

Singing into the Wind: Uses and Abuses of “Christian” Songs in our Foreign Language Classes

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Be filled with the Spirit. Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord
Ephesians 5:18-19

Singing is a special gift from the Lord. Christians recognize God’s joyful creativity in giving us voices to sing and instruments to play. It is therefore quite appropriate to sing in our foreign language classes for God’s glory and to serve our neighbor. Nevertheless, just as other gifts from God can be utilized well or abused (I Corinthians 12-14), we can use songs in ways that may or may not please God. The following areas point out some weaknesses and strengths in our singing and some suggestions where we can improve our music for God’s glory.

Singing into the Wind

Much “Christian singing” today is really singing “into the wind,” that is, we close our eyes, we put our minds on idle and we sing to no one in particular.¹ We frequently are not conscious of the person(s) to whom we are singing. We give the impression that it does not matter to whom we sing, as long as we are singing something Christian.

The Ephesians 5:18-19 passage cited above, as well as many other passages in Scripture, reminds us that songs have a communicative purpose. Singing can express our deepest thoughts and emotions, our gratitude, as well as our trust and our doubts to our God and Savior.

On other occasions, singing is to be directed to our sisters and

brothers. Singing is a beautiful and powerful instrument to communicate a word of encouragement, a word of testimony, or an exhortation. The following short song in Spanish, while quite simple, is nonetheless exemplary in its Biblical and interpersonal content.

Hermano, para mí eres un regalo, un regalo muy
necesario, y por eso te amo.
Hermano, no sé como empecé a amarte, pero te amo.
Jesús es tu hermano mayor.
Jesús es mi hermano mayor.
Jesús es nuestro Salvador
////Y vive hoy////

Hermano, Jesucristo es un regalo, el regalo más
necesario, y por eso te amo.
Hermano, no sé como empecé a amarte, pero te amo.
Jesús es tu hermano mayor.
Jesús es mi hermano mayor.
Jesús es nuestro Salvador
////Y vive hoy////

Singing “into the wind” can frequently lead to a Pharisaical type of life, where we repeat the right doctrine, but do not practice what we sing. Jesus rightfully criticized this mindless repetition of right doctrine when it was not accompanied by faithful obedience.

The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the seat of Moses; therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds, for they say things, and do not do them. . . . Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others.²

Singing “into the wind” demonstrates a negative hermeneutical practice that is far too common in the Church. In our Christian colleges we expend great energies in thinking, reflection and analysis, but if the truth be told, our obedience usually lags quite far behind our talk. The Scriptures call us to be “doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude ourselves.”³ If we, as Christian professors, continue to model as normative a talking/singing about

Scripture without putting it into practice, we are perpetuating an extremely damaging hermeneutic!⁴

Translated Songs

It is quite common for us to sing Christian songs that were originally written in English but have been translated into a target language. The reasons for this are obvious. Students are already familiar with the melody and can sing along with a certain confidence. They already know the meaning of the lyrics and can more easily guess the meaning of the more difficult words in the target language. They are generally enthusiastic about the process because they will be able to sing and contribute something to a worship service in the other language. Current Christian songs tend to be short and repetitive and therefore there is a sense of accomplishment after spending a few minutes learning the translation of a familiar song.

Nevertheless, I would suggest that there are some significant disadvantages, as well as the obvious advantages, to singing translated songs. In the first place, the language of the translated song is usually somewhat forced and unnatural, because it is an attempt to fit a particular content into the constraints of the melody (and usually to achieve rhyme and rhythm). Secondly, it gives us a false sense of assurance that we have learned something significant about the target culture and language, when in fact, we have not. The melody most certainly does not express typical music of the target culture. The lyrics, unless they are literally biblical, will reflect more the thought processes and worldview of the first language and culture than those of the target language and culture. This is especially disheartening, because British and North American Christianity has had an excessively dominant impact over churches in many of our target language cultures (Latin America, Asia, French speaking Africa, etc.), and we may inadvertently be perpetuating that dominance. Moreover, given the fact that churches in the Southern Hemisphere are generally flourishing, there are many Christian songs available in target languages that are both quite expressive of their culture and theologically solid.⁵

