

CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN MUSIC AND THE CHURCH

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary time, music has put on a new garment. The younger folks prefer a different melody and beat to suit their taste. Hence, the music of the past is termed “old-fashioned”. However, for some churches to be seeker friendly and reach the younger generation, the church music style is adjusted to meet their needs. Thus, this paper looks at the Contemporary Christian Music (CCM) and its impact on the church.

Definition:

It is noted that defining a Contemporary Christian Music is not an easy task because it comes in a variety of species. It comes in form of Country Rock, Gospel Rock, Rap, Hip-Hop, Latin and Raggae – all “sanctified” through Christian lyrics.¹ Meanwhile, Bacchiocchi defines Contemporary Christian Music as “Rhythmically based music, (beat music), like Rock, Gospel, Blues, Jazz, Country and related form”.²

Basic Features of Contemporary Christian Music

Contemporary Christian Music (CCM) has some identifiable features even though it does not easily lend itself a definition. Preuss observes that “not all CCM is rock music, although the two are often confounded. It is estimated that about ninety percent of CCM comes in a wide variety of rock styles”.³ This is so because some church leaders place importance on the lyrics of the song and not the style. For instance, Rick Warren opines that “churches... need to admit that no particular style of music is “sacred”. What makes a song sacred is its messages.... There is no such things as “Christian music”, only Christian lyrics”.⁴ Warren stresses that “music is the primary communicator of values to the younger generation. (And) if we do not use contemporary music to spread godly values, Satan will have unchallenged access to an entire generation.”⁵ Further, since Contemporary Christian Music comes in a wide variety of styles, it definitely shares the same features.

Guenter Preuss notes that “The basic musical elements of rock including ‘Christian’ rock, are volume, repetition and beat. It is a music designed not to be heard, but to be felt, and to be drowned in Its main instruments are amplified electrical guitars, electrical bass, drum set with a dominating one-beat, often

accentuated on the second and the fourth beat and keyboard instruments like piano and synthesizers are often added.”⁶

TYPES OF CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN MUSIC

Contemporary Christian Music comes in different forms in so far that it has to some extent, the elements of Rock Music. It is evident that the beat, rhythm and tunes of the secular music have been entrenched in the Contemporary Christian Music. Hence, the types of Contemporary Music that will be examined are Rap, Jazz and Rock.

Jazz

Machlis and Forney describe jazz as “a music created mainly by African Americans around the turn of the twentieth century as they blended elements drawn from African music with the popular and art traditions of the West.”⁷

Historically, jazz first became popular about 1900 among blacks of the Southern United States. It combines the complex rhythms of Africa music and the harmony of Western music. Jazz musicians have experimented with many kinds of instruments and styles. Most jazz features much improvisation.⁸ “To improvise is to compose and perform at the same time”.⁹

Jazz is considered by many to be America’s greatest contribution to music. Thus, Hickok remarks that “its impact on American society has been enormous and its influence on world culture has been far reaching. Its message has been direct, vital and immediate, enabling it to hurdle cultural, linguistic and political barriers”.¹⁰

The world of jazz has witnessed many changes since its beginnings at the turn of the century. Geographically, its center has shifted from New Orleans and it is hard to speak of a jazz center, since good jazz is heard worldwide. Also, it has changed in function, too. For a long time, it was basically music for dancing; but since the 1940s, many newer styles have been intended for listening.¹¹

It is observed that in much of West African vocal music, a soloist’s phrases are repeatedly answered by a chorus; similarly in jazz, call and response occurs when a voice is answered by an instrument or when one instrument or group of instruments is answered by another instrument or group.¹²

It is however noteworthy that “the call-and-response pattern of jazz was derived more directly from African American Church services in which the congregation vocally responds to the preacher’s “call”. Other American influences on jazz were the rich body of music that blacks developed here- including work songs, spirituals, gospel hymns and dances like the cakewalk and the music of white America”.¹³

Rap

Historically, rap developed among young urban blacks. It began as a kind of rhythmic talking accompanied by a disk jockey who manipulated recordings on two turntables to create a collage of rhythmic effects. Rap often depicts the anger and frustration of urban black youth. It is part of the hip-hop culture that also includes break-dance and graffiti. Rap continued to grow in popularity throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s. It had by 1990 adopted stylistic features from other forms of popular music and had begun to attract new audience.¹⁴ Hence, by definition, a “rap song consists of a rhyme-oriented text that is not sung, but is spoken or “rapped”, over the background of a constant drumbeat combined with “samples” or “dubs” from recordings of popular songs”.¹⁵

Rock

Rock, initially called “rock and roll,” began in the mid-1950s as a new kind of popular music.¹⁶ Concerning its style. Wright writes:

