

## Hampton Park's Music Philosophy and Practice

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As an undershepherd of the body of believers here at Hampton Park, it is my responsibility to tend to their health as God's flock. Fulfillment of the biblical role assigned to me and the other men who serve as pastors involves three major areas of responsibility: as pastors, to feed and shepherd the flock; as elders, to provide a mature example for others to follow; and as overseers, to inspect the flock and take action to meet their needs. I want to address some needs tonight for the sake of the health of the flock here by making sure our church music philosophy and practice is clear. I hope my comments will deliver us from "slippery slope" innuendo and false conclusions about where we really are.

If you have been at Hampton Park any length of time, you know I have addressed this area before, both in a series of sermons in the summer of 2005 and in a Sunday evening sermon called *Music by the Book* preached April 6, 2008. I've been reluctant to address the area again so soon for several reasons: first, I've already covered most of the common concerns; second, you can hardly find five people who totally agree on this subject, whether you talk to those in the halls of academia, those in pastoral ministry, or those in a church pew. Much controversy has little to do with what the Scriptures teach and much to do with prevailing applications, extra-biblical theory, and personal taste. In my experience, however gracious any of us may be in articulating our views, we hold what we hold. I have to weigh how important it is that someone else sees it the way I do.

Third, and perhaps most important to me, I am committed to giving attention to what the Scriptures say, and in so doing to reflect the Scripture's proportion of emphasis. As I've frequently commented to you, the degree to which you emphasize what the Scriptures do not emphasize, is the degree to which you will neglect what they do. My hope is that looking at this again helps with understanding and unity within the body. My fear has been that talking more about it could elevate needless debate and increase carnal division.

So why am I addressing this area again? First, realistically, truth needs reaffirmation, clarification, and application. Second, I pray for greater unity of humble thought and loving practice, so that our ministry to one another and our testimony to the lost are not marred by music wars, fought with visible non-participation and networking among the disgruntled. Third, I

want to offer some practical help to families trying to understand and to help one another be wise and loving in their approach to music.

A transcript of my comments tonight will be available to you online and in hard copy, as will the *Music by the Book* sermon of April 2008. You can access the 2005 music sermons on [sermonaudio.com](http://sermonaudio.com). If you do review this material, or the sermon series preached in chapel at Bob Jones University in November 2006, or articles I wrote for *Today's Christian Preacher* in 2006, you'll find that what I say tonight is an elaboration of the same position I've articulated before. Because these messages were born out of a desire to cut through the smoke of the music wars to what the Scriptures actually say, I still hold what I preached before I came to Hampton Park. (You may also want to access a three-part sermon series, *The Word on Worldliness*, preached in October and November of 2008.)

So while infallibility of thought and practice is impossible for human beings this side of glory, what we practice today is what I have preached all along. I hope that fact is helpful to those who worry about our *direction* in music. Let me be really clear. It is not a *direction*. It is a *position*. We preach it, and we strive to practice it. Not everyone agrees with our position. That's okay. I'm not infallible and neither are they. Our practice is not always perfect—because none of us are. But I am convinced that our position holds up under the scrutiny of Scripture and of history, and I trust our practice is consistent with it.

The Bible teaches us all we need to know to discern what is right and wrong. Making manmade teaching a test of orthodoxy and a ground for separation is exceedingly dangerous, even when our intentions are noble. It adds to the Word of God, it binds and blinds the conscience, and it distorts the gospel. It not only genders strife; it produces the very corruption that it is trying to curtail. The Scriptures repeatedly warn us to resist such developments in our thinking. For instance, listen to Paul's words in 1 Timothy 1:3-7: "As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus so that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies, which promote speculations rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith. The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. Certain persons, by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion, desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions."

Most people understand that music is one means of expressing worship to God. The Word of God clearly teaches that we should use music to worship

God. There have been churches in the past that forbid doing so. They were wrong. One of the spiritual mandates of "Church Life by the Book" is that we are to be a worshipping church. We state in our church philosophy that we want "to encourage and to engage in zealous, reverent, Word-driven, Christ-centered, God-exalting, life-permeating worship in large and small gatherings, public and private devotion. In a self-centered world, so-called worship is often little more than catering to what makes the individual feel "worshipful." We want to recover and to maintain a worship that expresses our humble submission to and loving awe of God through humble, repentant attitudes that tremble at His Word and exult in His grace displayed in Christ's redemption. True worship is neither mindless ecstasy nor dull repetitions. Corporate worship ought to engage all our beings—our minds, emotions, wills, actions—rendering to Him the love He deserves with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Our united worship is hypocrisy apart from the devoted submission of our individual lives to Christ."

