

Ephesians on the Air: American Idol

Ephesians 5:15–20

August 15, 2010

If I asked you to identify the following people, could you do it?

Rubin Studdard, Fantasia Berrino, Taylor Clark, David Cook, Kris Allen.

If I add the names Kelly Clarkson, Carrie Underwood and Jordan Sparks, it becomes a little easier. All these persons are American Idol winners.

I am just curious, how many of you have ever watched American Idol? Given that it is the number one television show in America I know a lot of people watch. My guess is that the primary audience are those 50 year olds and younger.

Given the number of you that are not in that demographic, I should probably say a few words about this show that I am focusing on this morning. Basically American Idol is a talent contest. Individual singers perform each week. They are critiqued by the judges and then voted for by those at home. As the show moves along contestants are eliminated until one final singer is left. He or she becomes the next American Idol. I believe a recording contract is one of the prizes that goes to the winner.

If we have any guests with us this morning, you might be wondering why I am talking about American Idol. What does that show have to do with our faith? My answer – nothing. Let me explain what I have been doing these last few weeks. Today is the fifth Sunday in a six week sermon series. The name of the series is “Ephesians on the Air”. Each week I take a television show to illustrate a theme or lesson from the book of Ephesians. Today’s show as you probably have figured out is American Idol.



As I was reading through the 5th chapter of Ephesians verse 19 really caught my eye. The New Living Translation puts it this way: “Then you will sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, making music to the Lord in your

hearts.” As I was reflecting on those words an idea came to me. Why not spend my sermon looking at, hearing and singing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs!

Since music will be the focus, what TV show is about music? American Idol. Unlike that show where the focus is on the singers, this morning our focus will be on the one we are singing to and about.

Right now I would like you to open your hymnal and turn to page 75, “All People That on Earth Do Dwell”

Let us sing the 1st and 4th verse.

Keep the hymnal open to that page. You can see at the bottom who wrote the words and the music. The words to “All People That on Earth Do Dwell” were written by William Kethe in 1561 making it one of the oldest hymns in our hymnal.

It's amazing to think that we just sang a hymn that was written over 400 years ago. One interesting note about this hymn is that Kethe's text is mentioned in Shakespeare's *Merry Wives of Windsor* (act 2, scene 1): “They do no more adhere and keep peace together than the Hundredth Psalm to the tune of Greensleeves.”

Music has been a part of worship from almost the beginning. We read through the Old Testament and we find several notations about music. The most obvious is found in the 150th Psalm. Please turn in your hymnal to page #862 and we can read this Psalm responsively.

I always find it amusing to hear folks argue against any other instrument except the organ or piano being playing in worship. If we look at Psalm 150, we can see a whole variety of instruments being playing in worship. Way before any organ was ever created they were using pipes, trumpets, harps and tambourines to worship God.

Times change and so do traditions. If you read about music and its role in worship over the years, you will see how tastes have evolved. There were periods of enthusiastic signing with lots of instruments and other times of quiet singing with no accompaniment at all. When I read Psalm 150 I hear in my mind a joyful blending of instruments and voice. Move forward about 2000 years and the Catholic church of 600 AD. Under Pope Gregory I the chant became to music of choice in the church. Let's listen to an example of a Gregorian Chant.

You may not know this but the church was once the center of musical development. Prior to the Renaissance it was in the monasteries that formal musical styles developed and musical notations were invented.

By the time of the Reformation, music was finding a life of its own outside the church. Within the church there was a variety of opinions. Calvin believed in minimal use of music. Luther believed the exact opposite. Over time you would find the whole spectrum within the Protestant church: from the rejection of all music in worship (early Quakers) to very limited congregational singing without instruments (strict Calvinism) to the acceptance of organ and choirs (Lutherans and Anglicans).

As for Methodist, we have always been a signing church. If you every looked through the United Methodist Hymnal, you might have come across John Wesley's "Directions for Singing". Let's turn to the very front of the Hymnal to page vii.

