

Preaching and Country Music

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A writer by the name of Melvin Shestak reports in *The Country Music Encyclopedia* of a time when he interviewed Hank Williams, Sr. for an English assignment in high school which was rejected by his teacher as worthless filth. Years later, he wrote:

Poor Miss _____. I wonder if she knows now, as she teaches grammar to illiterate angels in some heavenly schoolroom, that in 1973, Harvard students were writing theses about that 'hillbilly.' Poor Miss _____. (May she rest in peace.) What a shock she must have had when she slipped a golden nickel into one of the celestial juke boxes and the first sounds she heard were a fiddle and a git-tar with a honky tonk sound (p. 302).

Even in this enlightened period when many country music fans have come out of the closet, if preaching and country music are used in the same sentence the result is usually a smile on the face of the reader or hearer. Of course, it could be that the smile is brought on by the seemingly distant nature of preaching and country music, but it is also possible that the smile is brought on for some by the promise that what you had for a long time felt was at least loosely connected would be joined together in word.

Perhaps a good place to begin is to attempt to define country music. It's not easy. A few years ago the CMA (Country Music Association - located in Nashville) did a very "churchy" thing; it appointed a committee to work up a definition of country music. Being constantly challenged by one group or another to broaden its definition, the committee finally gave up.

Webb Pierce, a country music star of years past, talks about country music as an attempt to put into words "the things people think about but never talk about." One thing I believe can certainly be said about country music is that it is, for the most part, nonfrivolous. It is a music that seeks to tell a story. It's very much the same story told over and over in many ways, of and by people who are acutely and painfully aware of the dichotomy that exists between divine approval and human passion. It is their unwillingness to deny either, and their inability to reconcile the two, that creates the serious nature of country music.

This paradoxical nature that we all know something about is articulated in country music by men and women sweating through their voices, hoping, that with humor and humility, the clever phrasing of common experiences (see appendix), and the public confession of sin, those who hear the music will understand that they are not alone.

While some music is written to entertain society, and some music tends to reflect society, country music tends to penetrate society. It penetrates into the joys and anguish, the heartaches and hopes of the people. It is most certainly

not the voice of salvation, but the voice of the human condition spoken by poets who accept the fact that whereas there may not be anything new to say, there are always new ways of saying old things. There is nothing new about a broken heart when love is not returned, but how do you express that in such a way that the hearer says, "Amen"? How about this? "A headache tomorrow or a heartache tonight." We're not talking preaching at this point, only imagery, and the imagery is good.

But what about preaching and country music? Is there a legitimate point of contact? Obviously, I believe there is—and my argument is something like this: the preacher should be interested in country music because in country music we see reflected the person of our times—the believer/unbeliever who is forever struggling in a desperate and unusually honest way with intense problems of the spirit. The Bible is no stranger to all this. Many of the Psalms, the book of Job, and especially Ecclesiastes struggle with the dark side of life. And for those who would say that the expression of pain and sadness in country music is self-inflicted by a life lived apart from God's will, I would argue that the majority of those who lived in the time of Job and "The Preacher" and even King David would have said the same thing.

One way of trying to see how country music can inform our preaching is to look for certain themes found in the music. The following are a few of the more obvious.

1. "The Last Shall be First"

If you listen to much country music, you will soon be struck with the insight that those who suffer on earth may be in line for something much better in the life to come. Yet country music, like the Bible, does not limit the possibility of the last being first to the age to come.

Being "last" in country music understanding is to know about poverty. Being "last" is associated with living in the country and getting up before dawn to milk and plow. It's knowing about sickness and sorrow and defeat. And yet, in country music, all of these negative components of poverty are not only cancelled, but they become the very factors out of which the most important thing in the world (as far as country music is concerned) becomes possible—true love. The "firsts" of the world find life far too complex to concentrate on love and so we hear songs like *Silver Threads and Golden Needles* ("cannot mend this heart of mine"). A great deal of country music ties in with the biblical concept of the uncluttered life being the appropriate style, with songs illustrating how money won't buy a *Satisfied Mind*, and that *Old Dogs and Children and Watermelon Wine* are the only three things that matter.

Beyond the simple life-style that carries with it a greater possibility for true love, country music claims another point of contact with the biblical idea of "reversals" in that country music shows a great deal of compassion for the "last"—the poor and the prostitute, the alcoholic and the adulterer. And while drinking oneself into oblivion over a lost lover (*There Stands the Glass*), or blaming everything from "my hair I keep losing" to "a boss who don't know I'm alive" (as Randy Travis does in his record *The Reasons I Cheat*), may not

be sufficient cause in a court of law, it does act as a voice to restrain those of us who are prone to step quickly into the role of the modern day scribe or Pharisee. The music refuses to let its audience look on and judge those in the world whose weakness and sin have been exposed without causing the same audience to reflect on its own weakness and sin.

