Multilingual Worship

The language we use in worship matters. It infuses substantive thoughts and images into our understanding of God. It molds and captures our heartfelt expressions to God in response. The language we use in worship can promote unity. It can also foster diversity, whether directly or indirectly. It can encourage people to engage and participate in worship. It can also contribute to an attitude of disconnected observation.

Here, Multilingual Worship will be the subject of discussion, including biblical evidence of its inclusion in worship, practical considerations for application, current and future uses in worship, and misuses or potential dangers. It is true that there are other aspects of language, as used in worship, such as the tension between incorporating culture and preserving the truth of the Christian faith, or vernacular vs. Orthodoxy. However, there is simply not room to discuss these as well. Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version.

Biblical Principles and Pictures of Multilingual Worship

As Genesis 11 tells us, at one time all people who lived on the earth spoke the same language. However, when they decided to build a great city with a tower reaching to the sky, God saw what they were doing and was concerned that nothing would be impossible for them, since they were united and spoke the same language. So God said, "Come, let's go down and confuse the people with different languages. Then they won't be able to understand each other" (Gen. 11:7). It seems that these people were acting out of pride, thinking that they could accomplish anything in their power, and God humbled them by scattering them in confusion. Author Timothy Pierce holds the persuasive view that, while God instituted diversity of languages due to pride, Christ in humility has united and is uniting all believers together as one. Through the church, God's Spirit is reversing what happened in Genesis 11.[1]

Going straight from Genesis to Revelation, we get some pictures of what the ultimate end, or beginning of the end, of God's grand narrative will be like:

> And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying, "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!" (Rev. 5:13)

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[1] Timothy Pierce, *Enthroned on Our Praise* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2008), 39-40.

> After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" (Rev. 7:9-10)

Here, in John's vision of heaven, we see that literally every creature will worship God. In the second passage, we see "a great multitude," which includes representatives from every nationality and *language*. It is difficult to determine exactly how many languages are spoken in the world today. However, one of the best estimates we have is that there are currently 6,909 known living languages, with 94% of these spoken by only 6% of the world's population.[2] What the texts from Revelation seem to say is that speakers of each of these languages will be present, "standing before the throne and before the Lamb." Whether or not they will all be speaking their own languages or perhaps a new common language, is unclear. However, we do know that they will all be saying the same thing: "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" In summary, we see a *unity*-in-diversity as many different types of people, comprising the church, Christ's body, are all gathered around God, worshiping Him together. Whether one language or many are used, all the people are glorifying God in unity of the *understood* word.

The notion of understanding is addressed more directly in 1 Cor. 14:9-12, where the immediate situational application is the proper use of tongues in corporate worship:

> So with yourselves, if with your tongue you utter speech that is not intelligible, how will anyone know what is said? For you will be speaking into the air. There are doubtless many different languages in the world, and none is without meaning, but if I do not know the meaning of the language, I will be a foreigner to the speaker and the speaker a foreigner to me. So with yourselves, since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church.

The principle behind the specific application here is that everyone needs to understand what's being said in corporate worship. To apply this principle in a corporate worship setting today where people of different language groups are gathered together, two general approaches can be followed. In the first, the dominant language can be translated by a designated translator and delivered via wireless headphones or other means. While this may work well for the parts of the gathering where people are just listening, it is not conducive to active participation by the

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[2] Paul M. Lewis, ed., *Ethnologue*, 16th ed. (Dallas: SIL International, 2009).

minority language groups. The second method is to provide the means for all people to pray and sing in their own primary language simultaneously or at least in a mixed fashion.[3]

Motivation for Multilingual Worship

In the 1990's, the total U.S. population increased by only 6%. However, during that same decade, Native Americans in the U.S. increased by 38%, Latin Americans by 58%, and Asian Americans by 107%.[4] Moreover, this trend is predicted to increase. In her book, Kathy Black predicts that by 2050 these same groups will increase by 80%, 199%, and 195%, respectively, while the European American (white) population will increase by only 3%.[5]

The collective people of the United States are becoming increasingly multi-ethnic, and apparently at an increasing rate as well. A pertinent question one might ask is: How will churches in the U.S. respond, and how are they responding to this change? Some people believe that the statement, "Sunday morning is the most segregated hour of Christian America," attributed to Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., still holds today. While this topic is debated and researched[6], the key question seems to be: "Can American churches remain separate but equal?"[7] Bob Hurd, a teacher, composer, and liturgist in the Roman Catholic denomination, has written an informative article on Multilingual Worship. In it, he writes, "'Separate but equal' liturgies are not enough in parish life…because the very meaning of the Paschal Mystery we celebrate is that while we are *many* we are also *one* as the body of Christ."[8] To say more here would be outside the scope of this paper. The point is that Multilingual Worship will likely become increasingly important in the life of American churches in the near future.

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[3] Bob Kauflin, "Praising God in a Multi-Language Congregation," Worship Matters Blog, entry posted March 12, 2009, http://www.worshipmatters.com/2009/03/12/praising-god-in-a-multi-language-congregation/ (accessed March 14, 2012).

