

The Bible and Music

Introduction

Ultimately, it's not about music. Everything in life is about God. Our view of God and His great glory dictates everything else to us in life. Whatever is good about God, Satan has sought to pervert in the fall. In this perversion, the effect on music cannot be an exception. When man touches his hand on what God has created, it too can be perverted. As nearly as we can imitate God's creative excellences in music or any creative endeavor, we magnify, glorify, or highlight His moral excellences. We are created in God's image and thus are in some degree creators. We take things that we cannot see and put them together. I exercise my will upon them and produce them and then they are gone. From ancient Greek philosophers to the rock--and--roll legends of today, skilled musicians have universally understood that musical composition is a creative act which can powerfully influence the human soul. The auditory influence of music holds as much potential for good or evil as does the visual influence of pictures. As we create these things we can exercise our will toward evil and choose to glorify evil and pervert God's gifts. Or, I can seek to glorify self, sin, Satan, or the system of man with God left out. Or, I can glorify, identify, point to the moral excellences of God Himself and display His character. In music we can say loudly "There is a God!" I will do that by arranging musical elements that will reflect the creative excellence of God. And who is to say what that is? Is this rooted in Bach? Why does this have to be 18th Century Song? Since God never gives us what these excellencies sound like, we must make careful discernment in light of all wisdom that is from above found in God's Word, be filled with the Holy Spirit and seek to imitate God in a way that best brings accuracy to His excellencies. This means that there will be differences from culture to culture. God's multifaceted excellences are then displayed by these differences. Sounds that are different do not necessarily indicate sin, but can be merely be different.

However, there is objective criteria by which you may measure the validity of any musical offering whose manifestations of these criteria changes from culture to culture and from age to age. But the baseline excellences are the same.

Form, order, beauty, activity, repose, symmetry, climax, release, tension, and balance are some these excellences. These excellences are revealed in God's creation and are recognized and imitated wittingly or unwittingly by those who achieve some degree of excellence in the arts.

You have moral excellences that are achieved by the unregenerate who do not intend to glorify God. Is God glorified? Only in that His excellences are imitated just as the heavens declare the glory of God. But God is not pleased with their efforts and there is no worship. If however, the intent of the individual is to bring worship, he must then offer his best through Christ by reflecting back to God His own character of moral excellence. The goal must always be the glory of God, that is, display the multi-faceted excellences of His very character and essence.

Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs

In both the Old Testament and New Testament, music played an important part in spiritual worship and was widely used in teaching doctrinal truth to believers.

There are three types of songs in the Bible; Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs.

I. The word “psalm” comes from the Greek word (psalmos), and refers to a Psalm from the Old Testament. Its meaning is derived from the idea of twanging a string on a musical instrument so that it vibrates, hence, it means “to play on a stringed instrument.” In the New Testament, the verb (psallo) means to sing a hymn, to celebrate the praises of God.

II. The word “hymn” is from (humnos) meaning “a song of praise to God.”

III. Spiritual songs, (pneumatikos ode) are songs that praise, exhort, challenge, or warn, or seek to testify of God’s work of grace in the heart. The Greek word ode, from which the English word “ode” comes, refers to any type of song, a battle song, a harvest song, a festival song, etc. So the term “spiritual” is added in the Bible to limit the type of song used in Christian worship.

1 Cor. 14:12-16 So also you, since you are zealous of spiritual {gifts,} seek to abound for the edification of the church. Therefore let one who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret. For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful.

What is {the outcome} then? I shall pray with the spirit and I shall pray with the mind also; I shall sing (psallo) with the spirit and I shall sing (psallo) with the mind also.

Otherwise if you bless in the spirit {only,} how will the one who fills the place of the ungifted say the "Amen" at your giving of thanks, since he does not know what you are saying?

Note in these verses that the singing is a key ingredient in the ministry of edification, and that it is just as unfruitful to sing without content as it is to speak in tongues to someone who does not understand, since “he does not know what you are saying (singing).”

Singing in the NT Church

1. Music is **intellectual** - it involves mental activity, thought processes (Col. 3:16; Phil. 4:8).
2. Music is **emotional** - it involves feelings (Eph. 5: 19; Col. 3:16; I Sam. 16:23).
3. Music is **physical** - it involves literal sounds/hearing/ movement/visual elements.
4. Music is **spiritual** - Eph. 5, Col. 3 “psalms, hymns, spiritual songs” - that is, if there are spiritual songs, then there is a spiritual dimension to musical communication.

There are two major passages in the New Testament dealing with singing: Eph. 5:14-21 and Col. 3:12-17.

