the beliefs of the Gnostics was that all flesh (or all matter) is evil, and cannot be good. Gnosticism was rejected as a heresy and died out as a distinct group. Many years later, when the Reformation caused many to question Roman Catholic (and to some extent Eastern Orthodox) doctrine, some ideas that people thought were dead revived. Among those was Gnosticism. John Calvin incorporated part of Gnostic doctrine in the first of his five tenets, the Total Depravity of man.

That part of Gnosticism has always led to one of two conclusions. If man’s flesh is totally sinful (but the soul is not), then one option is that the soul can be saved but the flesh keeps on sinning. (This contradicts Romans 6, which argues that we must not continue sinning if we have been saved from sin.) The other conclusion is that Jesus could not have been God and flesh, so therefore he only appeared to be in bodily form. (This ignores Hebrews 10:20, which says that we have access to God through his flesh.)

Calvinism, which is currently practiced by Presbyterians and Congregationalists (and to some extent Baptists) is based on the doctrine of predestination of individuals. Its extreme form, that God is in control of every detail of life, makes one ask, what’s the point? If God can make sick or heal, why does the Presbyterian

Church put up so many hospitals? Going further, what is the point of living at all?

Some of Calvin’s other points related to that doctrine include Unconditional Election and Irresistible Grace. The former says that God has chosen (predestined) those who will be saved and those that will be lost. The latter says that if God has elected an individual, that person cannot help but be among the elect; the most extreme form of this is that the elect cannot choose to sin. Ignoring that these doctrines seem to contradict the first (if man is totally sinful, how can he receive the grace and no longer sin?), these doctrines raise an important question: What’s the point?

Given that I am totally sinful and cannot choose to be otherwise, that God has chosen me to be among the saved from that sinfulness, and that I cannot help but be saved, what is the point of preaching? If one is to be elect, and cannot resist it, then they will be elect whether or not the word is preached to them. If one is not among the elect and cannot choose election, then preaching to that person is nothing more than a waste of time.

How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach, except they be sent? as it is written, How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things! (Rom 10:14-15)

It appears that Paul had never heard the doctrine of individual predestination, or the doctrines that come from it. He says preaching is important, as is hearing, in bringing one into faith. Preaching has a point. If so, where does that leave the followers of John Calvin and his pupil John Knox?

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SONGS THAT SPEAK

I recently heard on the radio a current singer of the genre now known as Christian music discussing one of his songs. He was a preacher's kid, and once asked why they always only sang the same old songs. Why didn't they sing songs that spoke to him? It is a valid question, and one of his answers was that as he grew up he started writing and singing songs from his heart. Not everyone can do that successfully, however. For most people the question remains.

(Author's note: this article is more of a discussion of how I see music in the church, rather than a discussion of what the Bible says music in the church should be. Also, this discussion is mostly about the words, since some music may be excellent but people are not even aware there were once words to it.)

There are a couple of possible answers to this singer's question of why the church doesn't sing songs that speak to him. Some relate to the listener, and others to the songs.

The listener

One answer, particularly if it is a child asking the question, is that you are not letting the songs speak to you.

In congregational singing, the words are speaking to "us," not me.

There is a reason that the "old" songs are still around. They have stood the test of time. Hundreds of songs have not, and we have yet to see which of the contemporary songs will do so. Johann Sebastian Bach wrote a new mass practically every week, yet even the most ardent Bach fan is only familiar with a small portion of the music he wrote. When you write that much music, even if your name is Bach, some of it is not so good, and some may even be downright bad. Only the good stuff lasts. So it is with the more popular hymns. They last because, for the most part, they are good; they "speak to" a majority of people over the years. If, then, they have stood the test of time, perhaps some do not hit the mark with a listener because he is not listening. "They have ears but they hear not." (Ps 115:6)

That is not to say that all the older hymns will address every individual's concerns. Some songs may not apply at the time, but may become beloved after other circumstances. Not every song on every contemporary album becomes a hit, but even the "B sides" may be popular with a few people. They obviously had meaning

to the writers. This is true with any written work. I have tried three times to get into *Wuthering Heights* and *Crime and Punishment*. Both are great novels, but not for me. Some songs may be great for the majority of a congregation, but not for some people (regardless of age). Even if this is true, however, some of the older hymns should be popular among young people. It is my experience that this is true; even some song leaders as young as ten years old will choose a mix of older and contemporary songs.

