



## Praise Music Is Depressing

I've been feeling a bit out of sync at my church lately. Now I know what you are thinking. "You're a heretic; you're *supposed* to feel out of sync. That's your job!" Well, to some extent, that's true; but I think this time my church is more at fault than I.

Let me digress. I attend a large, Southern Baptist Convention church that is a mega-church wanna-be. To meet that end, about a year ago they hired a new music minister. And he has done a marvelous job. Within a few months, he transformed the band and choir/chorus into an almost professional-level group of performers. He sings and jives while the chorus blends mightily. The band plays so energetically it almost makes you think that 70's and 80's music is alive again. The audience (excuse me, "congregation") obviously enjoys the services. They dance at their chairs; they clap in rhythm; they scream exclamations of praise (or they just scream) during the service; they applaud loudly and enthusiastically after several of their favorite songs are performed.

In short, this is not your mother's SBC.

The problem is that the music is like this *every* Sunday: one big, loud, happy, praise party, week after week after week. The only music you hear shows the Joy of the Lord and the great happiness that comes from being a Christian. I have just come home from yet another worship service that featured slap happy, clappy, music.

The whole thing left me depressed.

Now to be fair, my depression was not the result of the worship band's music. Honestly, I was probably pretty depressed when I came in. The problem is that all that joy, fun, and dancing left me feeling guilty for feeling depressed. Life is tough right now.

You see, my warranty expired on my birthday last year. In the space of 6 months, I had prostatitis, hernia surgery, and had half my thyroid removed. The day before the above mentioned “happy day” service, I met with my dad while he explained to me all the maintenance procedures I will need to do for my mother when he is gone. Last year, we found out my father, my hero, had mesothelioma, and more recently, that it has come back with a vengeance. He will probably be dead by next spring. At about the same time my wife found out her mother has a debilitating disease that will rob her of her dignity before it robs her of her life. Both parental spouses are alive but trying to deal with the impending deaths of their companions of over 50 years. Then on top of that my wife’s best friend’s mother is on her last legs and may even die before I finish this article. Our family prayers at night seem to be listings of one painful family circumstance after another.

So I am not in a praise mood right now. I am in the mood to gripe at God. If I read the Psalms correctly, David did his own share of griping at God. And, next to Christ, David was God’s favorite, so I am in good company.

Nor are David and I alone. Michael Spencer, on his website, shares how he is in the process of establishing care for his elderly mother. As an only child, he now shoulders the pain of caring for a mother who nourished, loved, and supported him. He shares the painful knowledge that this woman is now dying and there is nothing he can do about it. He writes:

“I learned that we are fragile, and our suffering can take away our slender grasp of reality. In such times, we must be held in the realities of others. Those who care; our loved ones; God. Especially God. (Thank You Robert Capon for teaching me this.) The reality that allows me to write, and you to read, is as thin as a piece of paper, and can vanish in a second, reducing us to someone else entirely, unrecognizable and broken. Who will love us then, when we cannot love or speak or know anything?”

The danger is that the church is presently pushing fantasy with their current proliferation of “praise” music, and only “praise” music. The fact is that those of us who have reached and passed the mid-forties know that life and God are in the business of throwing some pretty fast and nasty curve balls in our direction. Life rarely ends well for us or those we love. It ends in pain, sickness, and death. Nor can we always be in a praise mood. To force and surround us with a liturgy that elevates “praise” to the detriment of all other emotions separates us from the supporting hand of God and of each other.

Marva Dawn expresses a similar sentiment in *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for this Urgent Time.* Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1995. She writes:

“Another important question that we must ask is whether our worship music is true to human experience. Last year when I was very ill from chemotherapy I found it extremely difficult when my freelancing took me to congregations that sang only ‘happy’ songs. I could respond with Joy when we sang about God—those truths encouraged me in my struggles with the constant pile of physical afflictions I’d been facing for several years—but I couldn’t enter into songs that spoke only about wonderful feelings.” (Pg. 176)

And..

“‘Praise’ that uses only ‘upbeat’ songs can be extremely destructive to worshippers because it denies the reality of doubts concerning God, the hiddenness of God, and the feelings of abandonment by God that cloud believers going through difficult times. I have counseled numerous people whose experience of worship that focused only on happy praise left them with huge feelings of inadequacy. ‘Why do I feel so discouraged? I know I should praise God, but I just can’t,’ they say. That is because the worship has not dealt with their feelings of guilt, their doubts and fears, their sense of hypocrisy and sinfulness. Many question their faith because they are not able to be as happy as their fellow believers. They can’t enter into upbeat worship if their lives are in shambles. Instead of recognizing the inadequacy of worship that teaches only one aspect of our relationship to God, they blame themselves for inadequate faith.” (Pgs. 88-89)

Amen. For worship that only sings, claps, and dances while it ignores or, even worse, illegitimizes those who are suffering under the loads of life ultimately destroys the fellowship of the church. The community of the church is not only made up of those who “rejoice with those that rejoice.” It must also “weep with those that weep.”