

What Happened to Church Music?

(on the occasion of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary closing its School of Church Music, by Terry Austin, April 29, 2009)

Things have changed a great deal at the seminary where I earned my preaching credentials. Of course, it has been more than thirty-two years. Last week, seminary officials announced another change. The School of Church Music is being closed. When I was a student, they had the theology school, religious education school, social work school, and the music school. I believe they closed down social work a few years back and now they are doing the same thing to Church Music.

The justification given was the lack of students. There are simply not enough students to justify having a School of Church Music. Courses will still be taught but they will be administered under other disciplines.

I remember the music program from seminary with great fondness. Of course, those of us studying the high science of theology frequently teased the Church Music students just like we did the religious education students as being nothing more than acolytes to our superior calling. However, I loved the performances and the worship leadership they provided. I was raised as a Baptist from the western frontier. All of my church experience was with a typical revivalistic influence. I was accustomed to three hymns (first, second, and third stanza), a special, the sermon, and an invitation. When I was introduced to a liturgical style of worship, not only in seminary chapel but also in Kentucky churches, I was fascinated.

I began to pay attention to the words of the hymns and understand the symbolism of the ritual. I had never belonged to a church that observed Advent or anything during Holy Week other than Easter Sunday. It was the students and professors of the School of Church Music who made these introductions to me. I clearly remember attending chapel services and being moved by the sound of six hundred or more men (we had very few women seminary students in those days) singing beautiful harmony and infusing new meaning into the ancient hymns. The music of those chapel services was typically much better than the preaching.

Closing the School of Church Music saddens me. However, it also causes me great concern. Anyone involved in church leadership is keenly aware of the changes, emphasis, and disagreements that surround the issue of church music today. There is no subject that is more volatile in many churches. This does not seem like the time to de-emphasize the study and expertise development in church music. If anything, we need better-trained and more qualified music leaders in the church.

I confess that I am certainly no expert in church music. I can read music, and over the years, I have played a variety of musical instruments; I even took a music theory course once. But I have been a careful observer of how music is done in hundreds of churches over the past decade, so I am not lacking in opinions about the subject.

There are two statements I would like to make concerning church music and the role it plays in today's church. First, the music must lead to participation rather than performance. Because we have consumer-driven churches, we also have performance-driven worship. There is a temptation today to make sure the music at our church is better than the music at your church so more folks will come to our church. The easiest way to control the quality of the music is to make it performance rather than participation.

The problem is that worship is not an activity for observers. Worship requires participation. Much of the church music that is used today is not conducive to participation. We sing songs that have no melody, or one that is very difficult to recognize. Folks are provided with nothing but the words. There is no music distributed so that those in the congregation who can read music find it easier to sing along. Very few songs have any kind of harmony for those with an ear for music. Any song that substitutes "ohhhs" and "ahhhs" for words does not encourage congregational singing.

The result of using music that is un-singable by the congregation means that there is a need for performers. Otherwise, much of the worship time would be nothing but instrumental music as people stand and watch words flashing on a screen. So we put together a "worship team" and everyone is happy. The music "sounds" good and no one feels the necessity to participate.

The importance of participation does not exclude the use of contemporary music. However, it does mean that we must use contemporary music that is conducive to congregational singing. It also helps if we sing a song often enough that we actually learn it. Perhaps one of the best things a School of Church Music could teach is how to encourage participation in worship.

My second statement about church music is that it should be theological rather than emotional. Pay careful attention to the words of many of the songs used today in worship and you will discover that we are not singing about God or the great things of the faith. Often, we are singing about ourselves. When the subject of the song is "I," then it is not a song worthy of using in worship of God.

Not only is music expressive of what we believe, it is also instructive of what we believe. As our music provides great statements about God, those truths are continually reinforced in our minds. Those of us who grew up in church singing the great songs of the faith learned much of our theology from those songs. Sometimes it is easier to recall the words of a hymn than a scripture passage when trying to understand theology.

We need music leadership that will make sure that we are learning and singing songs that are theologically sound. The easy path for a music leader is to select music that stirs the emotions, even if it does not strengthen the faith. This kind of singing may sound good for the moment but will offer nothing of eternal significance.

Music styles and music tastes have changed. Many Christians will never learn to appreciate the hymns. However, that does not mean we should give up and just sing tunes from the Top 40 charts. Instead, it requires even greater diligence and determination to make sure that we have music that truly honors God and encourages His people to worship. There is still a need for a School of Church Music.