

## Young People's Forum (III.18)

Dear Young People,

We have been talking about singing the Psalms in the worship service. I have said about all I intend to say concerning that subject, although there is one other matter that I want to address briefly. You will remember that I mentioned in one of these articles that the history of Psalm-singing in the church has demonstrated that whenever a church or denomination introduced hymns into the singing it was because either heresy had already come into the church, or it had the result that hymns themselves brought heresy into the church. In other words, hymn singing has always been connected with heresy. I know of no exception to this rule. And it is true for Reformed Churches and for Presbyterian Churches.

I have wondered why this should be the case. I think there is one main reason for it. That reason is that it is difficult to sing in worship with the understanding. In writing to the Corinthians about the misuse of speaking in tongues, the apostle writes: "What is it then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will pray with the understanding also: I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also.

To sing with the understanding means that one sings in such a way that he is aware of the words that he is singing and knows what they mean. He makes the words his own confession and prayer. This is not as easy to do as one would suppose. Many songs become familiar to us and we sing them from memory without ever giving a thought to what we are singing. Or we are singing alto or tenor or bass, and we are concentrating so hard on the notes that we do not give the words we are singing any thought.

The fact is that we are more concerned with and interested in the tune, the music, than we are the words. And that is why we like the tunes better than the words. Many of the hymns have, what I would call, catchy tunes, or lively tunes, or unusual, but pleasing harmonies. And so hymns are often more pleasing to people than Psalms, not because the words are better, but because the tune is more appealing. We like tricky tunes with syncopated rhythm, pleasing to the ear, and popular.

The Reformers in Geneva, including John Calvin, knew this and really wanted all the singing to be without harmony and according to tunes which, while stately and edifying, were not in themselves appealing. The Reformers did not want people to sing because the tunes were nice, but because the words expressed Biblical truth.

In other words, people like hymns because of the music and not necessarily because of the words. Some musicians have made millions on this appeal that the music has to people, and have gone so far as to write supposedly Christian music, at least music with religious themes to rock and roll rhythms and tunes, and have called their music, "Christian rock."

Now, I think one can go too far with writing music that has no appeal in itself. Music is a gift of God and must and can be used for God's glory. Not all music, but music which is genuinely music and follows the laws of music that God put into his creation. I am sure that no one will sing rock and roll or rap music in heaven. But the danger is always present that people

like some songs better than others, not because the words are better, but because the music is more attractive and appealing.

And there is no question about it that hymns have more appealing music than Psalms – at least for our modern generation. Psalm singing goes back to the Reformation and carries with it the influence of the Reformation. Hymns are of more recent origin and were written to attract people by means of the music, not necessarily the words.

And, because people sing without giving much thought to the words, but captivated by the music, it is easy to introduce heretical ideas into songs sung in the church so that people do not even notice that the words are not Biblical; they are simply too caught up in the music.

John Wesley was a mystic and an Arminian of the worst sort. He hated Calvinism and even told George Whitefield that if Whitefield did not quit preaching the doctrines of grace, Wesley was not going to have anything more to do with him. Augustus Toplady, author of “Rock of Ages,” was a staunch Calvinist. He warned people against Wesley’s Arminianism. Wesley was so angry that he slandered Toplady unmercifully. Charles Wesley was the brother of John and went with John on his evangelistic campaigns. But Charles was the hymn writer. And, although Charles was a gifted musician and although he knew what kind of music appealed to people, he wrote hymns that fit his brother John’s theology. Yet, Charles Wesley’s hymns are widely used yet today.

Because people like the music better than the words, and because hymns have more appealing music than Psalms, people in the pew clamor for hymns in the worship. And, once starting on the road of hymn singing in the church, it usually happens that sound doctrine has to take a back seat. Many Reformed and Presbyterian Churches, once Psalm-singing churches, have introduced “a few hymns, mostly for special Christian holidays, and have prepared books for singing that have both hymns and Psalms. But it is a well-known fact that when books of worship have both hymns and Psalms, more and more hymns are added, and more and more hymns are sung in the worship services, until the Psalms are not even sung except on rare occasions. When I was attending a Christian primary school, we used the Psalter Hymnal. I can recall that we only sang two Psalter numbers and those only on rare occasions. One was Psalter No. 1 and the other was Psalter No. 7. But we sang some awful hymns.

When I was a teen-ager, I used to sing in a male quartet. Did we ever sing Psalms? No, I cannot recall that we ever sang Psalms. I know that there are not many Psalms written for musical groups composed only of men, but I know too that our quartet liked what are called “negro spirituals,” because of their rollicking rhythms and catchy tunes, their syncopated beat and their close harmony. We did not give too much thought to the words.

Singing that pays attention to the music and ignores the words is singing that is not done with the understanding. And singing that is not done with the understanding is not God-glorifying.

Again, I emphasize, good religious music has its place, and is a gift of God, but singing that ought to be used in the worship must have both: good music and Biblical words. The nearer we can come to that, the more God-glorifying our worship will be.

We are talking about living the life of the antithesis. We must not forget that. The music we play and sing is one powerful way in which we show that we are different from the world.

Anyone can develop a “taste” (probably a sinful taste) for worldly music, when it blares from loudspeakers in stores, restaurants and even in one’s ear when he is put on hold while trying to reach someone on the telephone; but one develops such a taste more quickly when he/she deliberately has that kind of music playing when reading, studying or doing some chore. My wife and I have walked out of restaurants in which such music crashed so loudly against our ear drums that we could not even talk while eating. I have complained to companies that subject one to dreadfully wicked music while they put one on hold. But the wicked world will not be deprived of its sinful music. Let it be said of us that we will not be deprived of our genuinely God-glorifying music.

With our love in the Lord,

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