The Whole Counsel of God

In his farewell speech to the leaders of the Ephesians church, the Apostle Paul reminded them that he had shared with them “the whole counsel of God.”⁶ Paul took seriously the responsibility to provide “a complete and balanced diet” for his brothers and sisters. As Christian foreign language teachers, one of the major ways that we communicate the “whole counsel of

God” is through song. Given the important role of music in our post-modern culture, we need to be vigilant that our singing communicates a fairly complete and balanced diet of who God is and what He desires for us. Fad diets come and fad diets go. Good cooks withstand the fads and serve their families nutritious meals. How nutritious is the singing in our classes? Are the current trends in “Christian singing” omitting important ingredients? Three examples will suffice to illustrate these trends.

In the 1960s and 1970s the Second Coming of Christ was an important theme in evangelical theology generally (e.g. *The Late Great Planet Earth* by Hal Lindsey and the movie *Like a Thief in the Night*) and in Christian songs in particular (e.g. *I Wish We'd All Been Ready*). We might have rejected some extreme forms of this eschatology, because it became an “escapist” theology by separating the Second Coming from the ethical demands of the Gospel in the here and now.⁷ Nevertheless, in the current North American evangelical world it is almost impossible to hear songs about the Second Coming. This eschatological omission is even more obvious in the Latin America evangelical world. The “Health and Wealth” gospel has permeated large segments of the Church. In the official songbook (*Alabanza y Adoración*) of the largest neopentecostal church in Colombia (*Misión Carismática Internacional*) out of over 200 songs, only two mention the Second Coming, and these are cited only as filler. In a period of forty years the Second Coming of Christ shifted in our theology from being a most important doctrine to being almost totally absent, in large part due to our songs.

A related issue deals with the exaggerated individualism of our contemporary singing. Whereas the Bible has a healthy balance between individualism and community/extended family identities, we have overemphasized the individual at the expense of the community.⁸ Our singing tends to reinforce this mistake. For example, a very large percentage of contemporary Christian songs are exclusively individualistic and emphasize the personal relationship between God and me. Frequently, these songs highlight my peace, my satisfaction, my joy, etc. In contrast, the great hymns of the past (ex. *Be Thou My Vision*) contained much more biblical and theological content and often narrated much of the life of Christ. They tended to be more God-centered than our current “Christian light” songs. They also tended to reflect more accurately the cost of discipleship seen in the Bible than the “cheap grace” of contemporary Christianity. Even the way we sing tends to reinforce our individualism. No longer do we share a hymnal with our brother or sister in Christ. If we don't know the lyrics, the songs are placed upon a large screen up front.

If we do know the words, we tend to close our eyes and forget about everyone around us. We are truly “strangers in a crowd.”

Probably the most dangerous omission in contemporary US Christian music is its lack of social justice. Given the fact that we should seek first of all God’s Kingdom and his justice,⁹ this omission is inexcusable. Whereas it is difficult to find Christian songs in English that exemplify the Biblical call to justice, some Latin American songs from both Protestants and Catholics faithfully challenge us with God’s call upon us. The “Misa Nicaraguense” contains songs from a Catholic social justice perspective. The Christology expressed in *Vos sos el Dios de los pobres* depicts a Jesus of the poor, a Christ of the common people. Consequently, true worship of this Jesus is demonstrated in a commitment to serve and walk alongside the poor of the earth.

Vos sos el Dios de los pobres
by C. Mejía Godoy¹⁰

Vos sos el Dios de los pobres,
El Dios humano y sencillo.
El Dios que suda en la calle,
El Dios de rostro curtido.
Por eso es te hablo yo
Así como habla mi pueblo
Porque sos el Dios obrero
El Cristo trabajador.

Vos vas de la mano con mi gente,
Luchás en el campo y la ciudad,
Hacés fila en el campamento
Para que te paguen tu jornal.
Vos comés raspado allá en el parque
Con Eusebio, Pancho y Juan José
Y hasta protestás por el cirope
Cuando no te le echan mucha miel.

