

Is Quality Important?

by Tony Guerrero

The world offers great quality, especially in music. You may not personally enjoy a specific genre of music, a particular song, or a certain artist, but there is little doubt that a lot of time and money is put into presenting music with quality. Compare the quality of the latest Britney Spears or Elton John CD to most church CDs. For that matter, compare the quality of the band playing in the bar down the street with the quality of your average church band! Now, compare the messages. Shouldn't the quality of our music match the quality of our message? Shouldn't we strive to offer better quality than what the world offers? When we think about ways to attract our communities to the church it's important to remember that bad music never attracts a crowd. Great music, however, can! Great music also attracts great musicians!

If we were to visit a large majority of churches we might conclude that quality isn't very important in music ministry. So many worship leaders are just so happy and relieved to have anyone willing to play that they end up not demanding very much of them. They would never think of scaring them off by insisting that they actually practice their instrument during the week!

Naturally, the heart of a person is of far more concern to God than their musical ability, but if genuine and willing hearts were the only requirement for musical participation we'd see many of our congregations running for the door. Of course we all expect some amount of musical skill and quality from our participants, but the question is how high to set the bar.

Keep in mind that bad guitar playing, tasteless drum fills, showing off, and the like can actually distract from worship. 1 Corinthians 14:7-8 addresses the issue by asking the question, *"Even in the case of lifeless things that make sounds, such as the flute or harp, how will anyone know what tune is being played unless there is a distinction in the notes? Again, if the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle?"* (NIV)

Quality in our work is important to God. Scripture often promotes or demands quality. Consider the following Scripture passages:

In Exodus 26:31, God describes how he wants his tabernacle built and then commands that a "skilled craftsman" build it. (I would have assumed that anyone getting direct orders from God would have instinctively pursued the best work, but God made sure to specify quality just in case!)

Proverbs 22:29 states, *"Do you see a man skilled in his work? He will serve before kings; he will not serve before obscure men."* (NIV) One example of this is found in David, a finely skilled musician, whom Saul employed to play the harp for him (1 Samuel 16:18-23).

In 1 Chronicles 15:22, we see that Kenaniah was appointed by David to be in charge of singing because he was skilled at it.

Ecclesiastes 10:10 extols the virtue of skill over strength. Psalm 78:72 talks of David's skilled leadership. Psalm 45:1 qualifies the singer's tongue as being the "pen of a skilled writer." (NIV) In all areas, including music, skill and quality are considered important attributes.

David appointed 288 musicians for duty who were *"trained and skilled in music for the Lord."* (1 Chronicles 25:7) (I doubt any of these musicians were "weekend warriors," although it could be argued that even David had a "day job!")

Skilled craftsmen were highly respected and considered to be wise. In Proverbs 8, wisdom (one of God's attributes) is personified and calls herself a "craftsman" at God's side during creation.

Even more relevant to the topic is Psalm 33:3, which I consider to be the job description for all church musicians and singers: *"Sing to him a new song; play skillfully, and shout for joy."* It starts with a command for creativity and ends with a reminder that worshipping God is the most fun thing we can do on earth (when we do it right!). But right in the middle is the command to "play skillfully." God could have left that phrase out, but he didn't. If we are to believe that the Scriptures are the inspired Word of God, then we need to take those two words seriously!

God does want quality, and he not only wants it from the professional musicians, he even wants it from the amateur! Quality isn't about how good you are compared to the rest of the world; it's about how good you are with the talents God has given you. How good are you willing to work at getting?

What does the command to "play skillfully" mean? It doesn't mean that God expects us all to play guitar like Phil Keaggy or sing like Celine Dion. What it means is that we are all to strive to play at the best of our abilities for the Lord.

Making a "joyful noise" is fine for those who were not blessed with any musical talents, but for those who have been so blessed, at any level, it is basically bad stewardship to not offer our best and work on making our "best" even better. Those of us called to lead and/or serve in the ministry need not be the best in the world, but we should honor God by being the best we can possibly be.

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