

"Where's the Beef?"
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Remember the humorous "Where's the beef?" advertising campaign of the 1980s from Wendy's hamburger chain? A short, cute little old lady, played by 81-year-old Clara Peller, ordered a hamburger at various fast food restaurants. When it was served, she'd lift the bun, wrinkle her nose, and quizzically demand: "Where's the beef?"

Making the rounds to various spiritual food establishments (churches) in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, I've been tempted to utter that same line. I recently reported to the Commission on Worship what I've noticed as I consult and help our churches in the area of worship. Although there are wonderful exceptions, many worship leaders do not use discernment when they borrow songs from contemporary Christian music radio. It causes me to wonder: "Where's the beef?"

For instance, "Word of God Speak" is a beautiful song on Christian radio. It starts slow; then it soars; it's full of passion and life. I like to hear it and sing it. But should it be sung by a congregation? Consider the first lines:

*I'm finding myself at a loss for words/And the funny thing is it's okay
The last thing I need is to be heard/But to hear what You would say.*

*Word of God speak/Would You pour down like rain
Washing my eyes to see Your majesty
To be still and know/That You're in this place...?¹*

The theology is biblically respectable when the text expresses that worship is first of all an opportunity to hear God speak through Word and Sacrament. The song is a request to have our eyes and ears opened to clearly hear what God, not man, has to say. When we do speak, it's in response to what He first said. ("The last thing I need is to be heard.") We simply say back to God what He has already said to us in His Word. We respond to His love because He first loved us.

But imagine singing the first paragraph of that song in church. Is this really a text for group song? It might be appropriate for a soloist, but not a congregation.

When we hear a song and think about using it in worship, we need to ask a number of questions: "Is this true and biblically faithful? Is the text appropriate for a congregation,

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or for a choir/soloist? Is the tempo and is the key appropriate for a congregation, or for a Christian band?" If I'm asked one more time to sing the first tenor high notes of Chris Tomlin's songs as performed on CD, my throat is going to need more than a few lozenges.

But the songs that really make me want to shout "Where's the beef?" are ones like this:

Chorus

*Lord I'm amazed by You/Lord I'm amazed by You
Lord I'm amazed by You/How You love me
Lord I'm amazed by You/O, Lord I'm amazed by You
Lord I'm amazed by You/How You love me*

Verse 1

*You dance over me/While I am unaware
(And) You sing all around/But I never hear the sound*

Chorus

Lord I'm amazed by You..., etc.²

I whole-heartedly agree that God's love is amazing. Paul prays that we would know just how high and wide, etc. it really is. The problem with the above song isn't in what it says, but in what it **doesn't** say. It doesn't say **why** his love is amazing so that we can praise Him for His mighty acts. In contrast, consider another song of amazement that does state the reasons:

*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound/That saved a wretch like me
I once was lost, but now am found/Was blind, but now I see.³*

Here's another good example, a "beefy" contemporary Praise and Worship text:

*In Christ alone my hope is found/He is my light, my strength, my song
This cornerstone, this solid ground/Firm through the fiercest drought and storm.
What heights of love, what depths of peace/When fears are stilled, when strivings cease
My comforter, my all in all/Here in the love of Christ I stand.*

*In Christ alone who took on flesh/Fullness of God in helpless Babe
This gift of love and righteousness/Scorned by the ones He came to save
'Til on that cross as Jesus died/The wrath of God was satisfied
For ev'ry sin on Him was laid/Here in the death of Christ I live...⁴*

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Why sing about being “at a loss for words,” when such powerful words of truth can be sung? Why sing amazement that God “dances over them with love” when they can sing about the lengths to which his amazing love would go: “The wrath of God was satisfied when all our sins were laid on Him”? Now that’s beef! Luther said, “The Gospel should be proclaimed as clearly from the loft as from the pulpit.” Indeed! Why do anything less than that when our people are daily bombarded by the lies of a pagan culture? People need meat, not just ketchup and pickle on a bun. This can only happen if we ask of our worship songs, “Where’s the beef?”

This fall I plan to create a topical list of contemporary songs of substance, to help you locate the best of the best, on the website of the Center for U.S. Missions. I also plan to suggest contemporary songs that fit the themes of the three year lectionary, to make your worship planning easier. But on your own and until those tools arrive, keep asking Clara’s question of your contemporary worship songs. Don’t settle for anything less than the finest beef of Law and Gospel!

Questions for Reflection

1. When is the last time you reflected on the content of a song sung in your church?
2. How many “I” and “me” songs does your congregation sing on any given Sunday?
3. How often does your church sing songs that fail to tell the story of God’s grace?
4. How are songs selected in your congregation? Is there a theme? Do they relate to the focus of the message or scripture readings for the day?
5. What is your favorite hymn or song? Why?

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