The overall context of Ephesians establishes the following:

Chapter 1 - the truth about the union of a believer with the Lord Jesus Christ

Chapter 2 - Freedom from the Old Testament position of estrangement from Christ.

Chapter 3 - The believer in relation to his own advancement in the Christian life.

Chapter 4 - The believer in relation to the Body of Christ as a whole.

Chapter 5 - The believer’s relationship to the body in the local church.

Chapter 6 – The believer’s social relationships and the protection of the armor of God.

In Eph. 5:1-17, the walk of the believer is dealt with, and the spiritual condition of the believer is made paramount (5:18).

Verse 5:19 refers to the spiritual expression of the believer who is growing in Christ and filled with the Holy Spirit. Singing is the soul expression of the Christian, who sings in association with other like-minded people. He sings psalms, which are the Old Testament songs. He sings hymns, songs of praise to God. He sings spiritual songs, songs directed to people that praise, exhort, challenge, warn, or testify of God's work of grace.

In Colossians, the context of chapters 1 and 2 is that we are complete in Christ, and chapter 3 deals with the overt walk of the believer. Col. 3:12-15 describes the relationship of believers with each other. Verse 3:16 describes the believer with doctrine (3:16a) expressing that doctrine by teaching, admonishing, and singing with grace (psalms, hymns, spiritual songs). Verse 3:17 shows the overall motive and purpose for all activity.

What it is

In both of these passages singing is the expression of Christians in a local church and has certain characteristics:

- The person growing, maturing, and filled with the Holy Spirit sings! (Eph. 5:18).
- Singing is preceded by "the word of Christ dwelling in you richly" (Col. 3), Bible truth in the soul
- In Eph. 5 singing is an expression of the soul toward God, and the emphasis is on the proper attitude of the soul
- In Col. 3, the singing is an expression of doctrine in the soul expressed toward other people who benefit from it.
- In Col. 3:16, we see the two things that singing accomplishes with respect to other believers in the congregation. It is a teaching tool, and it is an admonishing tool.
- In both passages, singing is done "unto the Lord"; although it will benefit the congregation, the Lord will be glorified.

What it is not

It is very important, as well, to point out what Christian singing **is not**.

- The filling of the Spirit is necessary for proper singing; but singing is no proof of the filling of the Spirit.
- Singing in a local congregation is not designed to be used to create a mood for the soul. It is rather an avenue of expression of the mental and spiritual attitude of the soul created by applied Bible truth in a believer who is filled with the Spirit, occupied with Christ, living in the Word.
- Singing is not measured by the amount of zeal employed, but by the understanding that accompanies it. (1 Cor. 14:15)
- Spiritual singing is not designed necessarily to give a Christian a good feeling. If it is praise, then it is directed to God. If it is teaching, it is designed for learning. If it is admonishment, it is designed for warning, comfort, challenge, motivation, etc.
- Singing is not the primary function in a worship service. Spirituality and doctrine are the primary issues.
- Singing is not an adequate motive for attending church. The teaching of the Word of God is the only thing that makes singing either valid or meaningful.

The Purposes of Music In Scripture

I. Worship

Music is one of the primary means of expressing the worship of the heart. The most prominent fact about music in Scripture is that it exists, first and foremost, for the praise of God (*Exo. 15:1, 21; Jud. 5:3; 2Sa. 22:50; 1Ch. 13:8; 16:9, 23; 2Ch. 5:13; 7:6; 20:21; 29:30; 30:21; Neh. 12:46; The Psalms; Isa. 12:5; 42:10; Jer. 20:13; 31:7; Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16*).

The people of God have always used music to praise and worship the Person and work of God. Significant events, including Israel's deliverance from Egypt (*Exo. 15:1-21*), the return of the Ark of the Covenant (*1Ch. 13:8*), the dedication of King Solomon's Temple (*2Ch. 5:11-13*), the revival under King Hezekiah (*2Ch. 29:25-30*), and the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem (*Neh. 12:27-46*), were characteristically marked by worship music. Both the future earthly kingdom of Christ (*Isa. 35:2; 51:11; 52:8; 55:12; Zep. 3:14, 17; Zec. 2:10*) and the heavenly kingdom (*Rev. 5:9-10; 14:3; 15:3-4*) are marked by the use of music to worship God.

The connection between worship and music is certainly not limited to believers (*Dan. 3:5, 7, 10, 15*). Unbelievers also use music to glorify and praise the virtues of whatever is most important to them—whether a god, a person, a relationship, or a feeling.

