

What Then Shall We Sing?

Part 1: Thoughts on Music

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This morning we begin a brief study of music. This week and next, I want to share with you some thoughts on music and consider how we can use and enjoy music both in our times of gathered worship and in all of life.

I have 10 questions that I want to address and answer: 5 for today and 5 for next week.

The questions for today relate to music in general—music that we employ and enjoy in all of life. The questions for next week relate specifically to music in the context of gathered worship.

So you will know where I am headed, here are the questions we will consider:

Part 1 — Thoughts on Music

- 1) What is music?
- 2) What does music communicate?
- 3) How does music communicate?
- 4) Can music be evil or worldly?
- 5) What music can we enjoy as Christians?

Part 2 — Thoughts on Music and Worship

- 6) What is the relationship between music and worship?
- 7) Can all music be used equally well in worship?
- 8) What does music add to our worship?
- 9) What should worship music sound like?
- 10) Should all Christians sing the same music in worship?

As we progress through the study, these questions may raise more questions. If you have additional questions, feel free to write them down and give them to me. If there is time, we will include some questions and dialog near the end of class.

But let's begin with the first questions:

I. **What Is music?**

There are many ways to describe and define music. I want to give you three ways to think about music this morning that will be helpful in laying the groundwork of our study.

A. Music is a **gift of God**

Music comes from God; it belongs to God; it serves His purposes. Listen to how some of the Reformers spoke about music:

Among all other things which are proper for recreation of man and for giving him pleasure, music is the first or one of the principal and we must esteem it as a gift of God given to us for that purpose.

[From John Calvin's Preface to the Genevan Psalter (1543)]

Music is a beautiful and glorious gift of God and close to theology. I would not give up what little I know about music for something else which I might have in greater abundance. We should always make it a point to habituate youth to enjoy the art of music, for it produces fine and skillful people.

[Martin Luther, 1538]

1. Music is a part of God's creation

As part of God's creation it was created **good** for us to use and enjoy. The beauty and order in its design are testimonies to its Creator and give evidence of God's delight in beauty, order, and harmony. Zephaniah 3:17 reveals that God Himself sings as He dwells in the midst of His people and rejoices over them.

God has filled creation with music and He has adorned His Word with music. There are many references in the Bible that command and commend music, references that speak of music accompanying worship, work, recreation and rest.

Many verses contain the words to songs, hymns and spiritual songs.

There are 31,173 verses in the Bible; 3,521 contain music texts (about 11%).

About 14% of verses in the Old Testament are psalms and songs.

About 3% of verses in the New Testament are songs, hymns and quotations from psalms and songs in the Old Testament.

2. Music is designed for God's glory

Along with all of the good gifts of creation, God gave us music that He would be glorified in it.

Scripture testifies to this—music all through the Scriptures exalts God and His work.

Many of the major events of the Bible are celebrated through music. Job 38:7 records that the morning stars sang together and the angels shouted for joy as God created the heavens and the earth. Israel celebrated God's victory over Pharaoh and his army at the Red Sea with singing (Exodus 15:1–21). Music was heard at the giving of the law at Sinai (Exodus 19). It accompanied the bringing of the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem (1 Chronicles 15), the dedication of the Temple in Jerusalem (2 Chronicles 5, 7:1–11), and the restoration of the Temple (Ezra 3) and the wall of Jerusalem (Nehemiah 12:27–43). The birth of Jesus was announced with the song of the angels (Luke 2:13–14) and His coming again will be announced with the sound of a trumpet (1 Thessalonians 4:16).

God commands all of creation in —

Psalms 96:1–3 Oh sing to the LORD a new song;
 sing to the LORD, all the earth!
Sing to the LORD, bless his name;
 tell of his salvation from day to day.
Declare his glory among the nations,
 his marvelous works among all the peoples!

Music is a good gift of God that we are to enjoy for His glory—in worship and in all of life.

- B. Music is an **art**
 - 1. It is designed for expression
 - 2. It is comprised of elements

As painting has color, line, texture, shades of light and dark, music also has elements:

Pitches or Notes / rhythms / dynamics (loud / soft) / tempo (fast / slow)

Timbre (sound qualities of the various musical instruments)

Composers combine all these elements to express something they believe is of value.