Music is only part of our worship, but it should be consistent with these Scriptural guidelines. We have different personalities and backgrounds in our church family, with a variety of intellectual and emotional traits, but each one of us is to worship God with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength. While we reject mindless ecstasy, the Scriptures are clear that strong emotion is not evil. Psalm 100's "joyful noise" means "a jubilant shout." And a Psalm is by definition a leaping-for-joy exultation in God. How many times does the Scripture record that people fell on their faces before God or talk of lifting up holy hands? God spoke to Elijah "in a still, small voice." And self-control (temperance) is part of the fruit of the Spirit. Worship ought to be conducted "decently and in order." So it is not spiritual to be out of control any more than it is spiritual to be stoic and stiff. How we express genuine emotion toward God will vary, and we are wrong to despise one another for the differences the Scriptures allow or advocate. The Bible is the rule of faith and practice. It is presumptuous and wrong for me to demote its divine authority for the sake of my personal comfort and views.

Second, both the OT and NT place music as part of the preaching and teaching ministry of the church (Eph. 5; Col. 3). Just as the Divine Hymnbook, the Psalms, cover every major doctrine, our songs should have real teaching in them that is accurate and powerful. Uniting truth to a tune plants it in our hearts so that we can live out the truth. Pastor Coleman goes to great lengths to match both choral and congregational songs to the message of the hour. As your pastor, I try to present a balanced diet of Scripture, Old and New Testaments, a clear gospel, and accurate exposition. We strive to produce the same balanced range of doctrine in our singing. Some dominant themes in the Scriptures are not dominant themes in many hymns. That makes the task of matching the songs to the preaching very

challenging at times. But for the sake of the church's health, the music pastor does what it takes to make them available for us, and I am very grateful to him for making the sacrifices putting the philosophy into practice requires.

Third, the Scriptures call for both old and new songs. The Psalm collection exemplifies this, with Psalms written by Moses, along with those of David, Asaph, and psalmists after the exile. Our own hymnbook reflects this philosophy. I personally know those that produced it. They include many new songs they have written, along with older songs. I am sure that they never intended our singing to be limited to only what they included. They did not intend for us to sing no song written after they published the book, nor did they intend for us to quit singing old songs that they were not able to include. No hymnbook can include every good song. When we sing a song that is not in the hymnbook, we are not insulting our hymnbook, we are recognizing the limitations that any hymnbook has, and are seeking to meet the health needs of the congregation in accord with the Scriptures. Using the hymnbook and supplementing it with printed inserts or powerpoint are just ways of providing what we believe will edify the church. We believe in singing old and new songs, not just old songs, and not just new. The balance between the two will vary from service to service depending mainly on the theme of the sermon and the music texts we think best match the Biblical passage, not on some hidden agenda. We are not getting rid of the old songs. We are not getting rid of new songs. Either extreme is Scripturally wrong.

We are committed to providing doctrinally rich, singable songs that are ancient and modern. Years ago I discovered that there were many wonderful hymn texts that I had never known growing up, even though we sang from a traditional hymnbook: Newton's *Olney Hymns*, hundreds of Psalms and hymns by Isaac Watts, Thomas Kelly, and others. I derive great blessing reading from my growing collection of old hymnbooks, and hope someday to be better acquainted with them through song.

Fourth, text, tune, and style matter to us. The text must be doctrinally accurate. The tune must be accessible and suitable for the text. And the style must reflect what to us is godly if we are to sing it to God. Judging the text is very objective most of the time. Tune is less so, and the style is where people are most likely to disagree. We are a conservative congregation, and we seek to do our music in a style that reflects that fact. While we know we cannot match the musical preferences of every person, we do our best to do music in a way that will edify nearly everyone and will allow them to participate in it without violating their consciences. Individuals

customize their choices, but the unity and health of the church body limits ours.

Fifth, we believe that whatever acceptability tests you apply to one song must be applied to all. For this reason, the source of the song cannot be nearly as important as some want it to be. A person or group may differ with us on some doctrinal position, but if a particular song is doctrinally accurate we may choose to use it if we think it wise and beneficial to do so. Nearly all good hymnbooks draw texts and tunes from a wide variety of sources, as does the one we use. We will not reject a new song on that basis because we are not willing to reject the old ones on that basis, and we never have been. To use one set of rules for old songs and another for new ones seems double-dealing to me.