II. Express Emotions of the Heart

Music is a powerful language for communicating the emotions of the heart. Every emotion of the human heart can be effectively communicated through the medium of music—from joy and celebration, to anger and frustration, to deep sadness and regret. *The Bible never warns against the musical expression of emotion*. In fact, it consistently teaches the opposite—that music is an appropriate way of expressing the emotions of the heart in worship to God. When music is utilized for this purpose, the *primary* emotion that is to be conveyed is *rejoicing* (*1Ch. 15:16; 2Ch. 23:18; 29:30; 30:21; Neh. 12:27; Psa. 9:2; 67:4; 68:4; 71:23; 98:4; 100:2; Pro. 29:6; Isa. 35:2; 51:3, 11; 52:9; 55:12; 65:14; Jer. 31:7; Zep. 3:14; 3:17; Jam. 5:13*). The kind of joy spoken of in these passages does not merely bring a smile to the face of one who politely and calmly worships God. It is a powerful emotional response to the true knowledge of God that bursts forth in exultation, mirth, and gladness. Christian joy affects the whole person—heart, spirit, mind, and body—with the pleasures of God. The essence of worship music is *celebration* in the truest sense of the word, not just in a cultural sense.

Music may also be used to communicate other important emotions in worship.

Music may communicate:

- grief over sin, brokenness
- reverence or awe at the wonders of God
- desperation that cries out in need to God
- joy or delight
- victory over sin
- tension over the already-not yet aspects of the Christian life

While worship music is not to be *dominated* by emotion, these kinds of expressions have an appropriate place in worship. *Emotionalism* is not the desired expression, because it describes a contrived effect that has been worked up by utilizing certain styles of music that lend themselves easily to an emotional reaction. Genuine emotion is not so much a product of the music as it is the spirit of a sincere worshipper. Emotion is positive when it is the earnest and sincere outworking of hearts smitten with the glory of God. Worship that lacks this genuine emotion is deficient (*1Co. 14:15*).

III. Teach and Remind of Truth

Music should also be used to proclaim God's truth in a memorable way. Significant portions of the inspired Word of God are songs or hymns. Though the tunes to these songs and hymns are no longer known, we can certainly profit from the knowledge of this principle. God commanded the Israelites to write His words in songs, and teach them to their children as a constant witness for the Lord (*Deu. 31:19, 22*). It is clear that the people of God understood the importance of utilizing music to speak forth the message of the Lord on a continual basis (*2Ch. 25:1-7*). The people of God today bear the same responsibility for utilizing the language of music to communicate God's truth in a memorable way. The Church was instructed by God to employ a variety of different musical genres to instill sound doctrine in the hearts of believers and to continually admonish and counsel them according to truth (*Col. 3:16*).

This purpose of music must be recognized and balanced with the previous one. When music is grounded in sound doctrine concerning the Person and work of God, it allows our emotional response to be born out of truth. It keeps our music from being sappy and senseless emotionalism. On the other hand, the emotional expression of and response to truth keeps our music from simply being a mental exercise. God seeks those who will worship Him in *spirit* and in *truth* (*John 4:23-24*).

IV. Give Testimony

Music is a testimony for God and the Gospel in the entire world. The people of God need to continually testify to one another on behalf of the Lord through song (*Psa. 108:3; Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16; Heb. 2:12*). The unchurched and unbelieving may even be drawn to put their trust in the Lord after being exposed to a musical testimony concerning the Person and work of God (*2Sa. 22:50; Psa. 40:3; 108:3; 126:2; Rom. 15:9*). Though God is always the One who saves, He often chooses to minister the Gospel through song. Music can even demonstrate to spirit beings and false gods that the true God is worthy of praise (*Psa. 138:1*).

Believers may fail to use music as a means to testify on behalf of the Lord, but He will use other means of declaring His glory in all the earth through music. God delights for His glories to be made known through music. He will employ the creation itself—the heavens, the earth, the sea, the fields, the trees, the mountains, and the rivers—to shout for joy, to sing His praises, and to clap their hands as they exult over Him (*1Ch. 16:33; Psa. 65:12-13; 93:3-5; 96:11-12; 98:7-8; Isa. 35:1-2; 49:13; 55:12*).

