

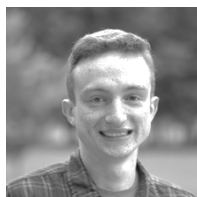
Music in the Mission of the Gospel

Adam Fosse

Music is a divine gift to beautify the proclamation of God's Word, facilitate its retention, and amplify human response to all of the blessings of Christ. Yet, we find as much diversity of expression, meaning, form, and style in the music of the earth as there are languages and cultures. For the Church to be united in her song, we must understand that the gift is not a universal sacred style or form, for these human inventions change and evolve with the passing of time. Rather, the unity and certainty of the Church is built on the pure Word of God, and meaningful musical expressions of faith are found through investigation of our human contexts. Before we can conclude what are the most appropriate applications of music in the life of a Christian, we must first observe the cultural climate in which this gift is employed.

Our experiences create the cultural context that composes the framework by which we understand our Christian faith. Life circumstances can enhance and enrich or corrupt and pollute our perception of the Truth. I once knew a pastor who kept livestock. One Sunday he shared how that week he had been reading from Malachi: "But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall" (Mal 4:2). He then looked out his window to observe a young calf skipping by, and he reflected to us, "This is a great promise. I'm really looking forward to that."

Contrast this with the story of a man in a nearby community who shared with me much about his difficult life. His tale included how at the age of seven years he had pulled a gun on his father and threatened to kill him unless he stopped abusing his brother and mother. Through our conversation, he allowed me to share the Gospel with him, but it was clear to me that his relationship with his earthly father had enormously corrupted his perception of his Heavenly Father. Despite being raised "loosely" Lutheran by his mother, he presently adheres to Native American customs and worships "mother earth." Our experiences and relationship with our earthly father impact how we are able to think of our Heavenly Father—even though He does not change.



Adam became interested in missions on a short-term mission trip in Central Asia in 2017, later studying music education there at an international university. He taught guitar, led ESL activities, and trained national youth as music leaders in local Lutheran churches. He now lives in Linn, Kansas, teaching music, serving as church organist, and working as a mission consultant supporting ongoing projects and short-term teams in Central Asia.

I see this in my own life experiences too. Since I have lived most of my life in landlocked regions of the Midwest and Asia, I am always struck by how little I know about seafaring. Hymns from recent generations, like *Rock of Ages*, *Peace Like a River*, or *Jesus Savior, Pilot Me*, retain poetic and melodic beauty, but describe a seafaring-type experience of faith that few people now understand. Certainly, the closest I have ever come personally to experiencing the stomach-churning plummet and soaking roll of sea billows is getting drenched by the flume ride at a waterpark! It is evident that context is not only bound geographically but changes with the passing of time as well. Now, when fear or grief incites the same gut-clenching, disorienting sensations that inspired the authors of these hymns, seafaring is no longer an intuitive connection for us to make; we must be directed to it. We read Bible stories about the scared disciples on the tempestuous Sea of Galilee, and rather than draw parallels to our own life, we too often think, “Silly disciples. Jesus is right there.”

Thinking about the way that context, place, and time affect our individual understanding and experience of spiritual matters has serious implications for the Church in her commission to teach the gospel. Because of the special qualities of music, the songs she sings are of great significance for growing in Christian faith.

In dealing with the experiencing of and the growth of Christian faith, we examine what the experience of music has to do with faith and whether the church can provide the experience necessary for growth in faith. We investigate our human experience to understand how people around us grow and act out their faith.

It is most certainly true that the revealed nature of God in Scripture, and the facts about what He has done for us are not altered by nor contingent on our human experience. “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Heb. 13:8). In fact, some of the oldest hymns in our hymnal, “Savior of the Nations, Come” (fourth century), “Of the Father’s Love Begotten” (fifth century), and “O Come, O Come Emmanuel” (eighth century) demonstrate the timeless staying power held by singing the story of God’s mighty works in narrative song. Litanies, modeled in the Psalms (by the fourth century), recognize the unchanging realities of God and the needs of human experience, offering comprehensive prayers for all the people of God.

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God does not leave us in the dark about this, prescribing a worship life for His people in the Old Testament and in the New. Activities of worship, as the Lord describes them, include giving to the poor (Mt 6:3–4), prayer (Mt 6:6), forgiveness (Mt 6:14), fasting (Mt 6:17), gathering in His name (Mt 18:20), the Lord's Supper (Mt 26:26), Baptism (Mt 28:19), adherence to God's Word (Luke 11:28), teaching (Mt 28:20) and singing (Eph 5:19). There are also works such as healing, miracles, prophecy, speaking in tongues, sharing testimonies, and more commended to the church, which many Lutherans today do not teach about very clearly, often quickly summarizing such works with Paul's instruction that "all things should be done decently and in order" (1 Cor 14:40).

The need to investigate and understand how the faith grows in the lives of people becomes critically important when our discussion centers on the *missio Dei*, God's mission to all the world and His commission to His people. Christ gives us the charge to be light in the world, salt of the earth, to exhort and encourage one another, to bear sanctified fruit in keeping with repentance, and to expose ourselves to the world as Christians by our love. This fruit of faith has two audiences: Christians, those with us in Christ, and those who are outside the Church.