Yo te he visto en una pulpería
Instalado en un caramanchel.
Te he visto vendiendo lotería
sin que te avergüence ese papel;
Yo te he visto en las gasolineras
Chequeando las llantas de un camión
Y hasta patroleando carreteras

Con guantes de cuero y overol.

From an evangelical perspective we have songs such as *La verdad los hará libres* (Portuguese) and *Tenemos esperanza*, sung to an Argentine tango melody.

Tenemos esperanza

by F. J. Pagura¹¹

Porque él entró en el mundo y en la historia
 Porque él quebró el silencio y la agonía,
 Porque llenó la tierra de su gloria,
 Porque fue luz en nuestra noche fría,
 Porque él nació en un pesebre oscuro,
 Porque él vivió sembrando amor y vida,
 Porque partió los corazones duros
 Y levantó las almas abatidas.

Coro

Por eso es que hoy tenemos esperanza,
 Por eso es que hoy luchamos con porfía,
 Por eso es que hoy miramos con confianza
 El porvenir en esta tierra mía.
 Por eso es que hoy tenemos esperanza,
 Por eso es que hoy luchamos con porfía,
 Por eso es que hoy miramos con confianza
 El porvenir.

Here again the Christology sung is of a Jesus of the poor, a Christ who is familiar with cold nights, hardened hearts, and people dying without hope. The lyrics clearly connect the nature of Christ with the life of His followers. He gives us hope and valor as we face the struggles of injustice. We face the future unafraid due to the faith and confidence we have received from Him.

Conclusion

Some consider singing to be one of the highest gifts the Lord has granted to his people. The Apostle Paul illustrated in his own life how we should use this gift:

I shall pray with the spirit and I shall pray with the mind
 also; I shall sing with the spirit and I shall sing with the

mind also.¹²

May that attitude be in us as well. Let us be filled with the Spirit and let us speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs and let us sing and make music in our hearts to the Lord. May the words we sing faithfully express the truth of the Scriptures.

NOTES

1 In Sik Hong has addressed this in his insightful analysis *¿Una Iglesia Posmoderna?* Buenos Aires: Kairos, 2001.

2 Matthew 23:2-3, 23 (NASB).

3 James 1:22.

4 Jesus reserved some of his harshest criticisms for those scholars who worked intensely with Holy Scripture. See Matthew 12:34; 15:7-14; 16:4-12; 22:18, 29; and especially 23:13-36.

5 Churches in every culture have songs that are theologically “more solid” and others that are inferior. Of course, discernment is necessary in the selection process, just as in other areas of life. One of my favorite Latin American Christian singers is the Chilean Leonardo Alvarez. He utilizes many different styles of music from Latin America and the Caribbean. His lyrics reflect a holistic gospel and include topics not frequently heard in other songs (ex. the life of an abused wife and mother). His most recent CD “El Camino” is available in the United States through the Willow Creek Church Network or Amazon.com.

6 Acts 20:27.

7 Almost every reference to the Second Coming in the New Testament is accompanied by a strong, ethical exhortation on how we should live in the light of this eschatological belief. For example see I Thessalonians 1:9-10; 3:12-13; 5:23.

8 For a further defense of this argument see my article “North American Christians and the Latin American Church: Lessons from South of the Border” in *Journal of Christianity and Foreign Languages*. Volume III (Spring 2002): 48-75. This article is also available in The Network for Strategic Missions. <http://www.strategicnetwork.org/index.php?loc=kb&page=detail&id=3126>

9 Ibid. pp. 51-58 for an exegetical defense of why “social justice” is a better translation of the Greek *dikaosune* than “righteousness”.

10 *Celebremos Juntos*, San José, Costa Rica: Seminario Bíblico Latinoamericano, 1989: 78.

11 *Celebremos Juntos*, San José, Costa Rica: Seminario Bíblico Latinoamericano, 1989: 93.

12 1 Corinthians 14:15.