“Its style is well known to all – the pounding beat, the heavy, amplified guitar sound, the driving bass and the simple, repetitive harmonies. There is, to be sure, much harmonic repetition, noisy filler and electronic distortion. The style of dress of the rockers, their sometimes – outrageous behavior, both on and off-stage and their social and political beliefs are just as important to rock culture as is the music they produce.”¹⁷

Hugo D. Marple, a professor of music comments:

“Early rock placed the amplified voice at the same loudness level as the instruments. Often the words were indistinguishable, which did not rob from the overall impression, since the sounds alone made the effect....”¹⁸

Heineman and Simels affirm that rock is “characterized by its use of amplified instruments, especially guitars and its emphasis on strong and high volumes.”¹⁹

Early rock grew mainly out of rhythm and blues, a dance music of African Americans that fused blues, jazz and gospel styles. Rock also drew upon country and western, a folk like, guitar-based style associated with rural white Americans. In little more than a decade, rock evolved from a simple, dance-oriented style to music that was highly varied in its tone colors, lyrics and electronic technology.²⁰

Wright further observes that “rock was born as a music of protest and rebellion directed against the established musical and social orders”.²¹

The Mixing of the Sacred and the Secular

Today, in order to be seeker friendly, some churches permit the mixing of the sacred and the secular. Thus, Ellen White counsels:

“In their efforts to reach the people, the Lord’s messengers are not to follow the ways of the world. In the meetings that are held, they are not to depend on worldly singers and theatrical display to awaken an interest. How can those who have no interest in the word of God, who have never read His word with a sincere desire to understand its truths, be expected to sing with the spirit and the understanding? How can their hearts be in harmony with the words of sacred song? How can the heavenly choir join in music that is only a form?”²²

Quoting Richard Harrington, a correspondent for the Washington Post, Osterman writes that “The religious industry has come to recognize the ‘untapped audiences’ for ‘positive pop’ and is capitalizing on its opportunity to make big sales by fusing current popular sounds with religious words”.²³

While explaining the sacred music, Preuss affirms from a biblical perspective that “Mixing the sacred with the profane is an abomination to the Lord” (Prov. 15:8; 15:26; Is. 1:13; Mal. 2:11). He explains that “to use the rock idiom in the church or in evangelism means ‘to offer strange fire before the Lord’

(Lev. 10:1 KJV). Paul emphasizes this principle: “Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them” (Eph. 5:11).²⁴

Preuss asserts that rock music misrepresents the claims of the Gospel by encouraging worldly values. It makes people believe that they are all right, when they desperately need a radical change in their lives – a conversion experience. As a medium which promotes gratification, violence, drugs, sex and pantheistic self-redemption, rock music perverts the message of the Gospel simply because the medium affects the message. He then submits that the church’s responsibility is not to contaminate the message with worldly idioms, like rock music. There is no need for the manipulation and stimulation of rock music to save people.²⁵

In order to avert mixing the sacred with the secular, White counsels:

“There is always danger, when the common is mingled with the sacred, that the common will be allowed to take the place of the sacred.... When objectionable matter is mingled with sacred matter... (God’s) blessing cannot rest upon the work done.”²⁶

White writes against hireling worldly musicians. She says “gather together singers who will sing with the spirit and with the understanding also”.²⁷

Sacred and secular music have different goals and thus they should not be mixed. Because sacred music that ministers to the Lord exalts His holiness and majesty while secular music seeks to bring attention to the musician.²⁸

Jacob Aranza points out that, “The musician becomes another music star and the main attraction in place of the Lord. In such cases, Jesus just becomes the platform for the musician to display the flesh”.²⁹

Writing on this same subject, Osterman posits that music is either sacred or secular stressing also that the holy should not be mixed with the profane. “Teach my people the difference between the holy and profane and cause them to discern between the unclean and the clean” (Eze. 44:23 KJV). This biblical imperative applies to the music as well.³⁰

He affirms categorically that “there is no such thing as “Gospel Jazz” or “Christian Rap” or “Christian Rock”. Such labels are an oxymoron. To assume that music that promotes perversion can be made into a medium that proclaims

salvation just by changing its label and lyrics are like believing that the devil can be made into a Savior just by changing his job description".³¹

Unequivocally, Osterman admits that the gospel is the good news that Jesus suffered inhuman abuse to gain our salvation. Thus, to trivialize the message of the gospel by mixing it with that which is secular (commercialism) is not only sacrilegious but is also an affront to the magnitude of Christ's atoning sacrifice.³²

