

Celebrate Diversity in Worship

Because of the music ministry with which God has blessed me, I have had the privilege of worshiping in countless churches. I have praised the Lord with people of numerous races and denominations. As a result of my experiences, I have come to the conclusion that, regardless of doctrinal differences, racial preferences and varying worship styles, the body of Christ has more in common than it has differences.

Time and time again, I have seen the love of Christ as it has been demonstrated to the lost and hurting. I have seen the church in action as its members became agents of healing and wholeness.

But I have also seen the church take its eyes off those things that bring us together and begin to concentrate on the things that divide and separate us. I imagine that is how different denominations got started.

I have nothing against denominations. But I believe that many times the sign on the church door tends to keep people out rather than invite them in.

Let's imagine that the leper who was cleansed and healed when Jesus stretched forth His hand (see Luke 5:12-13) went out and started a church after his miraculous healing. Suppose he called the church The First Church of the Stretched-Out Hand. His congregants believed that the only way a person could be healed was for Jesus to stretch out His hand toward them.

Assume that the centurion in Capernaum, whose servant Jesus healed by merely sending the word (see Luke 7:1-10), also started a church—this one called The First Church of the Sent Word. His congregants believed that the only way a person could be healed was for Jesus to send His word.

These two churches were in neighboring cities and could have enjoyed wonderful times of fellowship together. They could have celebrated the fact that there were people in both churches who had personally encountered Jesus Christ—and that because of those encounters, many others had come to a saving knowledge of Christ. But instead they chose to build up denominational walls and become divided over the issue of healing.

This imaginary scenario may be an exaggeration of the way things truly are, but the point is that the church must not allow prejudice and preference to create division. We must learn to celebrate diversity, especially in worship.

CULTURAL DIVERSITY I have learned that much of our worship experience is cultural. And I have never seen culture more clearly defined than in the church.

Take my father's church. In this black Baptist church, the singing was loud. The preaching was loud. The hand clapping and foot stomping were loud. People said, "If it's not loud, it's not church."

My father was the finest preacher and Bible teacher I have ever heard. He believed every word of the Bible and communicated each of his points with power and conviction. But often during the sermon, the congregation would begin to shout in agreement, and the organist and the drummer would echo back in a rhythmic pulse. The worship service would grow louder and louder—so loud, in fact, that I could hardly hear a word my father said.

On the other hand, I've been in countless conservative white churches where no one said amen, no one clapped his hands, and the organist never played anything that wasn't written in the hymnal. Every part of the worship service was calculated, with no room for spontaneity.

Often, the sermons delivered by the white preachers in these

conservative white churches were powerful and deserved plenty of amens. Still the congregation sat quietly and attentively in their pews without uttering a word.

The contrast between the two cultures is stark. But recently I have begun to see something wonderful happening as believers of different backgrounds worship together, both in church and at my concerts. Those members of the body of Christ who enjoy a free and liberated worship style are giving permission to the conservative members to enjoy themselves in the Lord. The quiet, reserved members are feeling free to respond. They clap their hands and say amen with reckless abandon.

At the same time, our quiet, reserved brothers and sisters are giving permission to the loud, liberated members of the body to sit quietly and listen. It is an awesome sight to see those who once said amen as if on cue sit in tearful reflection and ponder God's goodness.

The key word is balance. Neither group has a monopoly on worship. There is a place for emotional display, and there is a place for the intellectual approach.

As we worship together more and more, we must begin to appreciate and even learn from what other races and cultures can bring to the worship experience. If we are serious about reconciliation, we must be willing to accept each other's culture and worship experience as legitimate.

REFRAIN FROM JUDGING One thing that helps us to accept different worship styles is to avoid making judgments about them. We have to remain open rather than declaring, "I don't like that kind of music," when we hear something different from what we are accustomed to. Even if our first response is a negative one, we may find ourselves changing our minds as we listen.

Unfortunately, I have been misjudged as a singer numerous

times. People have heard me singing a soft, easy listening ballad over the radio and assumed I was a white singer. They were surprised when they learned I am an African American!

Remember that old adage, "Never judge a book by its cover." No longer can we trust in traditions, uphold our stereotypes and put people in a box.

In recent years, you've probably heard white singers belt out a tune with the soul of a Motown singer. And you've probably heard African Americans sing beautifully sweet, tender ballads. If we will let God do His work in our hearts, we will see Him erase the lines we have drawn.

I started singing publicly more often when I was in high school. I realized right away that I had a unique vocal style. But most people thought that since I was black, I ought to deliver gut-wrenching, sweat-producing gospel songs.

When I was younger, I thought that, too. I was often frustrated by what I believed was a limited ability. I considered my voice too white for black people and too black for white people. I tried my best to sing soul-rending gospel renditions, but I'd always end up with laryngitis the next day.

The enemy pointed his long finger of judgment at me and said, "Well, there certainly is no room in the church for a gray singer. You might as well pack up your soundtracks and go home." For a long time I believed his lie.

But I don't believe it anymore! I realize now that what God did with my voice, He did on purpose for a purpose. He gave me exactly the kind of voice He wanted me to have. He gave me just enough of the traditional gospel music style to minister to my black brothers and sisters. And He gave me just enough of the contemporary style to minister to my white brothers and sisters.

In a Babbie Mason concert we all come together with one thing in mind, and that is to worship. Hopefully we can put an end to categorizing music based on whether it is “black” or “white.”

STRIKING A BALANCE One of the most beautiful pictures of a balanced and harmonious relationship is the orchestra. Each section of instruments plays its part as written by the composer and directed by the conductor. The voices of instruments are all made from different materials. They come in all shapes and sizes, with tone qualities and timbres uniquely their own. Yet they make beautiful music together.

The heart of the listener can be deeply moved by the performance of a finely tuned symphony orchestra. But imagine how disruptive it would be if all of a sudden the French horn players stood to their feet and began to play loudly, each doing his own thing. We would all cover our ears in disapproval. Again, the key word is balance.

Some churches focus on the spirit in a worship service. The praise and worship must be spirited, the preaching must be exciting, and the response must be emotional.

On the other hand, some churches focus on the truth. Their approach to worship is purely intellectual. But Jesus told the woman at the well that true worshipers will worship in spirit and in truth (see John 4: 23).

In order for the human body to be healthy, it must receive a balanced diet. Too much fat, too much salt or too much caffeine can upset the body’s chemistry and cause it to be weak, sick and diseased.

In addition, each member of the body is dependent upon the other members to remain healthy. The digestive system works with the circulatory system. Together they work with the nervous system.

It is the same in the body of Christ. The Bible tells us, “And the eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you’; nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you’” (1 Cor. 12:21, NKJV). In other words, we need each other. Each member of the body plays a vitally important part in maintaining the overall health of the church.

This truth carries over to different denominations and different congregations within those denominations. We need them all. God created the body perfectly balanced so there would be no schisms in it. In other words, God designed the church to function in perfect unity so nothing will be lacking.

I’ve seen positive signs that unity is on the horizon in the area of worship. But there’s more to be done. Let’s commit together to pray for the healing of the church. We must all accept the challenge as members of Christ’s body to walk together, work together, serve together and especially worship together in unity, while celebrating our diversity.

Read a companion devotional.

Babbie Mason is a premier gospel singer and songwriter with numerous honors to her credit, including two Dove awards. She has been a featured artist for the Billy Graham Crusades, Women of Faith tour, and has worked with many other artists.