[4] Proskuneo Ministries, "First Glance Pack," downloadable at proskuneo.info/resources/first-glance-pack-new/, (Grayson: Proskuneo Ministries), 4.

[5] Kathy Black, *Culturally-Conscious Worship* (Danvers: Chalice Press, 2000), 14-15.

[6] Christopher P. Scheitle and Kevin D. Dougherty, "Race, Diversity, and Membership Duration in Religious Congregations," *Sociological Inquiry* 80, no. 3 (August 2010): 405-423.

[7] John Blake, "Why Sunday morning remains America's most segregated hour," Belief Blog, entry posted October 6, 2010, http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2010/10/06/why-sunday-morning-remains-americas-most-segregated-hour/ (accessed March 14, 2012).

[8] Bob Hurd, "Music for Multicultural, Multilingual Liturgy: Theology, Issues, and Strategies," *Liturgical Ministry* 6 (June 1, 1997): 122, *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCO*host* (accessed March 12, 2012).

Definition and Practical Considerations

Multilingual Worship, in its most basic form, can be defined simply as worship that uses multiple languages. However, within this definition there are positive and negative examples. Simply collecting a number of linguistically diverse elements (songs, prayers, readings, etc.) is not sufficient for how we will think of Multilingual Worship here. Multilingual Worship must also encourage the unity of the body; it must allow people to worship together, in word and understanding. According to Hurd, "In a wisely planned multilingual liturgy, language borders are places of meeting and interaction rather than separation."[9] In regard to selection and arrangement of music, he asks, "Does the song allow diverse language groups to pray together significantly?"[10]

Focusing now more specifically on music, there are several things one must consider when arranging songs for Multilingual Worship, for it is both an art and a science. First, there is the translation of the lyrics from one language to another. Both the dynamic or big-picture meaning and the transliteration or word-for-word equivalence should be considered. In addition, each lyrical line translated needs to have approximately the same number of syllables to be "sing-able" with the original language. For languages, which do not use an alphabet similar to the original language, a phonetic transcription is also needed if the translated language will be spoken or sung by people who do not understand it.

For example, take the lyrics to the chorus of "Mighty To Save," a worship song originally written in English, by Ben Fielding and Reuben Morgan:

> Savior, He can move the mountains
> My God is mighty to save
> He is mighty to save
> Forever Author of salvation
> He rose and conquered the grave
> Jesus conquered the grave.[11]

The slide below shows the corresponding Korean translation[12] (bottom line and left, light blue text), phonetic transcription[13] (top line, light blue text), and a loose English transliteration (bottom line and right, white text).

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[9] Hurd, "Music for Multicultural, Multilingual Liturgy: Theology, Issues, and Strategies," 124.
[10] Hurd, "Music for Multicultural, Multilingual Liturgy: Theology, Issues, and Strategies," 127.
[11] Ben Fielding and Reuben Morgan, "Mighty To Save" (Sydney: Hillsong Publishing, 2006).
[12] Chang-ki Lee, *In His Presence*, 5th ed. (Go-yang: YWAM Publishing, 2010).
[13] From Sean Moon, (Korean) Denver Seminary student (March 13, 2012).

Yae-soo san eul ohm ki shi neun
예수 산을 옮기시는 (Jesus who can move the mountain)

nae joo neun neung yuk ae joo
내 주는 능력의 주 (My Lord is mighty Lord)

keu neun neung yuk ae joo
그는 능력의 주 (He is mighty Lord)

Young one han goo won ae chang jo ja
영원한 구원의 창조자 (Forever Creator of salvation)

Sah mahng eul ee ki si ko
사망을 이기시고 (He overcame death)

Yae-soo bu hwal hat nae
예수 부활 했네 (and resurrected)

In this example, we can observe how closely the translation comes to the original. The first line is fairly close, except for the singular "mountain" instead of plural. However, the second and third lines do not directly convey the idea of saving. The fourth line substitutes the word "Creator" for "Author" in the original, since "author" in Korean would sound funny or weird to a native speaker. The fifth and sixth lines are again close, although there is no explicit mention of the grave.[14] Thus, there is a balance between conveying the original literal meaning, but also making it dynamically equivalent in understanding to a Korean speaker, and finally something that is sing-able in terms of number of syllables and mood.

The phonetic transcription in the slide above would be useful for English speakers if the worship leader directed them to sing the Korean language with their Korean brothers and sisters at some point in the song. For other language groups with alphabets dissimilar from both Korean and English, separate transcriptions would be needed. Note that, while any number of languages can theoretically be used simultaneously in a worship song, the need to print or project lyrics for each language does present a logistical challenge as the number of languages increases. In the example above, three languages can still all fit on one slide, but if seven or more languages were

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[14] Sean Moon, interview by author, personal interview, Littleton, CO, March 15, 2012.

used, it would be a stretch to project more than one line of the song at a time. At this point, multiple projectors and additional manpower would be needed. To have worship leaders from each language group or culture, working together, is also a big help.

