

RedMountainChurch

BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA



>> Worship

Terminology

I've been grappling with what terms to use to describe what I believe worship (and here especially, music) should be. The common descriptions are "traditional", "contemporary", and "blended". I think that these words are limited.

When people have asked what style of worship RMC will have (contemporary or traditional?), I've struggled to find the right explanation. But here is my best shot.

I would say our worship must be both Ancient and Authentic.

Ancient? Ancient worship reminds us of the faith that has been handed down through the centuries, the faith of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. We are part of something so much greater than ourselves, and when we come onto the scene, we discover that a great "cloud of witnesses" has come before us. So, worship should be grounded in the glorious and ancient history of the people of God. This means that our liturgy (form of worship) must reflect our heritage, and it must help us to remember where we come from. We can therefore happily include creeds and confessions, hymns, and other ancient forms.

But this is the year 2001. We don't live in the Middle Ages, the Reformation, or ancient Ireland. We are not Puritans, and we definitely ain't the Cleavers! This is our time, and we are now center-stage in the history of the church. This means that our worship must reflect who we are, and must speak to our time and our people! That's why I use the term Authentic. Worship must reflect our own robust faith and very real experience of the "deep, deep love of Jesus". Worship must stir the mind, will, and emotions. It must take us through the wide range of experience that comes along with dealing with a living God. It must also be conducted in the language of the people, and speak to the heart of the people. We have to constantly ask who we are and who we are reaching?

Forms

So, what will this look like? This is a little hard to answer before we even exist, of course. But I want to offer some ideas as a starting point for reflection.

First a word about the elements we'll employ. I think our worship should regularly include ancient forms such as creeds, confessions, readings, benedictions, calls to worship, and prayers (this following Acts 2:42, "They devoted themselves to the Apostle's teaching, to fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer..."). But, we must constantly explain what we are doing and why we are doing it. I think with a little effort and creativity, these elements can become very meaningful. (I have seen this done well in several church plants recently. The combination of liturgy, excellent music, gospel-centered preaching and communion is rich.)

Also, we plan to celebrate Communion weekly. There is strong biblical reason for this. The idea of monthly or quarterly celebration is pretty random. We are literally feeding on Christ by faith. The meal was instituted by Jesus Himself, and was given to us as a way to participate in His life. (We should probably plan on an hour and fifteen minutes to an hour and a half for worship). I think you will find yourself renewed again and again as we break bread together.

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Music

I break music for worship into two categories: musical offerings and corporate singing. Musical offerings consist of preludes, offertories, post-ludes, etc. (We don't have to use those terms). These can be vocal or instrumental. Corporate singing is of course, well, corporate singing.

If we want our music to reflect both ancient traditions and still be authentic, then we can (should) employ many music styles. We must encourage our musicians to pursue excellence, and to push the edge of creativity. I would love to see a wide range of music, including classical, jazz, folk, gospel, and "edgy" music. That means multiple instruments, and a variety of musicians. We need musical leadership to be able to play, arrange a body of music, and recruit trained, proven musicians.

One word about hymn texts. It has been my experience that older texts (over 100 years) as a whole are much richer than more modern texts. They demonstrate a more robust theology, plus a very deep experience of the realities of the gospel (maybe these are lacking in modern evangelicals?). Just open an older hymnal and lay it next to music written in the last 25 years or so. See if the more modern seems a little pale. Older hymns are expressed in rich and beautiful poetry. I believe that the current generation is surely capable of such creativity, and needs to be encouraged toward a deep faith in Christ, and the artistic expressions that flow from that experience. One of our ministries may be to challenge our musicians and poets to create a more lasting body of music.

For corporate singing, I want us to consider primarily (not exclusively) using these older hymn texts. But, we have to do them in excellent and singable ways. (RUF has a growing legacy of taking hymns and writing new music for them). Sometimes the original tune is best, but needs to be well. (Good examples include "O Sacred Head Now Wounded", "Praise to the Lord, the Almighty", "A Mighty Fortress", to name a few). Sometimes, our musicians can borrow or arrange new music that suits the text of a hymn. The music should lead us through a broad range of moods and experience (think of Lent versus Easter). Sometimes the music can be simple (maybe one guitar or piano or accapella), and sometimes elaborate (can we get the Birmingham Symphony?). But always thoughtful, creative, and excellent. Simple choruses are fine, but all music must be gospel-centered and sound.

One thing to hold in our prayers is that God will give us a number of musicians who can share the load. There is a great deal of work involved in doing this well. Also, they have to work together. While not every musician has to have the big picture of what we are doing (I'm not convinced that every musician even has to be Christian), the leadership must have a commitment to the overall vision of RMC and adhere to our theology of worship. They have to have an attitude that guards against performance and entertainment and seeks the glory of God. They must protect what we do under the oversight of our elders.

We also need a great sound system.

Conclusion

There are a number of things that we need to do well from day one. Worship is at the top of that list. That means I need to figure out how to preach, and that means that the music has to be excellent. That's why I want to be ready, and not throw things together as an after thought.

Our services could look different from week to week. If we have a representation of African Americans, shouldn't there be music that moves their souls, and wouldn't it be great to have some gospel music?

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What about Hispanics, bohemians (that's a state of mind, not a country), highly educated University professors or all of the above? Who is there? That will shape what we do.

I have found that unbelievers who are seeking, don't usually like singing in church. They come to hear what Christianity is about and often think that the worship is weird. We would love to reduce the "cringe" factor (the number of times you cringe in worship when you bring a friend thinking, "oh, why did we do that?"), so excellence is important. Also, it helps when preaching and liturgy take into account (every week) that seekers and those with real questions about Christianity are present.

But when all is said and done, we are coming together to sing the "new song" that He has given us. And this we will do with great joy as we learn to share together in His life! "When this poor, lisping, stammering tongue lies silent in the grave, then in a nobler, sweeter song I'll sing Thy power to save!"

Listening Suggestions

Here is a listing of music that you can get your hands on that gives a good selection of hymns done in various styles. All of these are worth the price!!

- > Boundless Free... (A hymn collection from RUF at Auburn). See www.auburn.edu/ruf and click on the music section.
- > A Cloud of Witnesses (featuring Jonathan Barnes, who you will notice is on our list!)
- > From All Their Sin and Sorrow (RUF: New York City) See www.ruf.org. Proceeds benefit Is58, a ministry to Aids patients.
- > Indelible Grace (RUF at Belmont/Christ Community Presbyterian) See www.christcommunity.org and go to college ministry.
- > Open My Eyes and Double Cure (both put together by the 6:30 Band from Redeemer Presbyterian In Manhattan. These are both instrumental jazz versions of select hymns). Actually Redeemer has great music resources. I'll try and find my order form and get you the info. They have a tremendous Christmas CD!
- > Hymns and Meditations (Fernando Ortega). Any Christian bookstore.