In one other sense, the song writer I mentioned at the first has a valid statement. "The older songs don't speak to *me*." What he fails to realize is that in congregational singing, the words are speaking to "us," not me. A congregation sings as a congregation, a corporate entity. In singing we are to be "teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs." (Col 3:16) This is a group teaching, just as when a preacher targets his sermon to one person the majority gets ignored. Most contemporary Christian music on the radio is very personal. There is nothing wrong with that. It does mean, however, that most of these songs are inappropriate for congregational singing.

The songs

On the other side of the coin, though, there may be a fault with some of the songs. Americans in general think the plays of Shakspeare are boring. Part of this is because they are forced to *read*, rather than *hear/see* the plays. Part of this is because language has changed in the past 400 years. It is the same reason that we have newer translations than the King James Version of the Bible. The same principle is true with songs, as well. Even though they have an excellent and biblical message, some of the older songs should be retired because their language is outdated. (When was the last time more than a handful of rural church members actually brought in sheaves? Or even know what a sheaf is?)

Until the middle 1800s, even American English retained a separate first person singular pronoun: thou instead of you. Even after the various forms of "thou" disappeared from common speech (except among some groups such as the Quakers and Amish), they were retained in hymnody. Many of the older popular hymns still use the distinctive second person singular pronoun. Thus we have *O, Thou Fount of Every Blessing* or *I am Thine, O Lord*. Even some contemporary writers try to use these words, often without an understanding of proper grammar. Thus you get phrases like "thou were," rather than "thou wert." A popular version of *As the Deer* mixes archaic and modern. "My soul pants after thee. You alone...." When the language gets so old, or so

ungrammatical, perhaps those songs should be removed from the repertoire. “I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also.” (1 Cor 14:15)

Other songs have been popular, but discerning people realize that they contain a faulty message. Sometimes it isn’t theologically significant. In *The Days of Elijah*, for instance, the lyric speaks of “David, rebuilding a temple of praise.” To be scripturally correct it might be better to say that David was “preparing a temple,” since you can’t rebuild something that you were specifically forbidden to build in the first place. Other songs may have had their day, but people have realized over time that they really had an unscriptural message. Fortunately most of these songs have quickly died out. I knew a person who did not like to sing *In the Garden* because she objected to the validity of the lines, “And the joy we share as we tarry there/ None other has ever known.” After all, Jesus said, “And now come I to thee; and these things I speak in the world, that they might have my joy fulfilled in themselves.” (Jn 17:13) His full joy is for everyone, not one individual. Others object to the reference to a “double cure” in *Rock of Ages*, since this is based on a purely Calvinist construction of justification. Nevertheless, while some songs may be un-scriptural, most that last are, fortunately, not anti-scriptural.

Is contemporary music any better? As said earlier, we will have to wait for the test of time on some songs. Nevertheless, there seems to be a certain trend toward dumbing down the audience. There is one contemporary version of an older hymn that throws out a perfectly good melody for one that consists of basically four notes (a glorified bass line). Much of what is written today is strong on emotion and weak on doctrine. Many people are being raised on a diet of water instead of “the sincere milk of the word.” (1 Pet 2:2) The greater tendency is toward laziness in writing lyrics. Some people refer to some of the newer songs as “7-11” songs; the same seven words repeated eleven times. Nor is this far from wrong. I have a (bad?) habit of listening to some songs and counting the repetitions. One song refers to “these four words” and then follows it with twelve words (four words repeated three times). The record so far is nine “on the move”s, only three of which are preceded by “God is.” While “God is on the move” may be a perfectly valid sentiment, repeating the phrase that many times in one chorus is lazy writing, and lazy writing in hymns and spiritual songs tends to lead to lazy listening and even lazy following.

That is not to say that contemporary song writing is worse than the older hymns. It is probably an indication that we are more exposed to the good and bad before the bad is weeded out. There are some excellent newer songs. The claim has been made that more people have sung the music of Chris Tomlin than any other song writer. Part of that is because his music is sung by whole congregations of people; but part is because he has written some very good songs. He himself could probably list a number of his songs, though, that have not become popular; they just

were not that good, either musically or lyrically. Some of the songs being written today will last (hopefully some of them with better vocal arrangements). Others will disappear. That is evident even in a short time of listening to Christian radio. Songs that hit the top 40 today may never be played again after they have had their week or two of fame. Others have been played long after their “top 40” status has disappeared.