Once translation of the lyrics is finished, the languages need to be mixed or woven in such a way that everyone – especially monolingual speakers – will be able to participate in and comprehend the song overall. Thus, songs which allow for easy participation and have a more transparent meaning are preferable. This linguistic weaving should promote unity in the body as discussed earlier. Absolute equality is not the goal; some weight may be given to the majority language, but the minority language groups should not feel as if they are getting "tossed a bone."

Current Examples and Future Uses

How exactly to weave the languages together to facilitate Multilingual Worship is as much art as it is science. One way is to focus on repeating short phrases in different languages. For example, the chorus of "How He Loves," by John Mark McMillan can simply be repeated in different languages. Since the chorus essentially consists of one phrase repeated several times, and the meaning is transparent, this can work well. One can also take a word that is said the same in many different languages and use it in a song. For example, the words *Hosanna*, *Alleluia*, and *Amen* are all taken over from the Hebrew in the Old Testament as direct transliterations, without translation[15]; as a result, these words are pronounced similarly in many different languages. For this reason, the word *Alleluia* was used to write a worship song, "Alle," by Proskuneo Ministries.

A second way to weave languages together is to alternate languages on the verses of a song. However, this approach works best if only two languages total are used. It does not work at all beyond three to five languages because most songs have no more than this many verses. A third approach, referred to as "crossing over" or "code switching" by Hurd, is perhaps the most integrative. The idea is to "cross over" between languages *within* the chorus or verses of a song, but with the essential meaning preserved within each language. Hurd gives an example, which is instructive, based on the refrain of one of his own songs, "O Love of God/Amor de Dios":

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[15] Arthur Carl Piepkorn, "Three words in our worship: devotional reflections," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 32, no. 7 (July 1, 1961): 389, *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCO*host* (accessed March 12, 2012).

O love of God, gather us,
amor de Dios, haznos uno,
that we may share the gifts we are given;
para construir la comunidad,
para construir la comunidad.[16]

The meaning for the monolingual English speaker is, "O Love of God gather us, that we may share the gifts we are given," while for the monolingual Spanish speaker it is, "Love of God, make us one for the upbuilding of the community."[17] Thus, while lines are not repeated in both languages, the essential meaning is still similar for both groups of monolingual speakers, and so everyone is drawn together in unity of understanding through this song of worship.

A fourth way to mix languages is to make the chorus multilingual, but have the verses *spoken* in different languages. As Hurd points out, "It is easy for musicians to look down their noses at this tactic of sung refrain/spoken verses, failing to understand that it is a valid art form."[18] A fifth approach is simply to use multiple languages simultaneously. This is the primary method that Kauflin discusses on his blog, and a number of people agree in their comments.[19] Simply singing together with people of diverse cultures and other languages, but all centered on Christ, is a picture and a foretaste of the heavenly worship in Rev. 7:9-10, which we will experience one day. One of the keys is to use songs familiar at least to the majority language group, and hopefully to others as well. Hymns such as "Amazing Grace" or "Holy, Holy, Holy" are good candidates, as are the more well-known songs by Hillsong, which has definitely grown international.

Potential Dangers or Distortions of Multilingual Worship

Although Multilingual Worship can be a very positive encounter, both in expression and formation of the church, it carries with it potential dangers as well. First, there is the danger of being entranced by diversity and losing sight of the God we worship. Too much time and focus can be placed on the creative aspect of diversity in worship, especially since it is so politically correct these days. The point of Multilingual Worship is not diversity, but worship of the one true God. Second, poor attention to the logistics can actually cause disunity. If the translations are not done with skill, then the affected monolingual speakers may wonder about the character

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[16] Hurd, "Music for Multicultural, Multilingual Liturgy: Theology, Issues, and Strategies," 129-130.

[17] Hurd, "Music for Multicultural, Multilingual Liturgy: Theology, Issues, and Strategies," 130.

[18] Hurd, "Music for Multicultural, Multilingual Liturgy: Theology, Issues, and Strategies," 129.

[19] Kauflin, "Praising God in a Multi-Language Congregation."

of who they are worshiping. In addition, if sufficient thought is not put into the weaving of languages as discussed earlier, one or more groups may not really feel included in the heart of worship. Third, there is the danger of seeing worship as a *means* to unity and church development instead of an end in itself. While worship, especially Multilingual Worship, should have these byproducts, it should not be viewed in a pragmatic sense as a way to achieve them. Rather, according to the Shorter Westminster Catechism, it is man's chief *end* "to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever."[20]

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[20] These dangers are among the "distortions" discussed in: Eden Grace, "Worship in the context of the WCC: the tradition of 'ecumenical worship' in light of the recent Orthodox critique," *Ecumenical Review* 54, no. 1 (January 1, 2002): 9-10, *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCO*host* (accessed February 21, 2012).

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