

Why Do We Sing What We Sing: Gospel Music

Matthew 25:31-46

The Rev. Nancy Conklin

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The second to last stop on our “Returning to the Roots of the Civil Rights” tour was the National Museum of African-American Music in Nashville. After the very intense immersive experience of the previous five days, I found it a bit jolting when I disembarked from the bus onto the jubilant and raucous streets of Music City. Yet, hearing the cacophony of live country music pouring out onto those streets from multiple honky-tonks immediately lifted my spirit.

Inside the museum, the walk through the history of African-American music began with spirituals. After which, we entered the gospel music exhibit and were greeted with this quote from gospel legend Mahalia Jackson, “I sing God’s music because it makes me feel free. It gives me hope.”

Throughout the museum, we were able to put on headphones and listen to the songs of that particular time in history. In the gospel music exhibit, we got to do something even better. In small groups composed of a mixture of Black and white members of our larger tour group, we entered a room and lined up against a green wall (like the ones meteorologists use to report the weather) and transported virtually into a large gospel choir. We joined in singing that gospel classic, “O Happy Day!” Swept up in the power of the music, even us white folks swayed our hips and clapped our hands. When our performance was over, the video played back so we could see ourselves, Black and white, East Shore and West Shore, an amalgamation of Protestant theologies, singing together with such joy! For me, that moment was a highlight of the trip; not only a moment of great joy, but iconic of our hope that we, as the one Body of Christ in the greater Harrisburg area, really will thrive together one happy day.

Joy, that wonderful fruit of the Spirit, is energy, and being filled with joy is energizing and empowering. That’s the great gift gospel music has brought and continues to bring — a channel of energizing joy that empowers social reform. Gospel music originated toward the end of the Gilded Age of capitalism. The rise of urban industrialization produced vast economic growth but, also, wealth inequality. In response, Protestant churches, both Black and white, began what became known as the social gospel movement. The social gospel movement emphasized that Jesus’ ethical teachings could remedy social injustices; what theologian Walter Rauschenbusch called “institutionalized sinfulness.” Gospel music expresses the joyful good news that Jesus won the decisive victory over the powers of evil, sin, and death that plague our societal systems and with the power of his life in ours, we can do the same.

The father of gospel music, Thomas Dorsey, the son of a Georgia Baptist preacher, joined that gospel message of hope with his love for jazz and blues. At first, the institutional church rejected Dorsey’s music, claiming the energetic rhythms made it too secular. So, he teamed up with Mahalia Jackson who, like him, had grown up in the Baptist church and had also become enamored with the sounds of blues. Together, they left the religious establishment and took their new Christian sound to the street corners of Chicago and across the country. Before long, male vocal quartets, who had been singing *a cappella* spirituals at African-American universities such as Fisk and Hampton, began singing gospel songs. Those quartets grew into larger groups until they became what we now picture — a massive gospel choir swaying and clapping and singing with exuberant, energizing, and empowering joy.

In the white church, white gospel music began as a blend of Christian hymns and revivalist songs. Fanny Crosby, the mother of gospel music, wrote poetic verses with a refrain that could be sung gospel style. Those gospel songs first appeared in Sunday school hymnbooks until evangelists, most notably, Dwight

L. Moody, used them in worship services, at which time the music became even more demonstrative and lively. In rural areas, musicians such as June Carter, who later married Johnny Cash, infused their gospel music performances with local Appalachian mountain music, giving birth to today's country music. The line between sacred and secular became all the more blurred.

The other gift of gospel music that, for today, helps us understand not only why we sing what we sing but how we are to sing, is that it brought choirs — adult choirs (as we now have) — into Protestant churches; not just the Black church, but also the white church, including our own Presbyterian churches. Post-Reformation Calvinist churches in America of whatever denomination had a big problem — terrible music. Though the congregants could actively participate in church singing instead of watching in silence, as was the case before the Reformation, they sounded terrible when they did. European churches had choirs filled with beautiful voices, but no congregation singing; American Protestant churches had congregational singing but no choirs to lead them. Instead, they had a song leader who would sing *a cappella* a line from the hymn and the congregation would sing it in return. That was the Scottish practice called “lining out,” resulting in abysmal singing. As one music historian wrote, “discontented ministers compared the music to howling.”

Without an instrument to set and keep a tune or a choir to give vocal support, the tempo became slower and slower to the point of monotonous droning. Clearly, churches needed some livening up and some formal music education. They found their musical salvation in the form of young university graduates with musical training. Disgusted by “the rack,” as they called congregational singing, these music students schooled their own congregations on alternative melodies for hymns. Then, they started to travel from town to town, teaching neighboring congregations how to sing. Before long, church choirs were formed under the direction of a choirmaster to lead congregational singing.

From that time on, the choir became an important and distinctive part of worship leadership, evidenced by the addition of choir lofts and formal choir robes. Choirs take seriously this role as worship leaders, knowing that worship is an act of the community and music is that of all the people. Whether edifying the gospel by singing a choral anthem or leading congregational singing, choirs teach and support us in our singing our praises to God and our trust in the hope of the gospel message for our salvation. For that, we are grateful to God and to them, as they allow God's gift to flow through them as blessing to us.

This morning, we are especially grateful that that our faithful and dedicated choir members are powerbrokers. Through the offerings of their time, talent, and faith, they transmit the life-giving energy of the Holy Spirit, empowering us that together we might be victorious over the powers of evil, sin, and death that plague our world. Then we can say with Mahalia Jackson, “We sing God's music because it makes us feel free; it gives us hope.”