Charles Spurgeon says about the hymnbook his own church produced, "The area of our researches has been as wide as the bounds of existing religious literature – American and British, protestant and Romish, ancient and modern. Whatever may be thought of our taste, we have exercised it without prejudice; a good hymn has not been rejected because of the character of its author, or the heresies of the church in whose hymnal it first appeared; so long as the language and the spirit of it commended the hymn to our heart, we included it, and we believe that we have thereby enriched our collection. The range of subjects is very extensive, comprising not only direct praise, but doctrine, experience, and exhortation, thus enabling the saints according to the apostolical command, to edify one another in the spiritual songs." (*C. H. Spurgeon Autobiography, Volume 2: The Full Harvest 1860-1892*. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1973; rpt. 2006, pp. 154-55.)

We do not necessarily reject a tune because of the character of its composer. We do not give up the music of Chopin and Mozart, even though we know how corrupt they were. And we will not necessarily disqualify a song just because someone else, even the composer, performs it in a style inappropriate for our congregation. If we want to argue association on this point, then we must deal evenhandedly and cancel out every other song, old and new, that is done in what we consider inappropriate style. I cannot expect other people elsewhere to conform to my stylistic parameters anymore than they should expect me to conform to theirs. They are part of their culture, and I am part of mine. They answer to God, and so do I.

What all this means is that our singing a song in a church service (whether from our hymnbook or elsewhere) does not mean *cart blanche* approval of every song a group or individual has ever written, nor is it advocating every doctrine they teach, nor is it sanctioning whatever style they may use. If you buy a CD or download a song we sing here, but it is done in a totally

different style, you can't say we do it at Hampton Park, because to that degree it is different music. Music is text, tune, *and style*. We are trying to exemplify a style that reflects what our church body believes honors God. Be discerning about what you feed on. Let the Word of God direct every facet of your decision making.

If you are still subject to your parents, you must yield to their authority. And parents, it is your job to know what's on your children's ipods. Go through it with them, talk about it, and give them guidance and direction. The music we sing in church is not entertainment, it is worship. We live in an entertainment-crazed society that uses worship music for background. You don't have to have a CD of a song to love it. Sing it to God with the congregation. Sing it with your family. Sing it with your Bible study group. Sing it by yourself in your private devotions. You don't have to have a professional version of it to provide you music all day long.

I have deliberately not named names and groups in this message, because in my view, doing so in this case obscures the real issues and tends toward the kind of carnal division Paul writes about in 1 Corinthians 3: I am of Paul, or of Apollos, or of Peter. I don't want to be part of a pro-this or anti-that fad. The names will change. The groups will change. The principles remain the same. We include the information we do on the powerpoint slides because the CCLI license requires that we do so. It is not there for us to decide whether we're going to sing the song or not, any more than that information is in your hymnbook for that purpose.

Finally, I want to appeal to you as your pastor to love God and to love your brothers and sisters in Christ more than you love your personal views on music. If it would be offensive to you if others in the congregation refused to sing the songs dear to you, will you consider that it may be harmful to others if you refuse to sing what is dear to them? And what about the lost person sitting in your section, or the visitor looking for a healthy church home? Does your behavior show love for God and love for others, or does it convey something else?

Comfort and conscience are not the same. As Martin Luther put it, a Christian's conscience must be "captive to the Word of God." Is this really a matter of comfort or conscience? That is, do you believe that your participating is sinning against God? If so, rather than talking or listening to others who are disgruntled or who are not even part of our congregation, talk to me. I can answer your questions. I can make adjustments if needed. Going to the right person is how God tells us we should resolve these problems. To do otherwise is sin, biblically defined. Hopefully we'll leave one

another's company with a better understanding and a decreased likelihood of letting bitterness find root in our hearts and in turn defile many.

I trust this helps. May God help us please Him in all things. May our prayer be what the old familiar hymn, "May the Mind of Christ, My Savior" expresses:

*May the mind of Christ, my Savior,  
Live in me from day to day,  
By His love and pow'r controlling  
All I do and say.*

*May the Word of God dwell richly  
In my heart from hour to hour,  
So that all may see I triumph  
Only through His pow'r.*

*May the love of Jesus fill me  
As the waters fill the sea;  
Him exalting, self abasing,  
This is victory.*

*May His beauty rest upon me  
As I seek the lost to win,  
And may they forget the channel,  
Seeing only Him.*

(Kate Wilkinson, 1859-1928)