Wesley's Directions for Singing

Learn these tunes before you learn any others; afterwards learn as many as you please. Sing them exactly as they are printed here, without altering or mending them at all; and if you have learned to sing them otherwise, unlearn it as soon as you can. Sing all. See that you join with the congregation as frequently as you can. Let not a slight degree of weakness or weariness hinder you. If it is a cross to you, take it up, and you will find it a blessing.

Sing lustily and with a good courage. *Beware of singing as if you were half dead, or half asleep; but lift up your voice with strength. Be no more afraid of your voice now, nor more ashamed of its being heard, than when you sung the songs of Satan.*

Sing modestly. *Do not bawl, so as to be heard above or distinct from the rest of the congregation, that you may not destroy the harmony; but strive to unite your voices together, so as to make one clear melodious sound.*



Sing in time. Whatever time is sung be sure to keep with it. Do not run before nor stay behind it; but attend close to the leading voices, and move therewith as exactly as you can; and take care not to sing too slow. This drawling way naturally steals on all who are lazy; and it is high time to drive it out from us, and sing all our tunes just as quick as we did at first.

Above all sing spiritually. Have an eye to God in every word you sing. Aim at pleasing him more than yourself, or any other creature. In order to do this attend strictly to the sense of what you sing, and see that your heart is not carried away with the sound, but offered to God continually; so shall your singing be such as the Lord will approve here, and reward you when he cometh in the clouds of heaven.

Above all sing spiritually. Have an eye to God in every word you sing. What a great reminder whenever we sing in church.

The question becomes “what do we sing!”

Following Calvinist thought we can put the words from the bible to music. There are a number of hymns in our Hymnal that do just that. One example is Psalm 119, verse 105. If we look in our hymnal to page 601 we can find those words in the Refrain. Last Sunday my family and I saw Amy Grant at DTE Music Theater. This was one of the songs she sang. I will ask George/Beverly to play the refrain.

Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path

Along with Amy Grant there was Michael W. Smith. We also have several of his songs in our Hymnal. He took another verse from the bible and used it for a song. The name of that song is “Forever God is Faithful”. Let us listen to that song. (YouTube: [Michael W. Smith Forever God is Faithful](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uSM96OA39ic)
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uSM96OA39ic>)

Here we have a contemporary Christian song that is sung at contemporary church services. As we think about music in the church a point of contention has been the type of music. Do we sing from the Hymnal or the Faith we sing book. Is it an old standard or a new song? Are the songs accompanied by organ, piano, or a band?

Congregations have gone to war over the choice of music during the worship service. We all have our own preferences so it is hard to please everyone. I can tell you from experience conversations can get pretty heated and passionate when discussing music during worship.

In one church I served a member told me he could barely worship because there were drums in the sanctuary. Mind you, they were not played during the traditional service he attended, rather they were for the contemporary service.

I have no solution for the worship wars. I like to have a worshipping congregation comprised of multi-generations. In order to do that you must include parts of the service that are meaningful to those in the different age groups. Now some say that so-called “blending” cannot be done. If you are going to do contemporary, then go all out. If you try to please everybody, no one will be happy. I understand that, but I also believe there is a richness having grandparents worshipping with their grandchildren.

For our hymns this morning I selected a very traditional hymn (O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing), a folksy Gaither hymn (He Touched Me) and a praise song from the late 80’s (Lord, I Lift Your Name on High). Hopefully you connected to one of those songs. As for having guitars and drums in worship, though we don’t have them today, we might in the future. If you do come in one Sunday and see them, please don’t get upset. Remember Psalm 150 and the variety of ways to praise the Lord.

As I close this morning, I want to have us do a brief hymn sing. Several of you can select a favorite to sing. In the spirit of American Idol, if you select a hymn, you have to sing the first several lines on you own. We many or may not have any takers. Let’s see.

I hope this has been informative. I also hope it will challenge us to look at our own musical preference when it comes to worship. Can we praise God in other music styles?