

Hymns or Choruses?

Here are some directional thoughts about why I prefer using our present hymnal instead of modern praise choruses in worship. I taught some of these things in an adult Sunday school class in Sept. 2001 which is available as a Sunday School Review (Issue #13).

When interviewed over the phone prior to being called to Mt. Airy, I was asked about my position regarding the use of modern praise music in public worship. I said I was opposed to it in preference but not in principle. I went on to explain that if a church was accustomed to singing praise choruses I would not campaign to have them removed, but if a church did not use them I would not push to have them instituted. My reasons follow.

The issues involved are not relevant to the regulative principle. The regulative principle is concerned with the elements of worship; in this case, that we sing praise. But the issue of contemporary praise choruses concerns form and circumstance; namely, what words to sing, and how to sing them. Noting this should soften the edges and tone of discussion from black vs. white and right vs. wrong, to grey vs. pale and best vs. worst. This is why I am opposed to them in preference but not in principle. It is not wrong to sing them. In fact we must sing in worship. But I think there is better music to sing, much like some translations of the Bible are better than others.

My reasons for resisting the use of modern choruses in

public worship are based on cultural observations in relation to our objective to maintain and foster a distinctively Reformed congregation that maintains its distinctives from generation to generation. I believe the use of our hymnal is better than the use of praise choruses because it suits our goal of propagating a distinctively Reformed expression of historical Christianity, against the trendy expressions of generationally isolated and doctrinally light evangelicalism of our day.

The history of congregational singing from the Reformation era forward gives us at least six classifications of songs used in congregational singing: Metrical Psalms, Hymns, Gospel Hymns, Gospel Songs, and Praise Choruses. The metrical psalms are psalms translated into Western meter. This type of congregational singing was prominent during the Reformation (15-1600's). The Strassbourg Psalter and the Geneva Psalter are examples.

The Hymn rose to prominence in the 1700's thanks to Isaac Watts. Other hymn writers include Wesley, Cowper, Newton, and Toplady. The Hymn is a stately, scholarly, doctrinally reflective, literary song for congregational use. Examples include: How Firm a Foundation; Rock of Ages; and O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing. A popular hymn from the Reformation era is Luther's A Mighty Fortress.

Gospel Hymns began to rise in use during the 1800's. They are lighter than the Hymn, have lilting melodies, poetic lyrics, and are personally reflective. Examples include: Just

as I Am; Sweet Hour of Prayer; Nearer, My God to Thee; Near the Cross.

Even lighter than the Gospel Hymn is the Gospel Song. Gospel Songs have jingly melodies adopted for use in the revival services of the 18-1900's. They often have a circus bounce to them. Showers of Blessing; Wonderful Words of Life; and Praise Him! Praise Him! are examples of this class. You might think of writers like Fanny Crosby and Phillip Bliss.

Praise Choruses came to prominence in the 1970's. They are more ambient than Gospel Songs. Reflecting the soft rock of the 1970's, they are guitar-based, repetitive campfire anthems. Often they consist of portions of Scripture put to music, though covering a limited range of topics. They are the most popular class of congregational singing today, imbedded in the Christian entertainment industry. Our hymnal incorporates all but Praise Choruses, though perhaps #42, El-Shaddai, and a few others might fall into this category.

From a broader perspective, we might recognize three common musical idioms: folk, popular, and classical. Folk music is unique among certain subcultures, having deep roots in the history of an ethnic group or region. The music of the Appalachian mountains is a good example of this. Gospel music, originating out of the historical religious narrative of blacks in America is a good example of the folk idiom in the church's music.

Popular music is a more recent phenomenon. With the invention of radio and the methods of marketing, certain styles of music are spread across a broad spectrum of society. This type of music is always changing with fads, creating a generational identity among its listeners. One might say that pop music is the opposite of folk music. Folk music is restricted to a small group of people and passed down from generation to generation, while pop music has a broad audience of isolated generations.

The classical idiom is both generationally and geographically broad. It is not restricted to one area (like folk) or one generation (like pop). This is the most extensive idiom (not denying certain limitations).

The popular and classical idioms might also be contrasted by their standards. The standard for pop music is its capacity to quickly capture the attention of the broad, changing market of public opinion. But the classical idiom conforms to more critical standards often at odds with mass appeal. The classical idiom is a criteria-based idiom of high standards, even cumbersome standards.

To be sure, crossover and interaction exist between the three idioms creating many musical five o'clock shadows. But their distinctions cannot be denied.

Our hymnal is a product of the classical idiom of music because it preserves and widely distributes generations of doctrinally and musically accepted songs. It has undergone great editorial scrutiny and ecclesiastical criticism prior to

and after publication with a view towards the furtherance and preservation of our denomination's doctrinal history, integrity, and distinctives. For example, read the first few pages of the Trinity Hymnal. Good hymnals are intended to be a lasting deposit of timeless music.

The praise choruses which are fast replacing hymnals are products of the popular idiom. They piggy-back the mass market being created, approved, and promoted by an entertainment industry guided by popular opinion.

The question we face as a church is not, Which idiom is right and which idiom is wrong? It is always right to sing praise to God!! Our concern is to weigh the relative cultural value of using modern praise choruses in relation to our concern to promote a distinctively Presbyterian church with a historically Reformed identity. I believe the classical idiom as it is reflected in our hymnal embodies those concerns best.

A church which is distinctively isolated by regional membership and tradition like some of the Independent Baptist churches in the mountains around here have good reason to lean heavily on the folk idiom. We do not have a folk-culture identity, and any attempt to reproduce their music might be transparently awkward and fake (much like a white person trying to speak in a black dialect).

The praise choruses are especially adapted for broad evangelical churches intent on gaining mass appeal, grand numbers, and downplaying the type of denominational-

traditional identity we value.

The classical idiom insofar as it relates to the songs in our hymnal seems best suited for propagating a Reformed church which is neither evangelically broad and shallow, nor culturally deep and isolated. Hymnals are deep and broad.

If you have a minute, take a look at the Preface of our hymnal on pages 7-8 which explains some of the editorial standards behind its production. Also, if you look at the Table of Contents of the hymnal you will find that the hymns are organized according to the sections in our Shorter Catechism.

But you might ask, Why do we use a piano rather than a guitar or a praise band? Again, there is nothing wrong with using a guitar to accompany singing in church. But using a piano is better, because the guitar is less formal and reverent, by comparison, to the piano. Since part of our purpose as a church is to recapture reverence and formality in public worship, the piano is better suited to that end.

Not everyone is going to like the way we worship. Some will think we are too formal and reverent, others will think we are not formal and reverent enough, others will think things are just right. In fact, this is the case. I have even had visitors comment that our worship is too informal and irreverent, and I am sure you have heard other visitors say just the opposite.

Anyway, before we begin asking, "Why can't we sing

praise choruses?” and “Why can’t we use guitars?” know that we are using our hymnal and the piano not because we think it is wrong to use an overhead projector and a guitar. We just think the piano and hymnals are better suited for what we are trying to do. We are not trying to grow a massive, popular church.

-Pastor Ferry