

Are "7-11" Songs Always Bad?

by Dan Johnson - Jenison Bible Church



Worship

Many worship traditionalists use the phrase "7-11 Song" to criticize what they perceive as the shallow and repetitious singing of a worship song. (Seven words, sung eleven times.) While agreeing that we need to avoid being careless and haphazard in our use of such singing techniques, I would argue against the outright dismissal of "7-11-ized" worship.

Recently, the 7-11 criticism arose again for me when I introduced "My Soul Finds Rest," a new hymn based on Psalm 62 by British hymnwriter Stuart Townend, at the IFCA International Youth Convention. This hymn is easily taught and sung and drives home the idea of resting in the everlasting, unchanging nature of our great God. The bridge employs the refrain from the 13th century hymn "All Creatures of our God and King," and repeats it three times.

"O praise him! O praise him! Alleluia! Alleluia!"

Couple this bridge with the beginning phrase from each chorus and you have what could more correctly be called a "4-10 song."

I also introduced this song to the congregation where I serve as worship leader. The response, in both venues, was mostly positive. However, I also received criticism from several people—revolving, almost exclusively, around the use of the repeated lyric. One person said it this way:

"About the fourth time we sing that line, it just makes me want to check out. Jesus warned us in the Sermon on the Mount about "vain repetition."

They not only put it in personal terms, they attempted to marshal a biblical argument. "Vain repetition" is a reference to Matthew 6:7 (KJV):

"But when you pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking."

The critic, in a sense, was saying that the song had crossed the line into the type of offense to which Jesus was referring in Matt. 6:7. Ultimately, they were claiming that this type of repetition was not only unhelpful or distracting—it was wrong.

My initial response was that this person was understanding the passage incorrectly. Even a cursory study of the passage in its context reveals that Jesus had much more in mind than mere repetition. It encompasses the idea of "babbling" or a pointless "going on and on." Also He was speaking to Pharisees and was probably aiming at how such babbling exposes the state of one's heart.

This prompted me to examine the place of repetition

in worship, and I have a thought to proffer. While a biblical argument could easily be made for the use of repetition in worship (Rev. 4:8, Psalms 8 and 136), I am going to choose, rather, an anthropological argument—an argument from human nature.

As part of our fallenness, human beings are by nature rather dense. Our ability to comprehend something important is often hampered by barriers intrinsic to our physical and spiritual makeup. Interested in a demonstration? Ask a person who has just sung a new, through-composed hymn (one that moves from stanza to stanza with no repeated words or phrases), to explain the meaning. Nine out of ten people probably couldn't recall much, and even that tenth would probably have only grasped some basic concepts but not the fullness intended by the author. Our fallen minds simply need more time to let it "sink in." Being aware of this failing, diligent worshipers will often ask me for copies of a new lyrics to take home, and proceed to study them devotionally over the week.

On that note, let's again consider the 7-11 song. Is it not possible that it allows worshipers to chew the concepts slowly and digest them properly? The Bible calls this "meditation." Is there a place for such repetitive meditation in worship? Given the anthropological reflections above, I think so. There should be room in



corporate worship to mull over an idea—even a simple idea, like, "O Praise Him, Alleluia!" Perhaps singing that phrase ten times would allow enough time to dive into the thought and emotion that phrase truly commands. Ten times just might foster the worship that phrase intends to engender. Ten times just might stir a new and profound sense of what it means to serve an "everlasting, unchanging" God.

The late 90s brought us a chorus with the repeated phrase "I could sing of Your love forever." Despite being somewhat wearied by its overuse, when I've let that phrase roll around in my head, heart, and soul, at times it has helped me gain a richer, deeper sense of God's great love for me.

It seems possible that this is precisely the reason God has prescribed meditation as an important, habitual spiritual practice for the mature follower of Jesus.

So, while I'm willing to admit that modern worship has gone overboard in the 7-11 department, let's not be totally dismissive and throw the baby out with the bath water. If we do, it's possible we'll miss a vital way we can engage in the important spiritual discipline of meditation in the act of singing.

(Special thanks to Martin Tel, and his presentation on Psalm singing at the 2010 Calvin Worship Symposium, for influencing my ideas and opinions expressed in this article.)