

What Then Shall We Sing?

Part 2: Thoughts on Music and Worship

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Last week we began a two-part series “What Then Shall We Sing?” with Part 1: Thoughts on Music. We addressed the following questions:

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?

We saw that music is a good **gift** of God, an **art** designed for expression, and a **language** that communicates meaning. Music primarily expresses emotion. It raises the affections (or in other words—gives voice and sound to our feelings). Music conveys emotion indirectly by **reflecting** and imitating gestures, inflections, and movements that are associated in human experience with specific emotions and feelings. That message can be helped or hindered by two other factors: **identification**—when a song becomes so well-known that its tune and its text are linked together that we identify one with the other—and **association**—when a song so embeds itself in our own experience that it takes on personal meaning, reminding us of a person or event or experience in the past.

We also looked at the relationships between **music and sin**, and **music and the world**. All music belongs to God. Music cannot in itself be “sacred” or “secular.” Nor can music in itself be evil. Evil does not reside in things like musical tones or beats or instruments. Sin and evil are issues of the heart and are found in our motives and intentions as we create and use music. Music itself expresses passion; but it does not in itself distinguish between godly passion and sinful passion. For that we need other clues—like lyrics, words and context. Music can be used in ways that honor God or in ways that profane God.

God gave us music to enjoy and use to His glory. But we live in a fallen world. And too often we are passionate in wrong ways and about the wrong things. And those misdirected affections are reflected in the music around us.

This morning I want to narrow our focus and consider **music and worship**, especially music in the gathered worship of the church. Last week I mentioned that the Bible is filled with references to music and contains a large number of verses that are the words to psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. When you look at all the references to music in both the Old and New Testaments, most of the references are in the context of God’s people worshipping God in gathered worship.

And as I mentioned last week, I have 5 questions that I want to answer this morning:

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?

I also received additional questions from some of you. I will try to include those questions and answer them as we go through the study. But let’s begin with the first question:

VI. What is the relationship between music and worship?

- A. These two terms have been misunderstood and misconstrued as synonyms.
 1. People will sometimes use the term *worship* in reference to the singing portion of the service.
 2. Because of the nature of music and its connection to our emotions—music can “feel” more like worship.
- B. But each term has a wide scope.
 1. **Worship** is much wider in scope than music—it includes many elements: praying, preaching, reading Scripture, testimonies, giving—music is but one element.

If you are not engaging in worship during the other elements, you are missing out on most of what takes place in times of gathered worship; in fact, you’re missing out on the very things that should fuel and impassion your singing in worship.
 2. **Music** is much wider in scope than gathered worship—it encompasses all of life. At work, at rest, and at play—in movies, in celebration and in romance; music is all around us.
- C. Is music necessary for worship?
 1. No—in the sense that what is *necessary* for worship is “Spirit” and “Truth” (John 4:24).

2. Yes—in the sense that music is commanded by God. “Sing to the Lord” is not optional! (Psalm 95:1; 96:1, etc.)

VII. Can all music be used equally well in gathered worship?

NO—Not all music is suitable for congregational singing or useful for corporate worship.

- A. Music must be fitting to what we are trying to express in worship.

We have freedom to create and use music in a wide variety of venues: a football game, a parade, driving in car, in the symphony hall, at home. In all these venues, we can enjoy music to the glory of God. But a worship service is not a football game or a parade or a family drive. Not all the music that we enjoy hearing at venues outside of the church may be appropriate or fitting for the purpose of worship. In worship we are pursuing a well-defined purpose and seeking to communicate a clear message. As we choose music for worship, we need wisdom and discernment to find tunes that will serve as a suitable accompaniment to help us express our emotional responses to God and His Word as we commune with Him corporately in worship.

We need to consider the affections that are raised in the song. Songs that express anger or rage or discontent, for example, will have a very little or limited usefulness, if we are seeking to communicate a message of peace, reconciliation, satisfaction and joy in Christ. You can't take words that express passions like peace, satisfaction and joy and wed them to music that was crafted and composed to express contrary passions and expect to have a coherent message.