- C. Music is a **language**
 - 1. It has written and audible structure
 - 2. It communicates meaning

Music is not just sound, it is intentionally composed to communicate. It has content.

Music is an **art**. It is designed to be **expressive**. Music is a language. It is **meaningful**.

SO—

II. What does music communicate?

- A. Music communicates emotion—it expresses feelings

Another way music is an art—like painting and sculpture—is that it can be **abstract** or **representational**.

Painting can be abstract—lines and shapes, lights and darks, textures and color—all for their own sake with no association with objects, places or people. Or you can take these elements of painting and use them to represent something on a canvas—like a person or a landscape.

Music can be abstract—pitches, rhythms, dynamics, timbres and sonance—sound for sake of sound. Or music can be representational. The vast majority of the music we hear and sing—in church, in the car, at the symphony hall, at the concert, on the radio, on our iPods—is representational, conveying emotion—we tend to prefer representational music for the simple reason that we want to listen to music that moves us and connects with our feelings.

Music helps us emotionally interpret and express poetry, movies, drama, and events. So if you think of emotions—love, contentment, excitement, hope, joy, wonder, anger, rage, regret, envy, fear, hatred, sadness, grief, ... Music is a capable means of helping us express such emotion.

B. Music is designed to “raise the affections”

In other words, music shapes and gives voice to our feelings. It not only allows us a means to express what we feel, both individually and corporately, it can stir and heighten such emotion in us.

SO—

III. How does music communicate emotion?

Music communicates primarily by—

A. Reflection

Music conveys emotion, but not in the same way as a spoken language. You can't combine notes and chords to directly express emotions in the same way that you put together letters to make specific words—as J + O + Y = JOY. Music conveys its message indirectly by reflecting and imitating gestures, inflections, and movements that are associated in human experience with specific emotions and feelings.

If you walk into a room and someone is joyful, how do you know they are joyful (if they don't come right out and tell you)? You can tell, right? You might notice the inflection of their voice or buoyancy and energy in their movements.

Music is extremely proficient in imitating and reflecting these kinds of signals that we use to interpret our emotions.

PLAY EXAMPLE: Bach — “Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring”
What is Bach trying to communicate? How does he do it?

Ladies, let's say you are putting your children down for a nap and you want to play some Classical Music as they rest. How would this work?

PLAY EXAMPLE: Bizet — “March Of The Toreadors” from Carmen
How would you describe the emotion of this song? Why would it not work for a nap?

Music is a marvelous means to express emotion.

For example, if a composer wants to convey rage, he might make the movement of the notes agitated or violent. To create a feeling of peace, he might fashion the sound to be still and quiet with soft tones and little movement. To express joy, as we heard with Bach, he might create a melody that is buoyant and energetic. By reflecting and imitating the gestures and movements of emotion, the music seems to take on the character of the emotion itself, undergirding and giving voice to our feelings and sometimes even stirring and heightening the associated feelings.

This expression of feeling in a song is not always entirely clear or apparent. We can miss cues in physical gestures, and often we need other clues from words, actions and the surrounding context to confirm our interpretation. The same is true in music. Sometimes a composer may change a song to suggest a different feeling.

PLAY EXAMPLE: Edelman — “Dixie” from Soundtrack of Gettysburg

This is a familiar tune. Normally played upbeat and joyful.

What has the composer done here? Why?

[He slowed the tempo / cast the song in a more somber, reflective tone]

A skilled songwriter will be very intentional to emotionally interpret and set the words of a song to music that fits the affections that are evident in the words or the context (like a movie score).

The Bible demonstrates the connection between music and emotion.

In times of joy music adds delight and enjoyment to celebration. In the Old Testament, for example, music accompanied the celebration of victory over an enemy (1 Samuel 18:7–8), celebration at the beginning of a journey (Genesis 31:27), and the celebration of springtime (Song of Solomon 2:12). In times of sorrow music deepens and enriches lamentation. David taught the children of Judah the Song of the Bow in 2 Samuel 1:17–27 to lament the deaths of Saul and Jonathan. In 2 Samuel 3:33–34 David sang a lament over Abner.

