

The Functional Limits of Creativity: How Innovative Can We Be with the Gospel?

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First, thanks for coming to the workshop! This is not a rant against creativity. I really appreciate creativity in church music. It's grieving how often Christians sing, preach, or talk about the glorious realities of the gospel in a boring way.

More importantly, God, the Creator, appreciates creativity. You can see it in the variety, beauty, order, and intricacy of the world around us.

We owe a great debt to Christians through the years who have pushed the boundaries of what kind of creativity is acceptable and helpful when it comes to music in the church.

EX: Playing music by ear, then by notes, then back again
 Moving from one part to many
 Luther who thought God's Word should be sung in the language of God's people
 Isaac Watts and others writing hymns of "human composure"
 Adding guitars, bass, and drums to the meeting
 Outpouring of songs in the past two decades

But can creativity exceed helpful bounds?

Can creativity turn from something helpful to something harmful?

Has God put any limits God on the music churches use when they gather?

I think the answer is yes.

I. **Thoughts on Creativity**

The Bible is filled with examples of creativity. **Bezalel** and the temple (Ex. 35:30-35).

The musical and liturgical revolution that **David** brought to temple worship.

The **Psalms** alone are a stunning example of sophisticated literary and musical devices including acrostics, parallelisms, rhythmic variety, and more.

Creativity can help us see the truth from a different perspective, causing words to impact us more deeply. It's a way of faithfully using the gifts God has given us. Wisely applied creative thinking can make the truth more accessible to our creative culture.

But God isn't always impressed with our creativity.

In Ex. 32, Aaron creatively fashioned a golden calf to represent God

Num. 3 Nadab and Abihu offered unauthorized fire before the LORD and he killed them.

2 Sam. 6, David transported the ark creatively, and it cost a man named Uzzah his life.

1 Sam. 10, Saul pragmatically offers his own sacrifices when Samuel is delayed.

The Pharisees and legalists through the centuries have sought to come up with creative ways to relate to God that avoid our complete and utter dependence on Christ.

It can be helpful to think of creativity like water. When water has limits, it's a blessing. When it breaks out of those limits, it's a problem.

When water in my house flows freely through the pipes of the plumbing system it's great. But if water finds its way out of those pipes, I'm in trouble.

As long as water in a river flows between its banks, we can play in it, travel on it, and fish in it. But when it overflows its banks, you have a flood.

Even oceans, representing limitless possibilities for creativity, have shorelines. And when the waves of the ocean cross the boundary of the shore, you have a tsunami.

I want us to gain a fresh appreciation for the God-ordained pipes, banks, and shorelines of creativity. Because in the church, **creativity is not something we do; it's a way we do something.**

To pursue creativity without concern for its function in the church confines us to always pursuing originality and newness, oblivious to the observation of Eccles. 1:9 that there is nothing new under the sun.

Worse, pursuing creativity without limits can lead us to idolize innovation rather than worship Jesus. The standard becomes not "Was Christ exalted?" but, "Were we creative enough?"

"Christian artists in direct service to the corporate assembly must understand from the start that the arts must function differently here than in any other circumstance, and this takes an enormous amount of creative humility, skill and wisdom." Harold Best, *Unceasing Worship*, 179.

So I want to start by talking about three ways church music functions when we meet and how that places good limits on our creativity.

II. Three Purposes of Music in the Church and their Corresponding Limits

To build up others – The Edification Limiter (first two briefer)

Eph. 5:18-19 – being filled with the Spirit produces songs, hymns, and spiritual songs

1Cor. 12:4 Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; 5 and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; 6 and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. 7 To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

1Cor. 14:12 So with yourselves, since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church.

The standard for the music we sing is not what benefits us, but others.

This requires a knowledge of the people we're leading and an awareness of our tendency to favor our own preferences.

"Artists, like everyone else are the recipients of grace. They are stewards of what has been given to them. God gave them the gift of artistic ability not for unrestrained self-indulgence, but to glorify God and to serve their fellow humans." – Leland Ryken, *The Liberated Imagination*.

To Demonstrate our Oneness in Christ – The Unity Limiter

Rom. 15:5 May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, 6 that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. 7 Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.

God has always intended singing to be a demonstration of the church's unity, not a cause for its division. There is no biblical mandate to use the most radical, cutting-edge, creative music possible when we gather.

Nor should churches be built long-term around music that appeals to one generation and excludes others. The fact that a lot of people in the church have learned a song by listening to it on their iPod repeatedly, doesn't necessarily mean the melody is singable, edifying to others, and unifying. My iPod isn't the best place to start when thinking about what songs to sing on Sunday.

We should be asking what kind of music best enables the people of God – from different generations, backgrounds, and socio-economic classes – to sing together, so that we might demonstrate in our singing how the gospel has reconciled us not only to God, but to each other.

In most churches, this requires consistent teaching, modeling, and encouragement.

To Enable the Word of Christ to Dwell in us Richly – The Gospel Limiter

Col. 3:16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.

The word of Christ most likely refers not to the red letters in our Bible, but the words about Christ and his mission. In other words, the gospel.

The gospel is the good news that Jesus, the incarnate Son of God, has lived the perfect life of obedience we could never live, has endured the wrath of God in our place on the cross, making full atonement for our sins and reconciling us to God, has risen triumphantly from the dead proving the efficacy of his sacrifice, and is now interceding for us at the right hand of God, assuring us that God will indeed keep us until we see him in the new heavens and the new earth.

Or to put it more simply, Christ died for our sins that he might bring us to God.

