

Music and Emotions

Introduction

It seems to me that two complex words, ideas, or concepts are before us to define and discuss. One might ask “what place does emotion, both positively and negatively, have in the life of the believer and what is music’s role as a vehicle for these emotions?” Even more difficult, perhaps, will be a natural follow up question; “How are we to come to biblical conclusions that will be helpful?” “How should this be fleshed out in our lives and ministries?” If “music is the language of the emotions” then it stands that there *are both* positive and negative emotions.

I believe, what faces us is a dilemma of sorts. On one hand, it seems to me we must call our churches to the positive need to love the Lord with “heart, soul, mind, and strength.” To offer God heartless, emotionless worship is incomprehensible. Our expressions of love certainly must include an emotional response. On the other hand, we must also caution our churches and people not to be so controlled by their own emotional response in worship that they/we become anthropocentric, or worse, Hedonistic. We must not approach God to show Him our love in worship for what we might get out of it. I am convinced that whatever our music standard, we are tempted to become selfish brides as His church. We must commit to becoming less selfish not more self-centered.

I take as common knowledge and assume that there is agreement in the truism that music is the language of the emotions. That music can build or reinforce negative emotions that are controlled by the flesh, and that music can build and reinforce positive emotions that are controlled by the Spirit. Maybe I assume too much in our post-modern world, but no doubt others in this book will be addressing music’s power around us. So, I begin with a development of a theology of emotions.

Our Emotional Makeup

On this subject I am sure your bookshelf is as barren as mine is. As a basis for discussion I would suggest the following presuppositions. 1) God is a person with emotions. Although liberals and deists have long denied the personhood of God we see Him in Scripture as a feeling as well as acting Person. This is good news! God has created us in His image. We have a God with whom we can relate. (Hebrews 4:13-16) 2) Because we are created in God’s image (Genesis 1:26-27) we are emotional beings like our maker. In fact, it is this very truth that allows us a level of fellowship unique in all of God’s creation. 3) Not only do we have this relationship because we have been created in God’s image, we also have a unique relationship because of our oneness with Christ through spiritual adoption. (Romans 8:15-17)

Christians are called to actively allow Christ to be formed in us. Certainly this must include His emotional makeup. An examination of Christ’s emotions reveals a full range of feelings that are obvious for all to see. Christ is our example, and as our example He readily showed emotions as He lived before men as a man.

To suppress our emotions would be to deny our godlikeness in creation and the forming of Christ in us in the new birth. Having stated this in defense of emotion in worship and music, it is also important to balance it with the clear declaration; we, as

believers, must learn to live with this emotional part of our person and without being controlled by it. Emotions must be both acknowledged and controlled.

The Proper Place of Emotion

In any discussion of emotions in music, we must understand the society in which we live. We *are* a post-modern society and one of the clear characteristics of post-modernism is its reliance on emotion as the determiner for right and wrong. “If it feels good, do it!” There are a few things about post-modernism that might seem appealing. One is that people are open to the idea that some things are not explainable by science. Post-modern people are open to the miraculous. When it comes to emotions, people in our new culture are repulsed by deadness. On this point it doesn’t take much Bible study to realize that God is also repulsed by deadness. Unfortunately, people today often elevate emotions above everything else. It is here that we must separate company with the world’s thinking. We must not be slaves to emotions.

I am sure that our founding fathers had no idea that the phrase “the pursuit of happiness” would become the rallying cry of a hedonistic America. It is certain that this post-modern idea has influenced the Christian’s view of the place of emotions. It is not our constitutional guarantee of our birthright as believers to freely pursue whatever tickles our emotional fancy in this world. To the contrary, we are called to “deny ourselves” take up our cross and follow Christ. (Matthew 16:24) This act of volition should be accompanied by emotion, no doubt (i.e. love, fear, or joy), but we are not to be controlled by the emotions that may accompany our commitment. In matters of worship and music, we must even more emphatically keep ourselves from offering to God our gift of worship because of how it makes us feel.