Criteria for Selecting Music for the Assembly

| | Music | Words |
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| Scripture | Does it fit the words? similar style & emphasis? TEXT | Does it fit the Scripture? Scriptural point, context, & framework? Ps. 119:54; Col. 3:16 |
| God | Does it display God's excellence? "characterized by beauty & excellence to a significant degree"? Gen. 1:31; Ps. 33:1-3; 47:7 | Does it display God's emphases? Christ-centered & -prioritized? Ps. 22:22; 1Kgs. 4:31-32 |
| Body | Is it appropriate to the Body? singable? communicate? Rom. 14:19; 15:1-6; Acts 16:17 | Is it edifying to the Body? intelligible/clear; accessible? Deut. 31:19; 1Cor. 14:7-10, 19 |

Singing in the Assembly

1. Music, both lyrics and music should reflect the character and essence of God. As His very being is displayed in nature, we learn that it is very wide in its kind and multi-faceted. There is not just one kind of bug or flower, or cloud, or planet, but multitudes of kind. Expressions of God in music and in words should have variety but should always undergo the scrutiny of Scripture.
2. The words are the edifying factor of a song. The words are not the only edifying factor. The music can edify or distract from edification. Since a church sings music in order to worship God, our songs should function like a musical confession of faith. Those confessions of faith should contain substantial and accurate truth about God. The use of wisdom born out of the word of Christ dwelling richly within is key to selecting songs (Col. 3:16).
3. Singing praise to God is a sacrifice, and as such, needs to fit the criteria for acceptable sacrifice (Ps. 27:6, Ps. 54:6, Ps. 27:6, Jer. 17:26, Ps. 27:6, Jer. 33:11, Ps. 27:6, Heb. 13:15, Ps. 27:6).
4. Assemblies are for God and His Body (Col. 3:16). They should not be targeted (though they should be sensitive) toward unbelievers who may be present (1Cor. 14:23-26).
5. All of worship (including singing in the assembly) includes truth and response (Ps. 95:2-3; 106:1). Consequently, all singing will contain some element of both. Two questions come out of this: How is that truth presented, and what response does it solicit?

6. Singing as part of worship in the assembly should be a response to God and engage the entire person (mind, will, emotions, and body [Psa 47:1; 63:4; 134:2]). God's people must intentionally engage in praise and passionately pursue worship. Music assists the heart to emotionally engage with the truths being sung, so that one's life properly conform to those truths and should help the congregation remember, even memorize, those truths. We sing to God to stir up our hearts to exalt and honor him.
7. Worshipful corporate singing comes from being controlled by the Holy Spirit (Eph. 5:18-21).
8. Singing in assembly should focus on the corporate ("we") aspect of songs (1Pet. 2:9; Rom. 15:6). It should then communicate effectively and appropriately to the body. Old, young, new believers, mature believers, emotional, less emotional, gregarious, melancholy, etc. should all be able to connect with the singing and worship God.
10. Congregational worship (including singing) should serve as only part of one's weeklong (24/7) worship of God (Ps. 103:1; 1Cor. 14:15).
11. One church is merely a single, contemporary manifestation of the timeless people of God. Consequently, every church should strive to avoid the danger of dead traditionalism that is inaccessible to the average worshipper and the danger of contemporary commercialism that glorifies the performer and trivializes the character of God. Instead, great care should be taken in our worship to offer the best materials from many current and historical sources—songs and texts that accurately reflect the excellent character, work, and purposes of God.
12. Since the people of God are many and are different, unity in worship should center on the truth of the person and work of Christ. Musical preferences in style provide the church an excellent opportunity to "count others more significant than yourselves" (Phil 2:3).
13. All aspects of the assembly fall under the elder's oversight of teaching (1Tim. 5:17; Col. 3:16).

A Word About Styles and Instrumentation

Styles

Styles always change. Styles have forever been a source of contention in the church. Music does communicate and a particular style is often chosen by a segment of culture that will best communicate its ideals and philosophies. A quick study of even classical music will show stylistic changes through the years. These changes can reveal much about the cultural changes of that particular day. Beethoven was frowned upon because he dared to write music outside the natural bounds of the sphere of culture he desired to write for. Waltzes were considered very sensual and were rejected by certain segments of culture for its promotion of sensuality. The designation of a style of music as "worldly" doesn't necessarily mean the same thing to every person from every generation or from every culture.

"Worldliness" can't be defined as merely adopting the world's culture. Culture simply happens. As we live and interact with other people we *de facto* create culture, and that culture is shared. Christ and the apostle Paul constantly expressed themselves in terms of the culture. Sounds often can identify culture because of association with that particular culture with that sound. So, people who define worldliness as merely "adopting the world's culture" have created for themselves (almost always unknowingly) a blunt instrument with which they can attack any cultural expression that doesn't agree with their own tastes and

sensitivities. Taste, preferences, and traditions cannot be the basis for choice of what is worldly or sinful. So, for example, pitch sliding, syncopated rhythm, or dissonance within a piece of music cannot make it automatically "worldly" simply because those techniques are employed by "the world."