2. "In The World There Will Be Tribulation."

Tribulation is a major theme of country music. Distress and suffering and persecution are not grace notes, but major chords. And while tribulation in country music deals with many causes, there is one cause that stands far above the rest—the frailty of human relationships. One of the therapeutic methods of dealing with the pain of broken relationships that country music suggests is the honky-tonk.

There'll always be a honky-tonk
With a juke box in the corner
And someone crying in their beer
And one old hanger-onner
And a lady looking lonely from a losing love
affair
Yes, there'll always be a honky-tonk somewhere.
Randy Travis, *There'll Always Be A Honky-Tonk*

However, the shortcomings of the honky-tonk are only too obvious. At best, the pain was only postponed and quite often the result of honky-tonking only brought on a more complicated life.

Interestingly enough, those who were victims of lost love in country music found some help in dealing with the pain of unrequited love and found it in a most unusual place—a rededication of themselves to loves that could never be. An example of this approach to dealing with heartache can be found in a song that some call the perfect country music song—*He Stopped Loving Her Today* (George Jones). The seemingly absurd dimension of rededication to a love that is lost, always on the border of self-pity, also touches on something very much like agape love (divine love—one that flourishes with or without response) and consequently may sustain someone, at least for a while.

The help afforded the preacher in sermons about tribulation in the world by country music is the reminder that while all who suffer need a word of comfort, there is a special need for some. This special need arises not from the degree of pain, but from the cause of pain. When suffering comes from the outside, through little or no fault of your own, a sense of injustice can create its own kind of compassion. But when there is no excuse (something that is often the situation described in country music), when you have no leg on which to stand, special help is needed. When this is the case, having some of your darkest thoughts and deeds mirrored through song can sometimes restore one's feeling of worth and sense of belonging to a community from which you had felt alienated because of sin.

3. *"I Believe, Help My Unbelief"*

Faith and country music have had a long and complex affair, and I am not certain whether country music is responsible for creating a particular kind of faith, or if a particular kind of faith has produced the music, but in either case "I believe, help my unbelief" seems to be a persistent theme. If you penetrate the secular facade of country music, what is oftentimes revealed is plainly and simply a struggle with God.

For many years, the nature of the southerner (and consequently country music) was such that religion was dealt with in very sentimental and pietistic ways, and for reasons that can only be summarized in this article as "a search for truth," this approach changed rather drastically in the late 1940's. One man deserves special recognition for country music's decision to be open and honest to the struggle that exists between God and God's creation—Hank Williams. Again, only a summary sentence can be offered in defense of this conclusion. Hank Williams was very much in touch with his own paradoxical nature (he would have called it contradictory). Having grown up under the moral imperative but having soon found out that life is more complex than the moralist sees, Hank Williams was keenly aware of the pain of the human heart in conflict with itself. And even though Hank wrote songs like *I Saw the Light*, he was continually plagued by the result of his own sinful nature. His struggle with good and evil were as genuine as his broken loves and his songs about his struggles brought country music to a better understanding of the human condition.

One of the happy results of this trail blazed by Hank Williams has been, that as far as religion is concerned, country music has learned to take God more seriously by taking itself less seriously. This is shown in Larry Gatlin's *Will There Be Mogen David in Heaven?*, and Bobby Bare's song which describes a man sitting in a tavern with a "painted lady," and in his response to a confrontation by a Sunday School teacher: "Me and the good Lord are gonna have us a good talk, later tonight."

Another serendipitous effect brought on by country music's more honest approach to faith is one that stands over against what may be considered the conventional approach. That is, if most people seek God by trying to do God's will, it may be that country music sometimes turns this approach to God upside down by seeking God by *not* doing God's will, or hoping to find God through God's absence. No doubt, somewhere below the level of awareness, country music often portrays the individual who may or may not have tried and failed to develop faith through ordinary means, yet, has through desperation or weakness (or grace), sought the light of God against the dark background of sin.

