

## ON SPECIAL MUSIC BY LARRY MUDD

Something that is a fairly regular part of our worship experience at the Manhattan Church is a piece of music that is presented in a special manner by a chorus, soloist and/or worship team. Since many churches experience only congregational singing in their corporate worship times, it is important to examine the purposes behind this practice in order that our experience of special music be as meaningful and intentional as possible.

Special music pieces are appropriate in corporate worship for several reasons. From a Scriptural standpoint, the little we do have in reference to First Century practice is pointedly **inexact**. The picture painted in the New Testament is one of believers with great latitude in their worship as they gathered in synagogues on Saturdays and then in their homes on Sundays, interpreting the Lord's Supper in feasts, not the spare cracker and juice distribution of our time, experiencing a wide range of worship experiences *impossible* for us to precisely determine (on purpose, I think). Paul's instruction was not on what to do but how to do it - for edification and building up. The references to singing in Colossians 3:16 ("sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God") and Ephesians 5:19 ("as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts"), having become proof texts for congregational singing only, use a reflexive Greek construction (resulting in English's "one another") that does **not** convey the idea of everyone doing it together at the same time, but rather the idea that some encourage while others are encouraged. This is even clearer in 1 Corinthians 14:26, with "What should be done then, my friends? When you come together, **each one** (emphasis mine) has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up."

Not to get all exegetical on you, but this language flows from Paul's earlier discussion of the exercise of spiritual gifts. We can assume that the one gifted in teaching is the one giving the lesson, the one gifted in tongues is speaking in tongues, and so on. The ability to edify and encourage the body through music is also a spiritual gift. One of the reasons I believe special pieces are appropriate and powerful is that those with that spiritual gift - not just the great voice, but the passionately-worshipful-heart-driven-voice, are given opportunity to use it in a way that builds up the body. If a significantly gifted spiritual singer is only able to sing with the congregation, their sole outlet for communicative expression of their great gift from God to others lies **outside the church**. If they are restricted from using their gifts within a congregational setting, a professional musical setting is the only venue available for the blessing and exercise of the unique talent gifted them by the Creator.

"Let all things be done for building up." That last sentence in 1 Cor 14 is the most important of all, and as always with Jesus, our motivation must come from the right place - in this case, a desire to build up, encourage, teach and admonish people on a level they are unable to receive or process when they're devoting all the energy and focus required to singing themselves. Just as God uses the training, skills, gifts and person of Tom to communicate the Word without participation by the congregation (except for the occasional hearty "Amen"), so I believe he uses us to communicate on Sunday the messages of texts like "you can breathe new life in me again", "behold your King," and "no man can hinder you". The message of each special text is received by the congregation in a far more immediate way than if they had struggled through the song with us. However, if specials are done in order to bring glory to the singers, I believe they are inappropriate, and while only God truly knows our hearts, I don't think any of us are in it for the pats on the back (I personally have to be dragged into solos). The chance for a message to be felt deeply by the congregation is an important aspect of specials. Familiarity with a piece is not required for it to immediately impact and bless the body, and in a place like Manhattan where the themes of our services vary widely, there is much more opportunity to communicate and encourage when specials are an option.

A final blessing rendered by special music is the thoughtful and accurate presentation of new music that will become part of the congregation's vocabulary in the near future. Having heard a new piece sung passionately and accurately is a great help in learning new music. Members often respond with "I can't wait to sing that song!"

This is not by any means an exhaustive discussion, although it may feel so to you. This is not intended to discount or downplay the significant importance of congregational singing by any means. The experience and encouragement of congregational singing is extremely powerful and mightily used by God in our lives. By coming to know so fully the songs we sing together, they are woven into our psyche and made tools for the Spirit – songs of comfort and courage, "Make Me More Free", "There's Not a Friend," and nearly countless others. This type of music is by far the primary experience of our fellowship, and it is a great encouragement. The opportunity for special encouragement, when pursued for the reasons discussed above, can be an equally great, though different, encouragement to us all as we strive to follow the One who created a musical universe.

<sup>NLT</sup> **Psalm 117:1** Praise the LORD, all you nations. Praise him, all you people of the earth. <sup>2</sup> For he loves us with unfailing love; the faithfulness of the LORD endures forever. Praise the LORD!