

The Importance of Worship in Children's Ministry

Years ago I found myself standing — groggy, over-caffeinated, and generally helpless — in front of forty hyperactive humans under the age of ten with minuscule attention spans and a low threshold for boredom. I had rushed off that morning, forgetting my guitar strap, and had to improvise by braiding plastic yellow caution tape (MacGyver has nothing on me) and fastening it to the instrument with pipe cleaners. My guitar was both out of tune and slightly sticky due to a prior attack from the aforementioned children, and as the plastic tape sagged under the weight of my instrument I thought (not for the first time), “What am I doing? I’m exhausted, and they’re not listening. Also, they smell. They don’t seem to care about worship, so does this even matter?”

The answer, which I already knew but had to work out in detail over the next several years, was an unequivocal, “Yes!”

Music, like all art, is a communication medium that has the power to uniquely affect and transform us. One of my favorite songwriters, Andrew Peterson, says that, “God has given music a peculiar power to ambush us with the truth.” This power is rooted in the fact that humans learn not only through our rational faculty, but also through our emotions and imagination - two areas that are easily moved by music. Music, therefore, plays two key roles in Christian worship and discipleship.

First, music fuels the imagination as an effective means of the Spirit’s ministry of the word upon our minds. When the songs we sing are saturated with scripture and theological truth, we are transformed by God’s revelation. We internalize it in a deep and formative way. I believe this is what Paul had in mind when he encouraged the church in Colossae to, “Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God,” (Colossians 3:16). When we sing truth, we interact with it on both an emotional and imaginative level, reaching the depths of who we are.

Second, music moves us to freedom; it enables us to express our hearts honestly to God, and gives us language for our emotions. In the Psalms we find celebration and contrition, the despair of abandonment and the joy of salvation, and the tensions between doubt and trust in the Lord’s loving character. Since ancient times music has been used to meet us where we are, open our eyes to how we are feeling, and give us the means of expression when words devoid of melody fail us.

What relevance does this have for children’s ministry? Music is able to gain a child’s attention when other means fail. Melodic and rhythmic hooks give songs a quality that moves children to sing along—often to the point of memorization. Scripture saturated lyrics focusing on the story of Jesus can fuel and form the imaginations of children. What a valuable resource for communicating the word of God!

Additionally, children need tools that help them process their life experiences, both good and bad. If there is any healing to be had, it is in the love of God shown in Christ; it’s the safest spot to be ourselves. Part of being transformed into Christlikeness is learning to express emotions in a healthy way, exposing our scars to the only one with the power and love to bring renewal. Worship through music can facilitate healthy expression and a space for healing.

Prayerfully, the songs we sing will give kids — the most vulnerable of us — tools and truth to enter this sometimes forgotten aspect of discipleship.

So, whether the children in our care are interacting with rapt attention, or we've just been sneezed on and sprinkled in mysterious gooey glitter from the day's craft, we can press on knowing that in worship God has given us an effective tool for gospel ministry!