- B. Music must be an authentic expression of our own voice in worship.

Not every song is written to be sung congregationally. Not every song is in a language or musical style we understand and can or express as our own. Musical expression arises out of our culture and experience. We use the musical instruments of our day. We sing in the language we share together. We sing with gifts and abilities God has given us.

For example: If Pastor Tom told me that he was planning to preach a sermon from Genesis 1 on creation, I wouldn't bring in vocal scores and instrumental parts for Haydn's oratorio, *The Creation* for us to sing that day in worship. *The Creation* is great music, but it is more complex and more involved than we could handle here. [Now if I were on a retreat with a group from an accomplished choir and symphony, maybe we could make it work.] But one of my filters for choosing music for our worship here at Grace, is finding music that fits our voice that we can sing well as an expression of worship together.

- C. Music may have unhelpful associations or be identified in distracting ways.

Some tunes and texts have become so closely associated over time, that to hear one brings to mind the other. For example, I would not want to use the tune of “Happy Birthday” to compose a worship song. “Happy Birthday” has a fine tune, but hearing it with different words would likely be distracting or even amusing to many people. It would take the focus off of worship.

VIII. What does music add to our worship?

A. Music is a means of praise, thanksgiving, confession, proclamation, prayer...

Psalms 100:4 Enter His gates with thanksgiving,
 And His courts with praise!
 Give thanks to Him; bless His name!

Music fulfills its highest purpose when it serves the communion of God and His people. Music accompanies, adorns and interprets the revelation, proclamation and teaching of God's Word as God speaks to His people. And music also bears the prayers of God's people as we speak and respond to Him in petition, praise and thanksgiving.

B. Music raises our affections (it gives voice to our feelings in worship).

Often in Scripture, where you see expressions of great joy and delight or great sorrow and distress, these feelings are expressed to God in prayer or to the community of faith in songs of praise or lament. The 150 psalms display the wide range of emotion that can be expressed in corporate worship (culminating with Psalm 150 in joyful praise). We are free to use music to express our emotions before God—everything from sorrow to joy—soft and contemplative to loud and celebrative.

The psalms actually have a much larger scope and vocabulary of emotion in worship than most of us are comfortable with. We are rather reserved in our day and in our culture with sharing the passions of our hearts (at least in church). There is passion and affection in the psalms—in the context of gathered worship—that would take us way out of our comfort zones, on both ends of the spectrum: from sorrow and grief and repentance to celebration and exuberant joy and praise. We get a little uncomfortable when things starting getting too loud and excited or getting too low and broken. But the psalms and music give us voice for these affections.

C. Music unites us in worship.

What may have started as a personal outpouring of emotion by David or another composer of psalms, becomes the voice of gathered worship, as it is sung together and shared together and expressed together in one common voice.

Music helps us pray together, give thanks together, confession together in one united voice.

D. Music shapes how we emotionally interpret and respond to truth.

It serves an important role in how we receive and understand the text. This is why we need to be thoughtful and discerning in the music we use to incarnate the words.

One example from hymnody are the hymns "O Sacred Head, Now Wounded" sung to the tune PASSION CHORALE and "O Lord, How Shall I Meet Thee" sung to the tune ST. THEODULPH. Both tunes are wed well to their texts. PASSION CHORALE expresses the sorrow and grief of Christ's suffering on the cross. ST. THEODULPH expresses the joyful expectation of communing with God in worship. Both are in the same poetic meter (7.6.7.6.D.), and the tune could be switched. But the result would be incongruent and contradictory.

The words and the music should emotionally tie together. There are many good tunes and good texts that are simply mismatched. One that I can remember while growing up was “Love Lifted Me.” It begins:

“I was sinking deep in sin far from the peaceful shore,
Very deeply stained within, sinking to rise no more...”

A joyful tune—a good tune, but very mismatched, at least at the beginning of the verse, with words that are trying to communicate desperation and our hopeless state when we are outside of Christ. We want to wed music and words that strengthen the message, not confuse it.