But let’s face it, many people choose a church or theological system based on how it makes them feel emotionally not on cognitive evidence. The merits of music are simply based on my emotional response at the end of it. Without being too unkind, I must ask if fundamentalist are any less guilty of this flawed way of thinking. How often have we come to the end of a service and judged its success or failure on how our people or we felt about it?

Having said this, emotions can in some cases be helpful in a diagnostic sense. Here we must exercise caution. Very different emotions can masquerade as being the same. For example, although “godly sorrow leadeth thee to repentance” (II Corinthians 7:10) there is certainly a morbid depression that is an evidence of the absence of God’s Spirit. (I Samuel 16:14 cf. Galatians 5:22) Relaxation and depression may seem close. In matter of music, the question must be asked is my emotional response to this depression or relaxation? Is this music exciting or violent/sensual? With this caution in mind, it is proper to use emotional response as a small part of the “halo data” we use when making musical choices. Again, caution is the watchword.

Worship and Emotions

We come now to how we judge the relative success or failure of a worship music experience or a music experience in general. Let us first be clear that difference paradigms exist for different music purposes.

All of our music must adhere to certain Biblical principles that glorify Him in this world. There is not time here to fully develop a Christian perspective on entertainment and aesthetics, but I would suggest at least several points on which there is agreement. First, we must begin with a clear affirmation that everything matters to God. God through Paul makes it crystal clear that we must “do all to the glory of God.” (I Corinthians 10:31) Second, it must be acknowledged that even with this overarching principle that must be applied to all the music of the believer, different paradigms do exist for different musical functions. It is on this point that I think some believers are confused. We have been tempted to use a paradigm that is perfectly appropriate for entertainment (a separate theology of entertainment has yet to be postulated by anyone I am aware of) or an aesthetic experience that cannot reasonably be applied to a worship experience. However you may define worship, the musical activity of worship is clearly different in emphasis than music that is intended for entertainment or aesthetic stimulation. In the latter case, our choices may be based more strongly on the emotional responses they produce in us.

But when considering music that is for personal or public worship, other principles must also be applied. (Others will no doubt discuss this in detail in this book.) In either case, whatever music we are listening to should manifest the fruit of godly emotions. (Galatians 5:22-23) It is here where emotions can at times be diagnostic in nature. As to the specific emotions evidenced in the worship music of the Bible, even a cursory reading will reveal that the most common emotion is one of fear; an overwhelming reverential awe at the greatness of God. Or as A. W. Tozer suggests, “a sense of divine mystery. Paul epitomized it for us as ‘Christ in you the hope of Glory.’” (Whatever Happened to Worship? 1985) The repeating sequence in worship experiences in scripture is 1.) God reveals Himself, 2.) Man falls down in fear and humility (bowing or prostrating oneself) 3.) Actions of obedience and service. As you can see, intense emotions are often sandwiched between the cognitive recognition of the transcendent God and the volitional commitment of the worshipper. So is fear only an emotion? Is it only an action? I would suggest that it should be both. And that both the feelings and the actions surrounding worship should be based on clear revelation.

In worship issues, worship examples, worship experiences (whatever terminology we may be most comfortable with) emotions are a byproduct. A specific emotional response neither confirms nor justifies a particular practice in worship. Specific emotions should not be sought after. Clearly this temptation by evangelicals generally and some fundamentalists specifically has led to a market driven view of church ministry. (Others have more thoroughly developed this line of reason by this “Saddelback” model of ministry plays strongly on the emotional happiness of its audience.) When it comes to worship music style, often the bottom line for them is “If they don’t like it we don’t do it.” Yes, Jesus made contact with others, as “a friend of publicans and sinners” (Matthew 11:19) while maintaining His purity. Christ is separate from sinners and unspotted from the world.