Lutherans, starting from a German or Scandinavian heritage, do well in cross-cultural mission reaching others when the religious traditions are similar, and people have similar values and ways of expressing their faith. They struggle when meeting people of unfamiliar cultures where, to be meaningful, they must start from what the people already know and understand.

Lesslie Newbigin describes how the evolution and diversity of human thought throughout history impacts humanity's interaction and confusion with Divine Truth. He states,

The self-evident truths of the Enlightenment are, we now see, not self-evident at all but only appear self-evident to a society which has been shaped by a particular story. (It is not self-evident to an orthodox Hindu that all individuals are born with equal rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness).¹

Applying this argument to music, it is clear that musical performances make sense within a given cultural context. In my own experience, I have often heard people extol various styles of worship music as more sacred or sincere than others. These comments do the Church a great disservice— from both sides of the aisle. Contemporary worship advocates critique traditional worship styles for their lack of sincere worship because they are perceived to have so little excitement and joy. Some who hold tightly to the

historical liturgical practices of the church also do disservice when they imply that organ music is the only music sacred enough for use when God's people are gathered.

Observing the power of music in cultural experiences around the world and throughout time, we address the role of music in our lives of faith directly. We have a record of music history just as we have a record of human civilization (Gn 4:21). Singing and music were cornerstones of temple worship. Singing combines with instruments and dancing for all manner of festivities throughout Scripture. The disciples sing with Jesus, and singing is a dominant function of the early Church.

Now consider what makes music such a good tool for instructing and imparting faith. In many ways, it is self-evident to us that music has a quality that makes words "sticky." Marketing experts certainly know the value of a good jingle. But really, God is the one who employs it first when He commands Moses to write a song to teach people, saying: "And when many evils and troubles have come upon them, this song shall confront them as a witness (for it will live unforgotten in the mouths of their offspring)" (Dt 31:21).

It is true that music alone has the ability to touch the human soul in a way unique from any other sort of art or narrative. Throughout Scripture we find potent music brought forth responsively in the most intense of human circumstances: joy and grief, victory and lament, praise and supplication. We see further evidence of the spiritual nature of music from how David is employed to calm the troubled spirit of King Saul. (1 Sm 16:23) It is also worth noting that in the end this did little to affect the salvation of Saul. May the Lord preserve us from believing that human music alone can generate faith in the Almighty God!

Because so many Christians seem confused on this point, it is important to teach this clearly. The Apostle Paul, during his exhortations on preaching in the book of Romans, makes it clear that, "Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ" (Rm 10:17). And in his letter to the Ephesians, Paul writes, "But be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Eph 5:18b-19).

Faith in Christ is a result of hearing His Word, and music is a responsive product of that faith brought forth by the Holy Spirit. At times the Lord even delivers His Word to us directly in song form! This same song in turn becomes a vessel of proclamation for the Word to again be heard and employed by the Holy Spirit to kindle faith.

Generation of faith is the work of the Holy Spirit through hearing the Word. Music in and of itself has no agency to accomplish such a work of the Divine, just as we Lutherans

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teach about baptismal water. Without proper application of the Word, it is only water, regardless of whether it's cold or hot, in ornately carved stone font or a crude kitchen bowl; it is only when it is paired with the words and promises Christ gives us that the mundane becomes sacred. The vessel is merely a vessel, but when understanding the remarkable thing that happens in Baptism, the response of faith may evoke the desire for an ornate vessel to reflect the sacred nature of the act.

Music is also such an ornate vessel, appropriate for use with the preaching of the Word. But when we think of decorative vessels for the Gospel, we must take care that the vessel does not distract people from the life-giving contents of the message.

When striving to connect people of a different culture to God's mission, and wherever Christians undertake the establishment of new churches for unreached peoples around the world, every effort needs to be made to encourage, collect (perhaps edit), and record indigenous songs of praise for the local church. In this way, local saints are equipped with liturgy and songs that carry the words of Christ to their own lost neighbors in a musical and expressive language they can understand, so that they have no doubt this message is for them.

Finally, my exhortation. Teach your children to play musical instruments; sing the songs of the Church in your home and imbue them with meaning through the lives you share. When you go out into the world, pray that the Lord opens your eyes to the needs of your neighbor, and arm yourself with a battery of Scripture and songs to comfort and encourage. For those who find themselves in a cross-cultural context (which I contend is most of America, whether you realize it or not), be the foreigner and ask questions. The language of the Church should be special so that people can understand it is sacred, but we need to understand how sacred things are expressed in the target culture. And finally, lights and smoke, candle and incense, organs and guitars, and all the trappings of church services—we must remember that these are peripheral to the Gospel. The message of salvation won for us on the cross was efficaciously redemptive prior to any presentation in a melodious form, and its proclamation will persist long after the Lord has called us home. “The Lord God is my strength and my song, and He has become my salvation!” (Ps 118:14).

Endnotes

¹ Lesslie Newbigin, *Proper Confidence* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 73.