One good example of matching words and music is the “Revelation Song” by Jennie Lee Riddle. Its tune communicates well a sense of wonder and profoundness suggested by the words. Another is Bob Kauflin’s setting of William Cooper’s hymn “God Moves in a Mysterious Way.”

Sometimes words can have more than one emotional setting. Having different arrangements of the same words can be helpful at times. We might feel a text differently depending on what we are going through or how it lands on us.

IX. What should worship music sound like?

To answer this question, let’s turn to the book of Psalms.

The psalms are a book of worship. They are our precedent and guide for understanding how to employ music in worship. But the book of Psalms is not just a book *about* worship, it is a book filled with the content and words of worship.

As we read through the psalms, we learn how to come into God’s presence. We learn how to worship Him. We can learn from the words of psalms themselves—as we see how God’s people expressed their hearts in song together before God—but we can also learn from the structure of the Psalter as a whole.

Note first how it begins:

Psalm 1 begins with instruction to forsake the way of sin and find delight in the ways of God.

 Psalms 1:1–2 Blessed is the man
 who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
 nor stands in the way of sinners,
 nor sits in the seat of scoffers;
 but his delight is in the law of the LORD,
 and on his law he meditates day and night.

Here we have a guide for our motives and intents. We are not to allow our desires and affections to run after unworthy things, unholy things.

We are to delight in God and His Law. This delight should be the foundation of all our singing and all our worship.

Psalms are a wonderful testimony to God's faithfulness as He continues to deliver and uphold His people. As the psalms progress, you see the people of God in a variety of circumstances and situations: some expressing joy, some in distress—some are singing praise, some lamenting—some declaring their love for God, some grieving over sin and wickedness. Many come with requests; many others come with thanksgiving because God has answered their prayers.

This is true of us as we gather for worship. We all come from different circumstances into the gathering of the church. Some of us are joyful, some of us are facing sorrow; all of us come with great needs that only God in the power of His grace in the gospel can supply.

But as the psalms draw nearer to the end of the Psalter, you notice that petitions and laments grow fewer and fewer, while praise and joy becomes increasingly dominant. After about Psalm 145 there is a crescendo of joyful praise to the end, where we see in the final verse (Psalm 150:6) "let everything that has breath praise the Lord!"

The structure of the psalms is a wonderful illustration of what happens in worship as we lift our eyes from looking at ourselves to fixing them fully upon God and the hope of the gospel. God takes all our concerns and trials—all our laments and pleas, and moves us in one direction, toward our chief end—glorifying God as we rejoice in Him forever. Everything is moving toward the glory of God. This is the trajectory of the psalms and should be the trajectory of our singing as well.

In Psalm 150 we hear a description of the sound of worship music.

Psalms 150:1	Praise the LORD! Praise God in His sanctuary; Praise Him in His mighty heavens!
Psalms 150:2	Praise Him for His mighty deeds; Praise Him according to His excellent greatness!
Psalms 150:3	Praise Him with trumpet sound; Praise Him with lute and harp!
Psalms 150:4	Praise Him with tambourine and dance; Praise Him with strings and pipe!
Psalms 150:5	Praise him with sounding cymbals; Praise Him with loud clashing cymbals!
Psalms 150:6	Let everything that has breath praise the LORD! Praise the LORD!

Verse 1 answers the question: **who** to praise: "Praise the **LORD**!"

And **where** to praise:

Praise God in His sanctuary;
Praise Him in His mighty heavens!

On **earth** = “in His sanctuary”

This is the tabernacle and Temple of the Old Testament—a foreshadow of its fulfillment in the New Testament: the hearts of God’s gathered people.

And in **heaven**

Verse 2 explains the reason for our praise—because of **who God is** and **what He has done**.

Psalms 150:2 Praise Him for His mighty deeds;
Praise Him according to His excellent greatness!

We are to praise and worship God “according to His excellent greatness!”