Here perhaps a lesson from church history would be in order. Every movement has a history. The hymnological history of the evangelical fundamentalist has been greatly affected by the early American singing school songmaster and the musicians which a generation later accompanied the traveling evangelist. D. L. Moody is quoted as saying; “I cannot judge the value of music until I see how it moves the people.” I wonder

that this litmus test for the value of music has not gone beyond diagnostic. Here decisions seem to be based on emotion response alone, not a solid understanding of what should constitute good music practice. Of course that is the same basic philosophy that subsequent evangelical evangelists have used. The hazards of this approach are just not becoming clearer.

Worship must be based on relationship. This relationship does not need to be purely cognitive and volitional. I believe that any healthy doctrine of man acknowledges that man, like his Creator, has an emotional side. If we are to “love God with our heart, and soul, and mind, and strength, then our whole person, including our emotional side must be involved. Personally, I believe this is where the rub is. How do we engage the whole person in our worship music without being controlled by our emotions? Apathetic worship is an oxymoron. We must worship God as a whole person. Remember that the church of Ephesus was rebuked because of their lack of love for God. A love that the text insists must go beyond their service, doctrinal purity, discernment, patience, and unfainting faithfulness. (Revelation 2:1-7) Our worship must extend beyond our mind and will alone. In our effort to keep our emotions in check, we must not succumb to heartless, emotionless worship. To be sure, emotion-filled worship that is not based on orthodox, biblical doctrine and is not done in the context of obedience God rejects as false worship. But worship without heart is equally odious. You see, God is not looking for worship, He is looking for worshippers. (John 4:23)

Balance in Our Churches

The challenge before us is to help our congregations build on the foundation of orthodox worship, a full-hearted worship that includes heart. It must be possible to have biblical worship that includes emotion. I would suggest at least three areas of consideration in fleshing out this full person worship. To begin, we must remember that we are not in church to perform a service for people, but to aid people in “performing” their service to the Lord. Simply reminding people in our services that we are to sing “with grace in our hearts to the Lord” (Colossians 3:16) may go a long way in helping our people see the importance of heartfelt worship. It is just this persistent, clear, consistent, teaching about worship that is so lacking in many churches today. It is not enough to stand against false worship. We must continue to preach, teach, and model authentic worship before our people if we are ever to please the Lord in our worship.

Modeling biblical worship before our people means we, as leaders must be willing to allow our own emotions to be expressed as we worship. We cannot lead our people somewhere we are not going ourselves. Study your message, but not during a song that is suppose to express your love and awe for Christ! Musicians need to guard against the tendency to be lost in the words or music. We need to prepare so that when we offer our gift of worship before His people, we can still focus on Him, not on ourselves. I believe if we simply yield to the Holy Spirit, if we have Christ-controlled abandon, we will manifest proper emotions. When we enjoy God and the good gifts He has given us, heart-felt emotions will become a part of our worship. God is glorified.

I would suggest as well that our worship would be aided by a renewed commitment to creativity in our worship. As much as we love order and familiarity (and both have their place) we must be creative in our approach from week to week. Variety

can help. It is here where using new orthodox material can be important. Let me also add that hymnological history has seen a pendulum swing between objective and subjective hymnody. We have a rich history of great hymns that express many different emotions. Many hymns are old enough to be new once again. Using these materials in a fresh way both in congregational and “special” (another topic in itself) can be helpful.

Conclusions

Negatively, we must not be held captive by emotional gratification. The musical environment in which we find ourselves has further exacerbated this problem. We drift in a virtual sea of music, even Christian music. We are everywhere surrounded by it. Christian muzak has often caused our worship music to become insipid, mindless filler. We give little conscious thought to the validity of the worship music with which we have surrounded ourselves. We must point our post-modern world to a God that exists outside of their own feelings. We must help our churches to worship God on His terms regardless of our feelings.

Positively, we need to renew our commitment to worship that reflects the whole Person of Christ. Sometimes I wonder if part of the reason the music of the world (which is more a cheap sentimental imitation of true emotion) hasn't become so appealing because in the name of orthodoxy we have offered heartless worship to God before our people. As in many issues, there are two ditches to fall into. Yes we must not be controlled by emotion in the musical choices we make, and we must not excuse emotionless worship either.