

perspective

Church Choirs: The Quest for Cultural Relevance



By Warren Anderson

Throughout these pages, we've encountered the biblical and historical foundations of the worshiping choir, and we've read excellent suggestions for building and maintaining choirs of all kinds. Indeed, this issue of *Worship Leader* could serve as a manual for Church Music 101: Choirs in Theory and Practice. What I want to offer as a coda is perhaps more exhortation than benediction: Choirs, when utilized effectively, counteract the primary bane of the contemporary American Church, the unrestrained quest for cultural relevance.

In moderation, pursuing cultural relevance, as Craig Adams notes earlier, is good and proper, Paul's desire to be "all things to all people" (1 Corinthians 9:22) being a case in point. And, of course, no one suggests that we go out of our way to be culturally irrelevant. Few tout the Amish as exemplars of evangelism or church growth, the other wonderful aspects of their communities notwithstanding. But is there middle ground to be forged between the total disdain for and the total embrace of our culture? Here are two suggestions for how choirs can help address this issue.

Changing the Vibe

First, choirs help mitigate against the market-driven, we're-all-young-and-beautiful vibe so prevalent on the platforms of many "culturally relevant" churches. In a previous article on this subject that appeared online at worshipleader.com (from which, in the spirit of Bach, I am borrowing a few key lines for this article), I argued that choirs help balance disparate elements in the life of

the church. We see this primarily in the area of participation.

The power of images (covered nicely in the January/February issue of *Worship Leader* earlier this year) is strong, and the predominant human images in our culture feature an alarming emphasis on youthfulness and superficial beauty. More space to, er, flesh this argument out would be nice, but, truthfully, is unnecessary. That American culture worships at the altar of the airbrush is self-evident. And when the Church reinforces that dynamic by putting only the most vibrant and physically fit of its members on the platform, where the spotlight shines most brightly, it unwittingly blesses the lies spewing forth from Madison Avenue. Utilizing choirs of all ages, on the other hand, allows the entire body of Christ, warts and all, to participate in the leading of worship, a more biblically sound model (Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12).

Today and Tomorrow

Second, choirs mitigate against the excessive promotion of the imminent at the expense of the transcendent so prevalent in many "culturally relevant" churches. There is much to applaud in offering Jesus as the fulfillment of an unbeliever's felt needs. Our Lord does—thanks be to God—stick closer to us than any brother (Proverbs 18:24), and, as Andraé Crouch reminded us in the 70s, "Jesus is the answer for the world today." But is that the complete message of the gospel? And if not, would unbelievers necessarily turn around and walk out if every single thing in our Sunday morning services (especially the worship music) didn't cater to those felt needs?

If unchurched people stumble into a building with the name "Church" boldly proclaimed on the marquee, a building that, in many cases, sports a huge cross (that age-old symbol of Christianity) on its roof, is it at least remotely possible that those unbelievers expect there to be some things that are "churchy" about what goes on inside? Is it possible that, in fact, those unbelievers want some things that are "churchy" to go on inside, because they've seen what the world has to offer and are desperate—dying!—to find something that transcends (not caters to) what they know of their culture? I think the answer to those questions is "yes," and, if so, it bodes well for the choir, that most "churchy" of all institutions. Selected well, good choral literature—from the classics to Clydesdale—can help point toward a Savior both fully imminent (as the old song says, "He's only a prayer away") and fully transcendent (as the new song says, "God of wonders, beyond our galaxy").

In our well-intended desire to be culturally relevant, may we reconsider the role that choirs can play in our efforts to be the Church. Paul McCartney, no stranger to cultural relevancy, says, "I love to hear a choir. I love the humanity, to see the faces of real people devoting themselves to a piece of music." Real people working together to achieve a common goal. That sounds pretty culturally relevant to me. W/A

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