Think of the magnitude of that phrase. This is what fills the content of our songs. This is what determines the scope of our songs. How much music will it take until we can say with satisfaction that we have fully praised God “according to His excellent greatness”?

Psalm 33:1–3 Rejoice in the LORD, O you righteous!
For praise from the upright is beautiful.
Praise the LORD with the **harp**;
Make melody to Him with an **instrument of ten strings**.
Sing to Him a **new song**;
Play skillfully with a shout of joy.

This is a command for every age and every generation, as the salvation of God is made known in the power of the gospel. There is continually a new song as hearts are conquered and voices are lifted up in praise in every place.

Verses 3 to 6 of Psalm 150 then describes the sound of music in worship:

We hear all kinds of musical instruments:

brass—trumpets
strings—lute and harp
wind instruments—pipe
and **percussion**—tambourine / cymbals / loud clashing cymbals

And we hear **voices**—everything that has breath

We also see something else in verse 4 that may make some of us a little uncomfortable.

Psalms 150:4 Praise Him with tambourine and **dance**;

We can save the discussion on dance for another time. But suffice it to say here, that this term here in this psalm does not carry with it all the meaning that some try to read into it. It is a

word that simply means “moving the body to music.” It is not a sensual dance with immodest overtones, as our culture tends to think of dance. And it’s not necessarily artistic or structured dance, like a ballet or modern dance. It is simply moving to the music.

I mentioned earlier that we tend to be rather reserved in our expressions of worship. But there are peoples and cultures, in other places and at other times through out history, who would think it very strange, if not impossible, to sing praise to God while standing still.

God’s design for music in worship is “everything that has breath.” Every person called to praise, and every style, every culture, every musical instrument sanctified for God’s glory and purposes.

One of the questions I received is about musical instruments:

“I have seen people get up and leave when they saw drums in a church service. Some teach that having drums is wrong in church.”

Some of this may be a lack of understanding about what the Bible says about music. But much of it, I think, is due to association. People have seen music used in frivolous and ungodly ways—ways that are obviously dishonoring to God—and for them it is hard to imagine how music like that—music played on *those* instruments—could be pleasing to God.

Drums have been on the hot seat in recent times, but there are actually two other instruments that had a much more difficult time being recognized as instruments suited to worship.

Can anyone guess what these are?

One was the piano.

The piano was invented early in the 1700s. It became popular, especially in the 1800s, but its use was in the home with the family or on the concert stage. The organ was the established instrument for worship of that day.

Pianos were used frequently used in Sunday School and at youth meetings, but not in worship. What finally made the change for the piano was the contemporary music of the day—the gospel song—that was popularized with the evangelistic crusades of the early 1900s. As people learned the new music at the crusades, they wanted to sing the music in church. The only problem was the accompaniment. The organ worked fine with the old hymns, but it struggled to keep up with the lively, bouncing rhythm of the new music.

Compare for example the rhythm of: “Holy, Holy, Holy” to the tune NICAIA with “Standing on the Promises” by R. Kelso Carter.

Churches discovered that people sang the new songs well in Sunday School with the piano, but when they tried them in gathered worship, the songs were hard to follow and hard to sing.

One of the evangelistic teams found the answer. Charles Alexander began bringing a piano into the sanctuary to accompany the singing. He was a gifted pianist and he demonstrated how the piano could serve well to accompany the contemporary music of the day in worship.

Eventually the piano and gospel songs stayed, but not without some controversy.

Critics of the day complained: “[it] sounds like a horse and buggy galloping through the sanctuary.” You knew you were in a contemporary church at the turn of the 20th Century if saw that the piano had been moved into the sanctuary.

The other instrument was the organ.

For this we must go farther back in history. The organ was invented around the 3rd century BC. Back then it was designed to use water rather than air in the pipes and was called the **hydraulis**. The water organ was quite loud and was used most prominently in the amphitheaters.

During the time of the Roman Empire it was used to accompany the processions and events at the gladiatorial games. Some ballparks today use the organ in a similar way to create a festive atmosphere—to signal and stir up the crowd. It was to the celebrative sounds of the organ that many Christians were paraded in before cheering crowds to be martyred.