4. *"The Spirit Intercedes With Sighs Too Deep for Words"*

The Apostle Paul was fully aware of a fundamental truth—the difficulty of a complete articulation of our deepest needs. In order to assure Christians of every age that this inability on the human side in no way interrupts our

communication with God, Paul reminds us of the Spirit's role as mediator, one, who among other things, completes our thoughts and finishes our sentences. Whether the source of intercessory power has been recognized as Holy Spirit or not, people have for a long time been aware that just as there is more to symbols than meets the eye, there is also more to words than meets the ear. Words, like symbols, often are more effective when they are used to point to something beyond themselves. Country music's willingness to simply describe the reality of life as best it can, frees both the hearer and the Spirit to function without the imposition of someone's well-articulated half-truth. A good example of this comes from Shel Silverstein's *Rosalie's Good Eats Cafe*:

The stoop shouldered man and his
frizzied-haired woman
It's strange how their eyes never meet.
He's playing pinball, she's fixing the
blanket
Of the baby asleep on the seat.
He's out of work, she's puttin' on
weight
And they never did have much to say.
It's two in the morning, on Saturday
night,
At Rosalie's Good Eats Cafe.

There's not a pious word in that entire verse, but the gap between what is said and what is felt is filled with religious images.

Country music is, I believe, one of the ways provided for people who are more likely to approach God indirectly rather than through more obvious and direct ways. Without forcing any doctrine or creed upon its listeners, the painful result of sin revealed in the songs resonates with similar emotions felt by these people. No judgment is spoken. No solution is offered. No suggestion is made that life will be better. What country music may do, however, in offering up the description and result of sin without a solution, is to create room for the Spirit to offer grace notes to those who march to a different beat. In trusting that the result of simply reflecting the pain of human sin in song without any moral or judgment attached can somehow be helpful to its audience, country music becomes an alternative tool for those preachers who feel obligated to explain every truth and dispel every doubt.

5. "My Grace Is Sufficient"

According to C. K. Barrett in his commentary on II Corinthians (p. 316 *Harper's New Testament Commentaries*), "[grace] means that one can rejoice in tribulation, because a scene of human weakness is the best possible stage for the display of divine power." Assuming that this comment is true, country music immediately comes to mind as a means of grace. There are few art forms that concentrate on human weakness more than country music. Larry Gatlin offers some understanding of how this grace may work when he says, "Sadness,

in its purest form contains a mystical quality that makes it one of the most positive forces in the universe" (p. 122, *Watermelon Wine*, Frye Gaillard). Consequently, when one with a broken heart hears another singing about his/her broken heart, it acts like the mathematical formula we learned in the fourth grade: "a negative times a negative equals a positive," or something like that.

Certainly, the graciousness found in country music is not a full expression of grace, but simply an unconditional acceptance of those struggling with sin, especially sins of the flesh. And while songs like Bill Anderson's *Somewhere Between Lust and Sitting Home Watching T.V.* or Tom T. Hall's ballad about a Cub Scout daddy who knows his mistress is waiting at a cheap motel may not picture the best side of human nature, they may offer a bit of sustaining grace for one who is overcome with guilt—until a fuller expression of God's grace is provided.

Implications for Preaching

Country music is filled with features that I believe can be helpful to today's homilist:

1. *Clarity* "Write the Vision, Make It Plain"

To present the Word of God plainly is not a suggestion that divine truth be reduced to human clichés, that is, "God said it. I believe it. That settles it." nor is there any suggestion that less emphasis be put on the mystery of God. On the contrary, when the abstract is removed and the divine will becomes grounded in some concrete form, the mystery is not only magnified, but it becomes more enticing. One of the characteristics and strengths of country music is the plain but rich imagery that it has produced.

"He little thinged her out of my mind."

"You're the reason our kids are so ugly."

"She's acting single and I'm seeing double."

The truth is, a few well chosen words can draw clearer pictures than lengthy descriptions. To write large and speak plain are not shortcuts to preaching; it takes a lot more time and effort to speak plain than it does to speak "fuzzy." To speak plain means you have to know what you're talking about or else you will be found out.

2. *A Personal God* "The Lord Is My Shepherd"

No essay on preaching and country music could avoid some word about the God/humankind relationship that is constantly portrayed in country music. In country music, God is not abstract or remote, God comes close. This closeness is not out of keeping with the rest of the music. Temptation and sin, compassion and love, or any subject that affects human life is seldom universalized in country music.

While I have chosen to cast my lot with the Presbyterian Church and its emphasis on *In Christ There Is No East Or West* rather than *I Come To The Garden Alone*, sometimes I feel the church has put too much distance between itself and its people with its stress on corporateness and inclusiveness and mystery, leaving the people to wonder about some nagging void that has been created deep within their souls. *Me and Jesus Got Our Own Thing Going* won't quite do it theologically, but if we try to hear what country music is trying to say about God without being turned off by the way it's being said, then perhaps a more dynamic faith will be the outcome.

