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THE BENEFITS AND LIMITS OF CREATIVITY

How Innovative Can We Be with the Gospel?

I. Introduction

- A. Church music through the centuries has benefited from the creative gifts God has given his people.
- B. More importantly, God, the Creator, delights in creativity.
- C. 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.
 - 1. Playing music by ear, then by notes, then back again
 - 2. Moving from one part to many
 - 3. Luther who thought God's Word should be sung in the language of God's people
 - 4. Isaac Watts and others writing hymns of "human composure"
 - 5. Adding guitars, bass, and drums to the meeting
 - 6. Outpouring of songs in the past two decades
- D. But creativity raises questions.
 - 1. Can creativity exceed helpful bounds?
 - 2. Can creativity turn from something helpful to something harmful?
 - 3. Has God put any limits God on the music churches use when they gather?

II. Thoughts on Creativity

- A. The Bible is filled with examples of creativity.
 - 1. Bezalel and the temple (Ex. 35:30-35).
 - 2. The musical and liturgical innovations of David in relation to temple worship.
 - 3. The **Psalms**: sophisticated literary and musical devices including acrostics, parallelisms, rhythmic variety, and more.

B. Benefits to creativity.

1. Help us see the truth from a different perspective, causing words to impact us more deeply.
2. A way of faithfully using the gifts God has given us.
3. Making truth more accessible to our creative culture.

C. But God isn't always impressed with our creativity.

1. In Ex. 32, Aaron and the golden calf.
2. Num. 3 Nadab and Abihu
3. 2 Sam. 6, David transported the ark creatively at the cost of Uzzah's life.
4. 1 Sam. 10, Saul pragmatically offers his own sacrifices
5. 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.

D. A metaphor – creativity as water.

1. When water has limits, it's a blessing. When it breaks out of those limits, it's a problem.
2. When flowing through pipes
3. Water flowing between river banks
4. Oceans defined by shorelines

E. In the church, **creativity is not something we do; it's a way we do something.**

1. 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.
2. 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.

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

A. To build up others – The Edification Limiter (Eph. 5:18-19; 1 Cor. 12:4; 1 Cor. 14:12)

1. The standard for the music we sing is not what benefits us, but others.
2. 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*.

B. To demonstrate our oneness in Christ – The Unity Limiter (Rom. 15:5-7)

1. God has always intended singing to be a demonstration of the church's unity, not a cause for its division.
2. No biblical mandate to use the most radical, cutting-edge, creative music possible when we gather.
3. We shouldn't build churches long-term around music that appeals to one generation and excludes others.
4. 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.
5. In most churches, this requires consistent teaching, modeling, and encouragement.

C. To enable the word of Christ to dwell in us richly – The Gospel Limiter (Col. 3:16)

1. 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.
2. 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.
3. Or to put it more simply, Christ died for our sins that he might bring us to God.

- D. Music is one of the primary ways God means to deepen the effect of this gospel in our lives.
1. Music helps us remember the gospel.
 2. It can stir up our passions for the gospel.
 3. It provides a means for us to express emotion about the gospel.
 4. 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.

IV. Creativity and the Gospel

- A. 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.

- B. Without the gospel, we have no relationship with God and our worship remains unacceptable. (1 Cor. 2:2; 1 Cor. 15:3; Gal. 6:14; Eph. 2:18)
- C. Three ways creativity can undermine the word of Christ, the gospel.
1. Creativity can distract from the gospel, affecting its value.
 - a. The Gospel has not been understood and found deficient. It has not been understood.
 - b. Creativity that is overbearing, or that forms the main part of our meetings or thinking, tends to draw attention to itself.
 - c. What you win people **with** is what you win them **to**.

2. Creativity can distort the gospel, affecting its content.
 - a. Metaphors can be so obscure or language so vague that the clarity of the gospel is lost.
 - b. 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?*,

- c. The Gospel is God's story and deeds, not ours.
- d. Songwriters and leaders can distort the gospel with “original” lyrics.

3. Creativity can demean the gospel, affecting its power. (Rom. 1:16)

- D. The success of our meetings is not ultimately dependent on something creative we do but on something God has already done.
- E. God can use our creativity, but He doesn't need it.

V. Pursuing creativity in a way that magnifies Christ.

- A. Know and treasure the immeasurable riches of grace found in Christ.
 1. Discover how Christ and his redeeming us is the story line of the Bible.
 2. Read books on the gospel and the cross – A Gospel Primer (Vincent), The Cross of Christ (Stott), Living the Cross Centered Life (Mahaney), The Gospel Centered Life (Bridges), 50 Reasons Why Jesus Came to Die (Piper)
- B. Value truth over tunes and Christ over creativity.
 1. The artist's job is not simply to express feelings, but to help people see, understand, and treasure the truth of who God is.
 2. We must study reality more than creativity. We don't really “create” anything, but are faithful *re-presenters* of God's creation.
- C. Trust the power of the proclaimed gospel.
 1. 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.

- D. Recognize that creative sometimes means **old** (liturgies and traditions), **simple** (chords, instrumentation, songs), and **familiar**.
- E. Refuse to settle for status quo, what’s popular, or what you’ve always done.
- F. Cultivate and expose yourself to creative thinking communities.
 1. Be humble, listen to others, allow yourself to be stretched artistically.
 2. But don’t be afraid to reject creativity that ignores functional limits.
 3. Don’t be creative simply because you saw someone else do it.
- G. Value the sound of the congregation.

“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.

- H. Regularly examine the short and long term fruit of your music.
- I. Never stop asking questions.
 1. 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."
 2. 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!”