

MUSIC and FAITH

Music Making and the Meaning of Worship

By Benjamin Ho

As Christians, worship represents the supreme act of response to God's love for us. Often times, we equate worship with a Sunday worship service and assume that we "serve" God by means of such an occurrence. In his famous Mars Hill speech to the people of Athens, the apostle Paul confronts the citizens of ancient Greece with their greatest error, that is, God is – and can be – served by our human hands:

The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything (Acts 17:24-25, ESV)

Today, we Christians make the same mistake of believing that we "serve" God by giving off our time, money and skills (whatever they may be). We desire to serve God forgetting that God cannot be "served" in the usual sense we understand the term "service". *What God desires from us in fact, is not service, but worship.*

The Nature of Worship

In the most basic terms, worship consists of someone acknowledging that someone or something else is greater – worth more – and, by consequence, to be obeyed, feared, and adored. Harold Best, Emeritus Professor of Music at Wheaton College, puts it well:

"Worship is an expression of insufficiency: I am not complete in myself; I prefer something to the point of wanting it to master me...recognizing that God created us in his image, a unique aspect of that imaging lies in the capability of the two beings to communicate with each other, to enjoy each other's presence, to love each other without end, and to be at work continually..."¹

Seen in this light, worship becomes more than just a set of weekly ritualistic practices conducted at church, instead it is personal relationship with the Creator, one in which all of life is encapsulated within. Such an understanding transforms the nature of worship from being a one-sided affair - in which one is only giving and the other only getting – into a union of loves, where both the Creator and creature are actively participating. The Apostle Paul describes this love in a remarkable passage:

"For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39, NKJV)

¹ Harold M. Best. *Music Through the Eyes of Faith* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), pp. 143-144

True worship then, begins from the acknowledgment that God himself - in the person of Christ – is both the initiator and sustainer of this relationship. In one of his sermons, John Piper, senior pastor at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, described that a ‘worship service’ as first and foremost be “a being served by God.” As Piper would go on to put it, “We worship first and foremost by thirsting and hungering after God above all things. And that means that we worship first and foremost by being served by God. It is a worship service, *because the service starts with God's serving us what we so desperately need, namely, himself*”.²

At the heart of worship then, is not about serving God, but *belonging to God and being reconciled with Him*. Without this prior relationship, our best and righteous acts of service are like “filthy rags” and we are akin to “shriveled leaves” being swept away by our sins (Isaiah 64:6). As such, we need to be careful how we understand our participation in worship (be it through music-making or other forms of artistic expressions) and what that ultimately means in the grander scheme of God’s redemptive work. We ought not to view music and art solely as means to an end (thus making them little more than tools) or viewing them as ends themselves (thus elevating them to a position of worship). Instead, we ought to understand and appropriate them in the manner God has designed this world and everything contained within it to be – in that *they are good, but not God*.

Music-making to the glory of our Maker

This recognition of the difference between that which is good and God himself is the starting point of all our music-making endeavors. Music-making then becomes an *act* of worship, not simply an *aid* to worship. Romans 12:1 reminds us that worship is an activity that is intrinsically connected with all of our being – as living sacrifices, or better yet, a sacrifice for as long as we are alive. Seen in this light, music-making is not simply a professional activity (much less a recreational hobby!) but an act of faith in which we respond in love to our Creator and Lover. Music-making does not start or end with music, instead it starts and ends with our Maker, whose redemptive plan of salvation has made it possible for us to approach Him, through Jesus Christ, who is the Author and Finisher of our faith. Only then, can we truly understand what music-making means and in so, affirming the words of the often-sung Doxology:

*Praise God, from whom all blessings flow;
Praise him, all creatures here below;
Praise him above, ye heavenly host;
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen*

² <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/sermons/all-of-life-as-worship>. Retrieved 28 Feb, 2012