A great many passages in Scripture where you see a personal outpouring of emotion (both joy and sorrow) are musical passages, especially the psalms.

Psalms 95:1–2 Oh come, let us sing to the LORD;
 let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!
Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;
 let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!

Psalms 118:24 This is the day that the LORD has made;
 let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Psalms 105:3 Glory in his holy name;
 let the hearts of those who seek the LORD rejoice!

A few weeks after learning the song, Hurricane Charley hit Southwest Florida. Many in the church sang the song while riding out the storm. We sang the song together when we met for worship the first time following the storm. It now has strong associations that heighten its meaning. Through the event of the hurricane we lived the truth of the song. God was and is our “Shield, our Strength, our Portion, Deliverer, our Shelter, Strong Tower, our very present help in time of need.”

Associations can also be distracting to the emotional expression of a song. Someone may know a very joyful song that was a favorite of a loved-one who is now with the Lord. Though the song was composed to express joy, it can now stir some sorrow as well as it invokes memories and bereavement.

Or take another example of association. Maybe God saved you out of a sinful and rebellious lifestyle in the past, and music was a part of how you expressed and indulged in that passion. Now when you hear music that sounds similar, the assumptions and connections they form are instinctively negative.

And you begin to wonder: Was that music sinful? It sure feels like it was?

IV. Can music be evil or worldly?

You may have read books or watched videos that teach on music and warn against various styles of music, pointing to their association with things that are ungodly. Those discussions about music can be both helpful and at times misleading.

They are helpful in that—

- 1) They make us aware that we should be concerned about the music we hear.
- 2) They expose some very real issues of sin and abuse of music to promote evil.

But they can be misleading in that—

- 1) They tend to pick on just 1 or 2 styles of music (Rock, Pop), and give the rest a pass.
- 2) They often misidentify the problem.

Let me give you some guidelines for thinking about music as it relates to sin.

First we must realize that—

1) All music belongs to God.

All music that we create is a part of this world. And all music belongs to God as a part of His creation. God gave us music to enjoy and glorify Him in all of life.

2) Music itself cannot be “sacred” or “secular.”

When you are considering just the music—not music and words together—not music in other contexts—just evaluating the tune—music itself is not “sacred” or “secular.” It is a false dichotomy to divide music into categories—thinking that God has His music over here—music that He prefers and delights in—and the world has its music over there that it delights in and prefers—and the really bad stuff—that is the devil’s music.

There is no “God’s music,” “world’s music,” and “devil’s music.” It is all God’s music. No tone or beat has ever been sounded in this universe that does not belong to God.

Music is not inherently religious or worldly, good or evil. There is only music—which can be employed for worship, for recreation, for celebration, for numerous occasions in which we wish to raise our affections and give voice to our emotions.

3) Music can’t be evil because “evil is nothing, i.e. no-thing.”

Evil does not consist of things, be it bullets and guns or tones, rhythms and instruments.

[For an explanation of this principle listen to the message by R.C. Sproul from Ligonier National Conference held in June 2010 on “What Is Evil and Where Does It Come From?”]

Evil does not consist of things, rather—

4) Sin is an issue of the heart.

When we see music that is wed to words or actions that dishonor God, if we are not careful, we can come to the conclusion that the problem is the music, when the real problem is sin. Sin is always an issue of the heart. Sin is found in our motives and intents as we create and use music, not in the tones, rhythms, and instruments we use to create and make music. Music can certainly be used in sinful ways to express sinful desires and wicked intentions. But the music itself is just a tool.

It has been this way since the beginning:

In Genesis 4:21 we read of Jubal—the father of those who play the lyre and pipe—the first time music is referenced in the Bible. Two verses later in Genesis 4:23 we have the first recorded song in Scripture—a boast exulting in murder and lust for revenge.

All styles of music can be abused in sinful ways. Often it’s styles like Rock and Pop that are targeted as “worldly” or “evil,” while styles such as Classical are championed as wholesome and safe. Critics point to the perverse lifestyle and evil intentions of many Pop and Rock musicians.

And we should heed their warnings and be on guard against using music to sin against God.