So you can imagine the difficulties with association that early Christians must have had whenever someone finally had the idea to introduce the organ into church as a worship instrument. How could *this* instrument that accompanied so much death, ever be used in worship?

But God had a purpose for the pipe organ. He designed to rescue that instrument and use it for His glory. Rome was sacked in 410 and the empire fell over the next 150 years. The organ was finally brought into the church around 7th century AD—well after the fall of Rome. It was not until the 1300s that the first organ was permanently installed in a church. But for hundreds of years after the pipe organ was a prominent instrument in carrying the praise of God’s people.

[Instrumental music as a whole had a difficult time in the early church. Most of the instruments of the day were associated to some degree with the worship of Greek or Roman gods. To play such instruments was regarded by many to be an act of worship to the gods.]

Turn now to—

Colossians 3:16

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing **psalms** and **hymns** and **spiritual songs**, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.

What did Paul mean when he wrote in this verse: “psalms, hymns and spiritual songs”? What music would he have had in his mind’s ear? I can tell you what he could **not** have imagined—

- Not the metrical psalms of the 1500’s
- Not the hymns of Watts in the 1700’s
- Not the gospel songs of the 1800’s
- Not the praise choruses of the 1960’s and 1970’s
- Not the worship songs of today

These were all still future expressions of God’s design for music. All music was once new music.

This brings us to the final question:

X Should all Christians sing the same music in worship?

- A. No—there have been many styles throughout the history of the church.
- B. There are believers singing to God’s glory all over the world (and throughout all centuries), and most are not singing like Americans—or even Westerners!

What is “singable” and suitable for one culture (or time in history) may not be for every time and place. Singable to a congregation in Indonesia or Zambia may not work for Cape Coral, Florida or Mansfield, Texas. The voice of one generation may not sound like the voice of the generation that follows.

This brings up another perplexing question in music. It is a question asked by almost every generation, especially as that generation prepares to pass the baton on to the next.

Why does music have to change? Why don’t we just keep singing the same songs as our fathers and our forefathers? Or, if you’re on the other side of the equation: Why don’t our kids just keep singing the songs we like to sing? They were good enough for us.

Listen to the opening verses of Psalm 96. Here is the answer:

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

Music changes because there is **always** a new song. God is at work in the nations, through His people, taking the gospel to the ends of the earth. God’s design is every nation, tribe and tongue magnifying His name and glory—that He would be praised in every place in every age!

Every generation adds its voice to God’s praise, but none can contain or epitomize His praise. No one generation or style or age can encapsulate all God is and all He has done. No one place or time or culture can fully express the praise and worship of our great God.

The praise of God is a glorious tapestry woven through the ages as His Kingdom advances, conquering hearts, lives, nations and cultures.

As God saves, he rescues and sanctifies—that is true of our souls as well as our emotional expressions through our music.

Let me give you one example. Hip Hop and Rap are often used in the world in demeaning and ungodly ways. But listen how Shai Linne —from Capital Hill Baptist Church uses the style.

PLAY EXAMPLE: “Q&A” from “Atonement — use of Hip Hop by Shai Linne to catechize.

Reformed Rap may not be suited well for congregational participation in worship, but it has one big advantage as personal expression and testimony—it is rich with words. If used in a sanctifying, redemptive way—you can pack a lot of truth in a short space of time!

There is ever a new song. And we have not seen the last. God has shown His power and mercy in every age and He intends for His gospel to spread to the ends of the earth.

Music changes because God and His excellent greatness cannot be contained. It cannot be epitomized. And every age and generation is commanded to add its voice to the tapestry of praise throughout history.

There will come a day when music moves on. It will be handed off to an up and coming generation. It will press out beyond our comfort zones and beyond our preferences. But I want to be one that cheers on and coaches the next generation to lift up their voice—to take the art of music and run with it to the glory of God.

May God make it so.

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