THE POWER OF MUSIC

Undoubtedly, music is powerful. "By some inexplicable means, music has the power to intensify and deepen our feelings, to calm our jangled nerves, to make us sad or cheerful, to incite us to dance and even perhaps, to march proudly off to war".³³ Depending upon the presence and balance of rhythm, harmony, texture, melody and other related components, music can be soothing or invigorating, ennobling or vulgarizing, philosophical or orgiastic. It can be the source of the richest blessings or an adjunct of rebellion and sinful behaviour.³⁴

Paul E. Hamel opines that music has a tremendous power, not only for evil, but also for good. For instance, the sincere message of a simple hymn, when sung at the appropriate time, can have a tremendous appeal to those with whom the Spirit of God is working. Many evangelists appropriately use a musical selection as the high point of their appeal for decisions for Christ.³⁵

While writing on the Ministry of Song, Ellen White asserts that:

"Music has power to subdue rude and uncultivated natures; power to quicken thought and to awaken sympathy, to promote harmony of action and to banish the gloom and foreboding that destroy courage and weaken effort. It is one of the most effective means of impressing the heart with spiritual truth."³⁶

CONCLUSION

It is obvious that elements of secular music are present in what is known today as Contemporary Christian Music. The melody, tone colour, rhythm and the tempo are similar. Even though the Contemporary Christian Music lyrics

seem to be different, the medium used is secular. The church music is hardly distinguished all in the name of being seeker friendly. Without exaggeration, church music must be pleasing to God and glorify God, edify the church or hearer(s) and inform the world. The “Christian” rock music characterized by beat, rhythm, loudness and syncopation cannot achieve this.

Thus, sacredness of the church music should often be safeguarded and preserved in all ages and all forms of secularity must vehemently be discouraged.

ENDNOTES

-
- ¹ Guenter Preuss, "Rock Music and Evangelism", *The Christian and Rock Music*, ed.; Samuele Bacchiocchi. Michigan: Biblical Perspectives, 2000, p. 3005.
- ² Ibid., p. 17.
- ³ Ibid., p. 305.
- ⁴ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*. Kaduna, Nigeria: Evangel Publishers Ltd., 1995, p. 281.
- ⁵ Ibid., p. 280.
- ⁶ Preuss., p. 304.
- ⁷ Joseph Machlis and Kristine Forney, *The Enjoyment of Music*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1999, p. 570.
- ⁸ R. M. Longyear, "Music", *The World Book Encyclopedia*, V.3. Chicago: World Book, Inc., 1994, p. 955.
- ⁹ Mark C. Gridley, *Jazz Styles: History and Analysis*. Boston: Pearson Custom Publishing, 2006, p. 512.
- ¹⁰ Robert Hickok, *Exploring Music*. England: Brown & Benchmark Publishers, 1993, p. 512.
- ¹¹ Roger Kamien, *Music: An Appreciation*. New York: The McGraw-Hill Companies, 2002, p. 360.
- ¹² Ibid. p. 361.
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Ibid. p. 380.
- ¹⁵ Hickok, p. 534.
- ¹⁶ Kamien, p. 378.
- ¹⁷ Wright, p. 418.
- ¹⁸ Hugo D. Marple, *The World of Music*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1975, p. 319.
- ¹⁹ Allan Heineman and Stephen Simels, "Rock Music", *Callier's Encyclopedia*. New York: Macmillan Education Company, 1989, p. 130.
- ²⁰ Kamien, p. 379.
- ²¹ Wright, p. 418.
- ²² Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*. Vol.9. Canada: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1948, p. 143.
- ²³ Eurydice V. Osterman, "Music and the Ten Commandments", *Here We Stand*, ed., Samuel Koranteng-Pipim. Michigan: Adventists Affirm, 2005, p. 430.
- ²⁴ Preuss, p. 303.

²⁵ Ibid. pp. 316, 317.

²⁶ Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, Vol.8. Canada: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1948, p. 88.

²⁷ Ellen White, *Spirit of Prophecy*, Vol.1. Oklahoma: Academy Enterprises, Inc. p. 2032.

²⁸ Osterman, *Christian and Rock Music*. p. 339.

²⁹ Jacob Aranza, *More Rock Country & Backward Masking Unmasking*. Australia: Thomson Schirmer, 2004, p. 44.

³⁰ Osterman, *Christian and Rock Music*. p. 339.

³¹ Ibid. pp. 339, 340.

³² Tore Sognefest, "The Effects of Rock Music", in *The Christian and Rock Music*, ed., Samuele Bacchiocchi. Michigan: Biblical Perspectives, 2000, p. 244.

³³ Wright, p. 3.

³⁴ Paul E. Hamel, "The Power of Music", in *Here We Stand*, ed., Samuel Koranteng-Pipim. Michigan: Adventists Affirm, 2005, p. 419.

³⁵ Ibid. pp. 421, 422.

³⁶ Ellen G. White, *Evangelism*. Hagerstown: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1974, p. 496.