

Thoughts on Music and Emotions

Dr. Kevin Bauder

The last thing that Jesus did before He left the Upper Room was to sing a hymn with His disciples. This was good Jewish tradition. Like Jesus, and like Old Testament Israel, Christians have always expressed their faith in music and verse. They have used hymnody both as a means of worshipping God and as a way of teaching and admonishing one another.

Often when we think of teaching, we think of doctrines, of affirmations that tell us Who God is and what He is doing. We can learn doctrines best by reading creeds or attending lectures. Good hymnody does not neglect doctrine—indeed, the best hymns always have a strong doctrinal foundation. Good hymnody, however, reaches beyond the mere statement of doctrines: it engages our feelings. Good hymnody embodies and fosters a right emotional response toward God and His ways.

In other words, good hymns are irreducibly emotional. If the emotional element is removed, we might as well be reading some dry volume of systematic theology. The whole point of hymnody is emotion, but in saying that I wish to insert two qualifications.

The first qualification is that, while good hymns always express emotion, they are never about the emotion. They are about God and His ways. The emotion must be our response to a right understanding of Who God is and what He is doing, and never a response to our own emotionalism. If we are going to tell God that we love Him, for example, then let us sing about the perfections that make Him lovely, and not indulge ourselves in self-congratulation about how very, very much we feel.

The second qualification is that good hymns must always be careful to express the right emotions. We experience different qualities of love, of joy, of awe, of gratitude. Some of these can rightly be offered to God, but some cannot. For example, if I express my love toward God in terms that I would normally use to express my fondness for a good hunting dog or my appetite for a plate of spaghetti, then I am being worse than silly. I am taking the name of the Lord my God in vain. Whenever we open the hymnal, we ought to remind ourselves that Jesus is not our boyfriend, not our buddy, not our therapist, not our favorite star or celebrity. He is no less than the sum of all His perfections and mighty deeds, and that is why we shall never have enough good hymns.

As I have said, good hymns are always emotional. Indeed, if a hymn articulates a right emotion in the right way, I doubt that it could ever be too emotional. This emotional component is what makes Christian music different from our doctrinal statements and theology books. Because of this emotional component, good hymns will help the people of God in two ways.

The first way that good hymns help us is by providing us with a language to express things that we don't know how to say. Most of us possess a limited emotional language. We may feel deeply about certain things (our love for our spouses, our grief at the passing of a loved one, our awe at natural beauty), but most of us cannot readily express what we feel. So it is in our walk with God. As we come to know Him, we find in Him a quality of love, of peace, of joy, and of consolation that we have met nowhere else. To worship God means exactly to reflect these responses back to Him. If we do not have the language to express the emotion, then our worship

will necessarily be hindered. A good hymn should give us the language that we need to verbalize the right response to God as we meet Him. That is the first use of a good hymn.

Some hymns help us in a second, deeper way. Besides providing us with a language to say what we feel, they actually teach us to feel the right things. The combination of music with poetic imagery possesses enormous evocative power. A very good hymn can take us into emotions that we have never experienced before. It can open aspects of God's character before us and induce within us exactly the response that God deserves and that He yearns to hear from us. When this happens, we are experiencing hymnody at its best; we genuinely are teaching one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.

[Consider two kinds of music.] The first is music that is meant to be done by the people of God, and the second is music that is meant to be overheard by the people of God. In both of these categories, the true audience is God Himself. The music is offered to Him, for His glory and for His pleasure. The difference between these two kinds of music lies in how the music is presented.

The first kind of music is written to be sung by the assembled people of God, the congregation. All of God's people are invited to participate in the presentation of this music. To accommodate the skills of ordinary people, this music is typically simple and accessible.

The second kind of music is specially prepared and presented by trained musicians, but it is offered to God in a setting in which it will be overheard by His people. It is sometimes called "special music," and it is like a musical version of public prayer. Trained singers and instrumentalists present a musical offering in behalf of the congregation. Their skills permit a more excellent level of expression, and the listening congregation is able to enter sympathetically into the presentation. The musicians become spokespersons for the congregation, voicing in a more perfect way some sensibility that all share.

Each of these categories carries its own danger. Because congregational music has to be accessible, it can slide into mere entertainment or degenerate into the trivial. Because special music requires a level of virtuosity, it can become overly complex or degenerate into art for art's sake. The problem with either of these extremes is that the focus is drawn away from God, away from truth, and shifted to the music or the musicians. When this happens, hymnody becomes idolatry.

Of course, the line between congregational music and special music is not always clear. Sometimes congregational hymns are arranged for presentation by special musicians. Sometimes special music can be simplified for congregational singing. In any event, the audience remains God Himself. The music is offered to Him. The focus is His pleasure and His glory.

Excerpted from remarks on "Jesu Meine Freude." Address at the Deo Cantamus Agape Concert
<http://www.centralseminary.edu/publications/DeoCantamusAgape.htm>
Dr. Bauder is president of Central Baptist Theological Seminary in Plymouth, MN