Music is one of the primary ways God means to deepen the effect of this gospel in our lives. Music helps us remember the gospel. It can stir up our passions for the gospel. It provides a means for us to express emotion about the gospel. It is meant to help us let the word of Christ, or the gospel, dwell in us *richly*. (There is a difference between smelling a Cinnabon and having one dwelling in you richly.)

“The cross presents the artist with difficulties because although it contains complexity, and we never exhaust its marvels or comprehend the depth of its truths, it is unambiguous. Christ didn’t die to teach us lessons about bravery or to encourage us when we face difficulties. He died because that was the penalty demanded by God for sin.” Steve Turner, *Imagine: A Vision for Christians in the Arts*, 90.

We have to fight to keep the gospel central and prominent in the midst of our creativity.

“It is at least possible that we are the generation of believers who will destroy much of historic Christianity from within – not, in the first instance, by rancid unbelief, but by raising relatively peripheral questions to the place where, functionally, they displace what is central.” – D.A. Carson, *The Cross and Christian Ministry*, 63.

It is too easy to assume the gospel. This message of the word of Christ is paramount in the life of the people of God. The New Testament makes it clear that Christ is our life, our reason for existence, and the motivation for and object of our worship. Without the gospel, we have no relationship with God and our worship remains unacceptable.

1 Cor. 2:2 For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

1 Cor. 15:3 For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures.

Gal. 6:14 But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Eph. 2:18 Through HIM we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. [Rev 5?]

Creativity is meant to serve the gospel. But used unwisely, it can fight against it. 3 ways creativity can undermine the word of Christ, the gospel.

Creativity can distract from the gospel, affecting its value.

The Gospel has not been understood and found deficient. It has not been understood. Creativity that is overbearing, or that forms the main part of our meetings or thinking, tends to draw attention to itself. What you win people **with** is what you win them **to**. (If we’re a guide at the Grand Canyon we don’t want to become the center of attention.)

Creativity can distort the gospel, affecting its content.

Metaphors can be so obscure or language so vague that the clarity of the gospel is lost. The gospel brings us from darkness into light. Our songs shouldn’t reverse the process.

“All of us are tempted, in the name of being winsome witnesses, to present the gospel in as attractive a way as possible. That’s fine in some respects – it is “good news,” after all – but we must also be careful not to round off the gospel’s sharp points.” - Greg Gilbert, *What is the Gospel?*,

The Gospel is God’s story and deeds, not ours. We must be faithful to its message. God is holy. We are sinful. We should be condemned, but God has forgiven us in Christ.

Songwriters and leaders can distort the gospel with “original” lyrics. EX: Above All

Creativity can demean the gospel, affecting its power.

Rom. 1:16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

The goal is not to be creative, but to see lives changed. Only the gospel can do that.

The success of our meetings is not ultimately dependent on something creative we do (new lighting, layout, arrangements) but something God has already done. Creativity must not usurp the gospel of grace. *God can use our creativity, but He doesn’t need it.*

III. Pursuing creativity in a way that magnifies Christ.

Know and treasure the immeasurable riches of grace found in Christ.

Discover how Christ and his redeeming us is the story line of the Bible.

Read books on the gospel and the cross – Gospel Primer, The Cross of Christ, Living the Cross Centered Life, The Gospel Centered Life by Jerry Bridges. 50 Reasons Why Jesus Came to Die by Piper

Value truth over tunes and Christ over creativity.

The artist’s job is not simply to express feelings, but to help people see, understand, and treasure the truth of who God is. We must study reality more than creativity. We don’t really “create” anything, but are faithful *re-presenters* of God’s creation. (Piper?)

Trust the power of the proclaimed gospel.

Don’t try to make music, images, and art do what only words can do.

“Whatever merit there is in stressing that post-moderns place great premium on images, on imagination, on relationships, on being part of a community, none of these things can substitute for the fact that the church has to *proclaim* the truth about Christ, that it cannot do so without using words, that words are the tools for expressing our thoughts, and that our thoughts must correspond to the reality of what God has done in Christ.” – David Wells, *The Courage to Be Protestant*, 203.

Recognize that creative sometimes means old (liturgies and traditions), simple (chords, instrumentation, songs), and familiar (There is a Redeemer, Be Glorified).

Cultivate and expose yourself to creative thinking communities.

Be humble, listen to others, allow yourself to be stretched artistically. But don't be afraid to reject creativity that ignores functional limits. Don't be creative simply because you saw someone else do it. "Creativity is not something we do, but a way we do something."

Value the sound of the congregation.

The most important musical sound when the church gathers is not my keyboard, the drums, or the guitar.

"It is the congregation that is to be heard above all. If it is not, then one of two things is wrong: either the congregation is not singing to the Lord with all its might or some other musical body or activity is keeping this from happening." – Harold Best, *Unceasing Worship*, 144.

Regularly examine the short and long term fruit of your music.

Song arrangements, writing, aesthetics, lighting, video, instrumentation, vocalists, order of events, additional activities.

Never stop asking questions.

We tend to lapse into unreflective repetition. Why? We're creatures of habit. We do it "this way" because we've always done it "this way." C.S. Lewis once said that liturgy should feel like an old shoe, comfortable and familiar, so that we can concentrate on the meaning behind our actions. That's true -- to a point. But repetition can just as easily produce contempt as it can understanding.

May God give each of us wisdom to establish the proper pipes, banks, and shorelines to our creativity, so that after we have done our best to serve the church with our creative gifts, both believers and unbelievers would leave our meetings saying not, "What great creativity," but, "What a great Savior!"