I said I was talking mostly about the words we sing. There is one aspect, though, in which the music itself must be addressed. With the advent of Christian radio, most of the popular songs today are written for a band. One problem with this is that these songs do not translate well into congregational hymns. Many of the older hymns were either written for four-part harmony, or were written as melodies and adapted to such harmonies. Many of the contemporary songs are written with a band in mind. There are pauses for instrumental licks. In some cases there is no thought to harmonic arrangements, and in some

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cases not even to a melody singable by the average person. Because of the popularity of the recorded arrangement, even transposing it down into a more acceptable key makes it sound strange. There are pauses for instrumental licks which make for awkward pauses if the song is rearranged for congregational singing without instruments. (Yes, there are still many of us in various traditions that opt for a *capella* singing.)

So what does all this mean? There are a few things a church can do to meet the needs of all of its members. These suggestions are tailored to the Church of Christ because that is what I am familiar with, and because those churches have long had a reputation for good singing and scripture-based teaching. First, a church should understand that their members have different needs. They should include a good mix of older and newer songs, based on the age and ability of their membership. In a tradition in which there may be a different song/worship leader each week, this shouldn’t be hard (especially if young men are taught to be leaders.) Second, teach what is good; not just what makes good music, but what is also good from the scriptures. It is as easy to sing a lie as it is to preach one. Third, just because it is popular on the radio doesn’t mean it should be sung in the assembly. There are some very good songs that are good for private singing that just do not fit the assembly setting. Our songs should “speak” to us, and it would be wrong to leave out a large portion of the membership in that singing. But it is equally wrong to concentrate on ourselves to the exclusion of others.

FALLING ON FACES

Backstage at the opera recently, a friend of mine related an incident early in his acting career. He was in a production that required him to fall forward to die. Unfortunately nobody had taught him anything about stage falls, and he had no martial arts training to teach him to fall. He literally fell flat on his face. He broke a tooth and ended up with cuts and bruises. He had a scar which was normally hidden by his beard, but for this production he was required to shave. His action, though, seems to be a common one in the Bible. Frequently people are said to fall on their faces.

My friend's action seems to be mirrored in that of Balaam. Three times his ass sees the angel of God and balks. Finally, the ass speaks. When his mouth is opened, so are Balaam's eyes. He sees the angel, and what does he do. Like my friend he "fell flat on his face." (Num 22:31) He didn't just bow his head; he didn't just fall on his face. He fell *flat* on his face. That is pretty emphatic.

It seems that falling on one's face is a common reaction when seeing an angel, or God. Abraham did it twice in one day. (Gen 17:3, 17) The whole nation of Israel did it when fire from God consumed the sacrifice at Aaron's ordination, and likewise when fire consumed the sacrifice on Mount Carmel. (Lev 9:24; 1 Kings 18:39) When Joshua met the captain of the host of the Lord upon entering the Promised Land, he fell on his face. (Josh 5:14) The angel of the Lord appeared to Manoah and his wife to announce the birth of Samson. When they realized he was an angel, they fell on their collective faces. (Jdg 13:20) David saw the angel of the Lord about to destroy Jerusalem, and he fell on his face. (1 Chron 21:16) (The place where he did so became the location of the

Temples.) Ezekiel and Daniel did the face-fall thing, as did the three apostles at the Transfiguration (Matt 17:6). Even in John's vision the angels and the elders fell on their faces before God. (Rev 7:11; 11:16) When confronting God, it seems automatic. In the cases of Joshua and Mr. & Mrs. Manoah, it appears that the angels may appear as normal people, but when they are recognized as angels, then comes the face plant.

People also fell on their faces before other people, usually those in authority over them. Ruth did it before Boaz. (Ruth 2:10) David (before officially becoming king) honored his friend Jonathan in this way (1 Sam 20:41), and was in turn honored by Abigail, who later became his wife (1 Sam 25:23). The book of 2 Samuel is full of people falling on their faces before kings. (2 Sam 9:6; 14:4,22; 18:28)

Jesus was the recipient of this honor from a couple of lepers, one before being healed (Lk 5:12) and one after (Lk 17:16). But Jesus himself fell on his face to pray to God. (Matt 26:39)

Apparently falling on one's face before another is a sign of honor or respect. How interesting would it be if members of the church fell on their faces before the elders of the congregation? The elders, though, would probably be so humble as to tell them to get up, as they are mere men.

What is a proper position for prayer? It could be with upraised hands, or bowed heads, or kneeling. Jesus, in an extreme situation, felt that it was appropriate to pray on his face. Were we to do so, it would be to emphasize our position before God. That position, in any case, is as if we were flat on our faces.

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