3. *Compassion* "Weep With Those Who Weep"

While there is plenty that could be said about the difference between country music and the Bible, one of the points of contact is the common audience attracted by both. People who in some way have experienced the pain of life are oftentimes the ones most likely to listen to country music—and to the Bible. While country music may not be consistently against sin, it has been relatively consistent in being for the sinner, at least recently. Unlike much of the music in the first half of the twentieth century, the country music of the past thirty-five years has been short on moralizing. This may be the result of seeking to justify unrighteous living or simply the poet trying to project the reality of life. Whatever the reason, the biblical injunction to "weep with those who weep" has found another form of expression. In Frye Gaillard's *Watermelon Wine*, Larry Gatlin helps explain the benefits of sadness:

Sadness is a constant recurring theme in country music, and I feel that if you are really sad, if you can evoke true, heartfelt sadness, it borders on compassion, a feeling of closeness for the person the song is about. Sadness is a gentle, creative feeling. It levels barriers (p. 122).

The point expressed in this quotation seems to be that for the quarter invested in the juke box, you receive three minutes of felt compassion. Under the veil of anonymity, your secret pain finds some relief when you learn that Willie knows what you know and Hank feels what you feel.

"How I love that hurtin' music," wails Hank Williams, Jr., "cause Lord, I'm hurtin' too."

4. *Remembering* "We Sat Down And Wept When We Remembered Zion"

Those who write about southern history tend to agree that as far as our biblical roots are concerned, the southerner more closely reflects what we know about the Hebrew than the Greek. The hebraic emphasis on "home" and "remembering" certainly supports this claim.

The "remembering and longing for home" theme is another common characteristic between country music and the Bible. Most of the time, in country music, the reason for leaving home is voluntary, with the purpose being to find fame and fortune in the big city. Then, after the glamor of city life has worn off and hard reality has set in, the song begins. The need to return to our roots

is a constant, driving force, one that is echoed throughout the Bible.

Randy Travis gives us one of the many examples of our need to return home in his record *Storms of Life*. His misery is summarized with the words:

I left my soul out in the rain
Lord, what a price I've had to pay
The storms of life are washing me away.

Yet, the song is not one of empty despair. A move toward repentance may be nourished by his remembering a better time and a better place—when he was young, back on the farm:

An old Mail Pouch Tobacco sign
Painted on the barn
Bringing back sweet memories of Mama's farm
When love was just a country girl
Who lived on down the road
You know, she almost had me turned around
But that was years ago.

A few well chosen words from the pulpit about remembering and home just may be the key to help some people start thinking about their own need of repentance.

These are a few of the implications for preaching. There are others; just listen to the music.

A Final Note

I am basically a practical person. Therefore, I would like to feel that anyone who has read this far has not done so in vain. Here's a little story that will fit somewhere in some sermon.

The influence of country music goes far beyond the South, even beyond the borders of this country. In a telephone conversation with George Hamilton, IV in the summer of 1987, he told me about an incident that happened when he toured Russia in March, 1974. After a concert at the University of Moscow, some Russian students asked him if he would stay and sing some songs with them.

(George): "I'm sorry, I don't know your language."

(Students): "That's all right; we know yours."

(George): "But I don't know any of your songs."

(Students): "It doesn't matter; we know a lot of yours."

George, IV said, "I still choke up a little when I remember how they started their first song, *This Land Is Your Land, This Land Is My Land*."

APPENDIX

"Our marriage was a failure, but our divorce ain't working either."

"I can still hear the music in the restroom, but they can't see the hurt that's on my face."

"Ain't I always nice to your kid sister? Don't I take her drivin' every night?"

"I can never pass a honky-tonk and there's one on my way home."

"I've been roped and thrown by Jesus in the Holy Ghost Corral."

"I've been Ruthless since Ruth walked out on me."

"What made Milwaukee famous has made a loser out of me."

"Drop kick me, Jesus, through the goal posts of life."

"When I got home at four a.m., the wife, the car and the mobile home were gone."

"You're the reason our kids are ugly, little darlin'."

"The future's not what it used to be."

"He's a heartache looking for a place to happen."

"It's all over all over again."

"It ain't easy bein' easy."

"She ain't much to see but she looks good through the bottom of a glass."

"When we said I do we did but you don't anymore."

"The Man who rode the donkey was the greatest cowboy of them all."

"It just dawned on me what sundown does to you."

"I ain't crazy, I'm just out of your mind."

"I'd rather get picked up here than be put down at home."

"If you want to keep your beer real cold put it next to my ex-wife's heart."

"You're still the perfect picture to fit my frame of mind."

"I don't care if it rains or freezes long as I've got my plastic Jesus on the dashboard of my car."

"I'd rather have a bottle in front of me than a frontal lobotomy."