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Church Music in the Current Technological Age

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Church Music in the Current Technological Age

Abstract

"As hymn books dissolve into digital catalogs and organs morph into macbooks, what do we make of the source of our songs?"

Posting about changes in worship music from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/church-music-in-the-current-technological-age/>

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May 8, 2018

in things

On the topic of church music today, let's consider Billy Graham, especially in the wake of his recent passing. He was the quintessential Western Christian celebrity preacher (something my circles tend to view quite negatively). He was well-known and well-loved. He appeared on Gallup's poll of 10 Most Admired People in America 61 times.¹

However, here's the rub: there was nothing overtly special about Billy. I've listened to many of his sermons and watched documentaries about his life, and I cannot get over how ordinary he was. But, if you or I memorized verbatim one of his sermons and preached it with the same inflection in front of the same people, we wouldn't get the same results. We just wouldn't. There was something else going on.

In my Assembly of God training in college, they call this kind of thing "anointing." I like that term (I John 2:20-27). In Reformed circles, we prefer to use "calling"—and that works, too. Both terms suggest an affirmation of gifts and talents. But, anointing has a certain mystery that implies the idea of something "coming on" (and the archaic association is pretty cool). Calling has a divine directional implication with a sense of doing, while anointing carries a sense of bestowed authority of being where the ordinary is supernaturally empowered. Thus, the "anointing" approach makes sense in keeping with the AG's particular interest with the Holy Spirit.

In my personal experience with the "anointing" concept, I found two obvious pitfalls among my AG friends. The first was the idea that if you are anointed, God does all the work and therefore you really don't have to prepare or plan. In this sense, God will "take over" and then naturally "get the glory," for you certainly did nothing to help. To me, this looked like (young) folks relying on their natural talents to get them as far as they could. It was laziness steeped in false humility. The other misuse was born out of a rigorous work ethic and systems management to the degree that it was hard to decipher what level of supernatural "anointing" was at work. I

saw this in the fast-growing mega churches within the denomination. The term “anointed” became a holy seal of approval on man-made work that looked suspiciously like a formulaic system. Still, in spite of these shortcomings, the idea of anointing resonated with me.

Back to Billy. Call it what you want; he was a sociological phenomenon. Now, I understand that there are many other social phenomena that have nothing to do with promoting Christ or his Kingdom. Viral videos, fidget spinners, Trump’s election... and, I’m sure that in hindsight, it is all scientifically explainable. But, it certainly isn’t predictable. In that sense, perhaps the injection of a supernatural factor into understanding Graham’s phenomenal appeal is more than primitive (or lazy). After all, Paul certainly seemed to think there was more at play when he wrote to the Ephesians: “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Ephesians 6:12). Perhaps the concept of “anointing”—or “calling,” for that matter—might accurately be applied to Graham’s claim to fame, and to the power of his words.

So, what does any of this have to do with Church Music in the Current Technological Age? Depending on your pneumatology², everything!

We know the history of our church music. We know that David was anointed by God as King and that he was a pretty handy songwriter (worship + leader). Half of the Psalms (which made up the song book for the Hebrews) were penned by one man—who was anointed by God. (The Sons of Korah deserve honorable mention, because they wrote a significant number of songs as well.) Likewise, Beethoven, Bach and Mozart have the lion’s share of classical listening spins. Isaac Watts, Fanny Crosby, and Charles Wesley wrote thousands of our most beloved hymns. Matt Redman, Chris Tomlin, and Darlene Zschech made up most worship set lists in contemporary Western churches 20 years ago. And today, Hillsong, Elevation, and Bethel Music pretty well own (somewhat literally) the contemporary church “worship music” scene³

Yet, while we may know the history, all too often we do not know any more than the facts. As hymn books dissolve into digital catalogs and organs morph into macbooks, what do we make of the source of our songs? Who decides what gets written and what gets played (are the worship wars really over)? Is our church music a popularity contest? Nostalgia? Are we victims of the Matthew principle⁴ on social marketing steroids? Are we Christian pawns being duped by business-savvy music ministries with money and power? Or, is there something else, an anointing—like Billy Graham—on people who write songs that seem to resonate and find their way into a majority of Churches throughout the country?

Maybe the technological age has little to do with this lack of interest in what lies behind the

I believe that generations of worshippers have done a poor job of handing the keys of the kingdom to the next of kin. Teaching them songs from history is a different thing than inviting them to express new songs from their current story. Of course we need to know where we've been, but we also need to know where we are and where we are going. It might be that the individuals and groups creating the lion's share of our (growing) churches' music are modern day money-changers whose tables need to be turned. It may be that they are just more talented, culturally savvy, and harder-working than others. Or maybe, just maybe, they are actually anointed by God himself to provide songs for the next generation of Christ's Church.

Footnotes

1. <http://news.gallup.com/poll/228089/news-billy-graham-admired-list-times.aspx> ↵
2. Theology of the Holy Spirit ↵
3. Not to be confused with CCM. It may seem like splitting hairs, but the best I can say that Christian contemporary music (CCM) is to Christian inspirational books as worship music is to devotionals. Obviously, there is some overlap (specifically in content) but the aim is generally different. ↵
4. Matthew 25:29, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Matthew_effect ↵
5. Peterson, Jordan B., Norman Doidge, and Ethan Van Sciver. *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*. 2018. ↵