But honestly, all styles of music can be abused by sin. Classical, Rock, Pop, Country and Jazz can all express a wide range of emotion. And all have a history tainted by sin. All have had composers and performers whose lives have been shattered by sin.

We need discernment to judge every style and genre of music.

A better way think of music in regard to evil is—

5) **Music can be used in ways that honor God or profane God.**

When music honors God, it is intentionally composed or used to praise Him, acknowledge Him or celebrate what is good and right. Music that honors God does not necessarily need to be worship music. It can be music that celebrates life, love, marriage, family, children, home, and many other gifts of God—and celebrates these good gifts in God-honoring ways.

When music profanes God, it is composed or used without thought of God, as an end in itself, making music to be an idol or empty. Or it is composed to celebrate or promote things contrary to God and His revealed will. And this can happen in all styles of music.

Music itself simply expresses and reflects emotion. It does not in itself distinguish between sinful expressions of emotion and pure expressions of emotion.

All emotions can glorify God when channeled and expressed in God-honoring ways. God created our emotions for us to express to His glory. But emotions can be hijacked, misdirected and used in sinful ways. And music has certainly been abused and misused to express emotion in sinful ways.

This world has produced some wonderfully passionate and expressive music. The music is for us to use and enjoy to God's glory. The problem lies in that the world is often passionate and expressive about the wrong things. Their emotions have been hijacked and sent in sinful directions. And so the music they use to express themselves has been hijacked and misdirected as well.

So how do we know—

V. **What music can we enjoy as Christians?**

Let me close with—

A. Some parameters for enjoying music

1) Do all to the glory of God

All music, whether it is sung in church, at home, on the stage, in the car, in private, should be sung to the glory of God. That is NOT to say that all music must be suitable for corporate, family or private worship. God is glorified when a man sings a love song to his wife, when he uses music to teach his children, or sings about his home or nation, or many other good gifts that God gives.

2) Keep a watch over your mind and heart—guard your affections

Music is a powerful tool. It takes what we sing and embeds it in us. It shapes how we emotionally respond to truth as well as error. What we sing and what we listen to will have an impact on us. It makes memorable our words and gives voice to our affections. It heightens and inspires and connects with our emotions.

What you choose to imbibe will feed your soul. What you choose to listen to will stick in your head. This is especially true of music. How often does a tune come to mind that just stays with you? As you turn up the radio or iPod, ask yourself: Do I really want to wake up singing this in the morning?

B. Some questions to ask when evaluating music

I have found it helpful to think through the following **grid** when evaluating the music.

A Grid for Evaluating Music

You need to ask good questions about the music you hear and sing and play ...

Questions related to truth and worldview:

- 1) What is this song saying?
 - Ask this of the words; the music doesn't "say" anything.
- 2) What worldview is expressed in the words of the song?
 - What does the song say about God, the world around us, reality, humanity, the meaning of life, right and wrong, etc.?
- 3) Are the words true? Are they biblical? Are they God-honoring?
 - Philippians 4:8

Questions related to affections and emotions

- 4) What affections does the music raise?
 - How does the song make me feel?
- 5) Are these affections reflected in the music itself or are they the result of associations I am imposing on the music?
- 6) Do the affections reflected in the music faithfully express the intent of the words?
 - Does the message of the words and the affections of the music undergird one another or distract from one another?
- 7) When and where and for what purpose would this song be useful?

Questions related to identity and expression

- 8) Why do I want to hear (sing) this song?

- 9) Do I connect with this song? Is this who I am?
- Do the words express what I want to say?
 - ♦ Why or why not?
 - ♦ Who says these kinds of words?
 - ♦ As a Christian, should I be saying this?
 - Does the music express the way I feel?
 - ♦ Why or why not?
 - ♦ Who feels this way?
 - ♦ As a Christian, should I be feeling this way about what is being said in the song?
- 10) Can I listen to (sing) this song to the glory of God?
- 1 Corinthians 10:31

My prayer is that these questions will serve you as you seek to enjoy music to the glory of God.

Next week we will continue with a closer look at music in the context of worship.

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Grid for Evaluating Music is also
available as a separate download.

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