

The “Rights” of Congregational Singing

by Gordon Adnams

Surely people have every right to want to sing or hear music they like, whether in church or in heaven. Most Christians today would feel that there would be something wrong about asking anyone to attempt to glorify and enjoy God – which the Psalms, Augustine, and Calvinist confessions all describe as our purpose – while employing only music that seems alien to them, or inferior, or markedly inappropriate for worship. But how can people ever hope to discover music they could enjoy together in heaven, when it is increasingly difficult for them to find music they can enjoy together in a single church on earth? (Frank Burch Brown)

Frank Burch Brown’s thoughts strike me as both insightful and inciting; I concur that it is sad that we Christians too often disagree over congregational song, but I take issue with his assumption that “people have every right to want to sing or hear music they like, whether in church or in heaven.” Unfortunately, this tired motif is still heard in churches, but usually less forcefully articulated as a matter of personal preference and taste: “I could really worship this morning - it was my kind of music” or “I really didn’t like the songs today.”

Some churches resolve the difficulty by creating multiple services that cater to different musical preferences, but the vast majority of churches in Canada don’t have enough people to sustain more than one worship service. Such congregations learn to live with diversity and typically include both choruses and songs from the hymnal in their Sunday singing. But, even in a “blended” environment, unease over music is still a fact for many worshippers and attributing this to conflicting musical tastes is a simple explanation that yields little insight.

From time immemorial, people have sung together to proclaim and create an identity, engender loyalty, to praise, encourage, lament and rejoice. Leaders of the Protestant Reformation understood and exploited these “functional” aspects of communal singing to create new communities, teach doctrine and demonstrate the biblical concept of the priesthood of all believers. Now, as then, worshipers come to church as individuals who belong to a community, and, in gathering, the community is made visible. In a congregation, I am one worshipper among many; the “I’s” form the “we,” co-existing in time and space, creating an interdependent unity. This complex relationship is embodied uniquely when we sing together, when we collectively express and impress, bond and build, while sonically uniting our bodies, minds and spirits.

If any kind of musically induced unity is to be achieved, some sense of agreement is necessary; it appears to be an embedded, non-negotiable component of communal singing. But how deep is this concord? A congregation may agree that singing in church should not be about individuals and their preferences, but individually, I may find it difficult to move away from the comfort of knowing what I like and liking what I know. “Me” and “we” are often at odds because contemporary culture has taught me to be a skilled consumer, trained to cherish choice. I’ve been subtly persuaded that what I choose

will not only satisfy me, but in the very act of choosing, I enhance my sense of who I am as a free being, able to assert my personal identity and advance my project of self-fulfillment. It has become natural for “me” and “my preferences” to be at the center of how I think, act and react, for apparently, when I exercise my right to choose, I have much to gain.

However, even though God created us as unique individuals, we are not designed to live in isolation, autonomously creating a world unto ourselves – individualism. We flourish in community with God and creation, but in our current cultural climate this dynamic tension of living with ourselves, our desires and others has become an acute problem, but not a new problem. The apostle Paul addressed it in his letter to the Christians at Philippi:

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests but also to the interests of others. (Philippians 2: 3, 4)

Perhaps the most uniting characteristic of humanity is that we are all created in the image of God – *Imago Dei*. According to Canadian theologian Stanley Grenz, “The divine image in the first creation narrative... is a community text. The image of God is a social rather than an individual concept.” Likewise, Henri Nouwen says; “Community is like a large mosaic... Together in one mosaic, each little stone is indispensable and makes a unique contribution to the glory of God. That’s community, a fellowship of little people who together make God visible in the world.” The communally conceived *Imago Dei* carries with it a creative mandate; as image bearers of the Creator, we are second-tier creators. We have an individual and communal responsibility to encourage and utilize all kinds of creativity for the glory of the Creator.

I contend that a musically mono-cultural church – traditional with only hymns or contemporary with just choruses – does not adequately reflect these basic concepts of Christian community (unity in diversity) or fulfil the creative mandate to its potential. Surely a worshiping community falls far short of God’s ideal when it allows a shared musical preference to become its most visible *raison d’être*.

So what am I to do when I don’t like a congregational song? The tension of singing with others in a Christian community has begun to surface. Do I sing? If I participate, how do I cope with my less-than-worshipful attitude? I feel unable to express myself in musical worship, frustrated because I can’t identify with the words and/or the music. I resent the choice the song leader has made, and I feel somewhat alienated from the rest of the congregation. These kinds of reactions are framed in personal terms. I want to have the feeling that in singing a song, I am expressing myself and my relationship to God from the “heart,” with a sense of honest, authentic and sincere worship – the voice of the “real me” singing to my Saviour God. This need often comes with the subtle moral dimension stated by F. B. Brown; “surely I have every right” to sing songs of worship that resonate with me, that connect with my life.

What if I were to think of songs as being connected to a sense of who WE are, together, in this place, before God? This approach opens many possibilities. Singing historic songs reminds us that we have inherited from the “communion of saints” a legacy of riches that can take us deep into the roots of our Christian story. We can also sing the songs of living composers who write in the language of modern song, with its many interesting styles and flavours. Songs from other countries with a different musical vocabulary tell us that we, in North America, are just a small part of God’s global, multi-cultural church building activity.

With this in mind, should it matter so much that sometimes I don’t like “strange” songs? No, it should not, but it takes work to break free from the insidious influence of the expressive individualism so rampant in our culture. As well, it may be a difficult challenge to remember the bigger picture of “us,” the Church Universal, into which we have been baptised. And what about the kind of love God has shown to us and requires of us – self-giving, undemanding? Somehow this has to make a difference in my attitude towards music that isn’t “my kind of music.” As I sing with the rest of the congregation on a Sunday morning, this may mean that I acknowledge the songs sung as *our* songs and not just a means of self-expression; they are gifts to God from *us*, his church. Surely there is no better way for the Community of the Redeemed to embody, proclaim and celebrate Christ, whose Kingdom is much greater than I or we can possibly imagine.