

Special Music: Bane or Blessing?

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Since joining the Protestant Reformed Churches, some criticism has been directed towards me, criticism concerning special music. In my old church (Christian Reformed), I often accompanied special music on the piano and sang in the church choir. I also played synthesizers for a group of young people who presented a musical in various Reformed and Christian Reformed churches, this musical even sometimes substituting for the worship service. So, when I changed my membership to the Protestant Reformed Churches, a few eyebrows were raised. Some have even expressed disappointment that I could no longer use my God-given talents.

When I joined our churches, I was not very concerned about the issue of special music. Foremost in my mind was the fact that these Protestant Reformed Churches were preaching the true gospel of Christ, and that my children could grow up in a denomination free from the turmoil and increasing apostasy which is oppressing my former denomination. God, in His mysterious way, through circumstances, was calling me to choose. Special music was not a criteria for judgment.

After I had joined, Christian friends began to ask more questions concerning special music. Why did my new church have to be so strict about what happened in the service? Isn't there a place even for a choir to sing in the service, if that choir were to sing music which would augment the sermon, and reinforce the preaching? Doesn't the Word (a nebulous term used by critics) come to us in different forms? Can't special music edify as much as preaching? With these questions I have dealt, and I am thankful for this opportunity to share the results.

First, I needed to understand positively what the worship service is all about, why we (being Protestant Reformed) make such a distinction between a worship service and, say, a Singspiration. How is it that we can forbid special music in a worship service and yet enjoy it at a Singspiration?

It was essential for me to understand that something very special happens at a worship service. The Holy Spirit makes us thirsty for the living water of the Word and the communion of the saints. God the Father, through His provision, grants us the means to come together for worship. Jesus Christ, our risen and ascended Savior, comes and speaks to us through His ambassador, an ordained and called minister. The Holy Spirit writes that Word, as it is spoken, on the hearts of the elect. Elders are present to ensure that the minister indeed preaches the Scripture and to reinforce that preaching with Christian discipline. Because of this, it is absolutely necessary that every element of the service be directed towards God's Word, with no room for distraction. Now, the question thus comes: Is there any room for special music here? No. The only person qualified to bring the Word, preach the gospel, is the minister who has been called to preach. In a broader sense, he has spent years preparing to preach. In a more narrow sense, he has spent many hours in his study preparing to preach a particular sermon. He is the one whom the Lord, through the congregation, has called to preach. This is a station, an office, which no other may occupy.

Secondly, I had to understand the true value of gospel preaching. When a minister stands before us in a worship service and preaches, it is all too easy for us to see him simply as a man who is relating to us his opinions about what the Bible may say. I think we are all guilty of this sin to some degree. Through faith, however, we see that Jesus Christ, the very Son of God, comes to us through this sinful man, and speaks His very own words to us. What could possibly

be more valuable than that? Special music cannot do this. It does not have the same authority, the same power. Consider this analogy. Would you rather take a drink from a pure, cold, bubbling spring or from a mud puddle? Yes, both will keep you from dying of thirst, both qualify as water. One, however, is desirable; the other is obnoxious, and even dangerous.

Thirdly, I needed to consider my past experience of participating in special music and observing it as a pew-sitter. At the risk of sounding too negative, I must say that there have been times when special music has done much harm. I have heard a Reformed sermon preceded by an Arminian song. At times, special music has been so polished and professional that it made the sermon appear a shoddy affair by comparison. At other times, it was done so poorly, it was an embarrassment. (In fact, one minister said to me, "You know, sometimes the best thing you can say about special music is that it's over.") It has also sometimes given the worship service the atmosphere of a carnival or piano bar. I have also seen that, on a purely emotional and carnal level, special music is far more appealing than gospel preaching. Our hearts, yet tainted by sin, are easily captivated more by a glamorous, polished musical performance, than by the preaching of God's Word. It is far easier to be entertained by song than to listen carefully to our Good Shepherd.

In conclusion, let us jealously guard the great gospel preaching in our churches, excluding all that would detract from the message of salvation and hope through Jesus Christ. Only in this way can we continue to expect the same spiritual blessings of God upon our churches, which have been ours in the past.

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