John definitively expresses just what the world is: 1John 2:16 For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions—is not from the Father but is from the world. Each of these three aspects can be found in any style, taste, or preference. They are all evidences of the heart. Christ's emphasis is always on the heart. Mark 7:15 **There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him.**" We then must be careful to allow our hearts to be examined first when we come to styles. We must make decisions on styles based on what we know to be true in God's Word for every generation and every culture. We cannot arbitrarily assign anything outside of our tastes, preferences or traditions as worldly, sinful styles, when in fact it is merely outside our tastes, preferences, or traditions.

So, the question then shifts from tastes, preference, or traditions to matters of wisdom. Under the control of the Holy Spirit, seeking the multi-faceted excellences of God, and seeking not to imitate the local culture which seeks to exist void of God, the leadership of the local church makes decisions on styles that would best fit the people of God for which they watch for their souls (Heb 13:17). A particular style may then not be utilized not because of tradition, preference, or taste, but because it simply is deemed by the elders as not best for ministering the grace of God in that church (1Cor 10:23). The Levites of the OT had a similar service to the people of God as guards over the people in regard to the sacrifices given to God (Num 8:26). Great care must be taken to disciple God's people in every generation to deal biblically, lovingly, with a goal of shepherding with truths that will equip the next generation for the dangers they will face. If we merely stick with a method of dealing with style based on the battles of the existing generations, we risk preparing the next generation with sound biblical shepherding to help them in their battles.

This kind of careful consideration will only take place when all of God's people are living in the realm of truth and seeing others more important than themselves and living joyously the fruits of the spirit so the glory of God can be seen clearly and distinctly.

Instrumentation

Scripture is filled with many different instruments used in various ways for various purposes. Melody is the key musical idea in Ephesians 5:18 as Paul speaks of Spirit-filled singing. It would make sense that instruments of melody would best be used to accompany music in Spirit-filled worship. However, nowhere in Scripture is a particular instrument commanded or given as the ideal instrument for accompaniment of Spirit-filled worship music. Each generation has grappled with the instrumentation. The piano was one time considered a "percussion" instrument since the notes are "struck" by a hammer. It was the instrument of choice at many saloons and bars and therefore had no place in the worshipping God. The saxophone has a similar history. Brass, wind, and stringed instruments of all kinds are mentioned in Scripture as well as a host of percussion instruments. Cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, psaltery, dulcimer, lyre, tambourine, ten-string harp, and bagpipe were all used in Scripture. (Psa 147:7; 149:9; Dan 3:10).

The mention in Scripture of instruments seems to merely be descriptive rather than prescriptive. God seems to leave open then for the leadership of the church to use any or all instruments as a method of accompanying worship. Seeking to please God and pursue the multi-faceted excellences of God as a guide, elders are called then to make decisions on appropriateness, usefulness, as well as giftedness of musicians in the church to serve God's people in this present generation.

A Word To The Assembly

Learning to serve the body of believers is perhaps one of the most difficult tasks Christ has left with us. In His Sermon on the Mount, Christ speaks of the importance of Kingdom living that is represented by the words, "poor in spirit" (Matt 5:3). Christ lived this kind of humility out perfectly and set for us a pattern to follow. Paul reminds us of that same spirit in Phil. 2:3, Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. When it comes to music, worship, and so many other things in the church, humility is a key to grace, and it is this grace that best demonstrates the glory of God in every facet of life. In today's lingo, it is called, "Giving people space!" We, by grace and in humility, give people the space to be different. People do not all have the same view of God and are on a journey toward Christlikeness and are daily being changed from glory to glory just as we all are. We give people space in humility knowing that we don't have our own personal view of God perfected yet so we allow room for growth in other's lives. This care for one another allows for the differences to exist side-by-side for the purpose of displaying God's great glory. God gives leadership—even imperfect leadership for the purpose of equipping the saints to do the work of the Lord. Elders are to guide, feed, protect, and serve the flock of God (1 Pet 5:2). Here is what the people of the assembly can do to help:

1. Pursue personal Christlikeness
2. Submit joyfully to the leadership as unto God
3. Serve confidently in Christ
4. Disciple people toward Christlikeness
5. Faithfully pray for the glory of Christ to be seen throughout the church
6. Faithfully love God passionately
7. Faithfully submit to God's work of grace
8. Faithfully serve and love people purposefully
9. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly
10. Pursue unity (John 17)