I. An Introductory Theology of Worship

A. Defining Worship

1. Object: the God whom we worship. This relates to theology proper and our knowledge of the person and attributes of God.

2. The Term
   a. Hebrew: *shachah* (bowing down); physical picture of heart attitude
   b. Greek: *proskuneo* (kiss toward, bow down) and *latreuo* (work of the people, suggests rendering homage)
   c. English: *weorthscipe*; i.e., worth-ship, worthiness; honor, reverence, adoration
   d. In terms of practical theology
      - Mayhue: Worship ascribes ultimate eternal worth to God alone…Worship expresses the recognition and celebration that God is the one, true, eternal Sovereign upon whom we are totally dependant and to whom we ascribe absolute spiritual allegiance. (*Seeking God*, p. 142).
      - Robert Webber: *Worship Is a Verb*
      - Donald Hustad: The worship service is a rehearsal for the everyday life of worship (*Jubilate II*, p. 124).

3. Corporate worship has changed vastly between the Old and New Testaments.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OLD TESTAMENT</th>
<th>NEW TESTAMENT</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>God’s revealed presence (Shekinah glory)</td>
<td>God’s indwelling presence (Holy Spirit, Word)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Priests only (ministry by the few)</td>
<td>All are believer-priests (ministry by many)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Musicians: Levitical only</td>
<td>All are to edify through music</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highly skilled</td>
<td>Edify regardless of skill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grand processions &amp; celebrations</td>
<td>Meetings in synagogues, house churches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tabernacle/temple central to worship</td>
<td>Spirit central to worship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centrality of the temple location</td>
<td>Many congregations in many locations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One central Temple/tabernacle</td>
<td>Many churches</td>
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Outward and visual | Inward, at times unseen
--- | ---
Full of the Word (the Law, Psalms and more) | Full of the Word (“Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly”)  
Sacrifices specified by the Law (physical) | Sacrifices of praise (attitudes and actions) and good works

National | Congregational
Worship system points forward to redemption | Worship celebrates redemption
Unfinished, bloody | Finished, blood shed once for all
Strict under law | Freely under grace

4. Music is used for worship by divine mandate

   a. Song (and its cousin, scriptural poetry) is the only art condoned in the Word for an ongoing purpose

   b. It is a marriage ordained by God of
      1) Objective, eternal truth (God’s Word) to
      2) Subjective, temporal culture (music is art!)

   c. All is subservient to the text, which must be biblical truth

B. Scriptural Purposes for Music (Not Exhaustive)

1. To praise God through vocal music (Psalm 27:6). This activity is eternal (Rev. 5:9; 15:3).

   *Psalm 27:6* (all Scripture quotations are NASB) “And I will offer in His tent sacrifices with shouts of joy; I will sing, yes, I will sing praises to the Lord.”

   After evangelism and preaching cease, there still will be music.

2. To praise God through instruments (Psalm 150:3–4)

   *Psalm 150:3–4* “Praise Him with trumpet sound; praise Him with harp and lyre. Praise Him with timbrel and dancing; praise Him with stringed instruments and pipe.”

   We apply this in our ministry by using various kinds of instruments in our praise to God.

3. To encourage one another with biblical truth through music (Ephesians 5:18–19).

   *Ephesians 5:18–19* “…be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord.”
4. To aid in the saturation of the mind with the Word, and to aid in having a thankful heart attitude (Col. 3:15–17).

*Colossians 3:15–17* “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful. Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God. Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.”

5. To learn Scripture and spiritual truths by singing (Psalm 32:7–8).

*Psalm 32:7–8* “Thou dost surround me with songs of deliverance. I will instruct you and teach you in the way which you should go.”

People learn biblical, spiritual thought through the music they sing. Avoid metaphors with children’s songs and keep the content direct and simple; also, children are very capable of learning great hymns.

6. To instruct and convict by the scriptural texts of the songs (Isa. 55:11).

Note that this passage is not specifically about music; however, *if* the musical texts are scriptural, it still can apply.

*Isaiah 55:11* “So shall My Word be which goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me empty, without accomplishing what I desire, and without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it.”

Lyric lines are important! Make sure they are truthful, theologically accurate, and inclusive of New Testament redemptive truth. Many praise songs reflect Old Testament truth only and therefore do not focus on Christ.

7. To lift the emotions of the heart (James 5:13).


Music has a unique ability to encourage and lift up the heart of the believer.

8. To introduce the unsaved to Jesus Christ through musical testimony (e.g., concerts) (Psalm 40:3).

*Psalm 40:3* “And He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God; many will see and fear, and will trust in the Lord.”

3
Consider the blessed privilege we have of introducing people to the Savior through Grace’s Christmas Concerts. Our testimony through song should be an evangelistic tool.

C. Spiritual Music Comes from Spiritual People: the Old Testament Example

The serving Levites separated themselves from the world, renounced their earthly inheritance, and consecrated themselves to God and His service for a lifetime.

1. The Old Testament priests were directly called by God to be set apart as holy servant-leaders in worship.

2. The Old Testament priestly musicians were very skilled (1 Chron. 15:22, 2 Chron. 34:12).

   1 Chronicles 15:22 “And Chenaniah, chief of the Levites, was in charge of the singing; he gave instruction in singing because he was skillful.”

   2 Chronicles 34:12 also speaks of the Levites who were skillful with musical instruments. See also Exodus 26 and 31 concerning “skillful workmen.”

3. Not only were they skillful, but there were many of them (1 Chronicles 23:3–5).

   1 Chronicles 23:3–5 “And the Levites were numbered from thirty years old and upward, and their number by census of men was 38,000. Of these, 24,000 were to oversee the work of the house of the Lord; and 6,000 were officers and judges, and 4,000 were gatekeepers, and 4,000 were praising the Lord with the instruments which David made for giving praise.”

4. However, music offered from a wrong heart is unacceptable to God as worship (Amos 5:23).

   Amos 5:23 “Take away from Me the noise of your songs; I will not even listen to the sound of your harps.”

   God tells His people that their hearts were far from Him. In Amos 6:5, God sends a judgment against those living luxuriously “who improvise to the sound of the harp, and…have composed songs for themselves” instead of worshiping and living for God.

   Many times a pastor will newly arrive at a church to find that a lot of ungodly people are involved in the music “ministry.”

II. The Activities of Biblical Corporate Worship
Note that none of these activities are exclusive to the Old Testament, even when supported with Old Testament passages.

A. Praise and adoration based on the nature and work of God as revealed in His Word.

The Psalms illustrate at least two characteristics of this:

1. Our praise is to be expressed through vocal and instrumental music (Psalm 33:2–3).

2. Our praise is to review the attributes of God and doctrines of the Word (Psalm 51:14, 59:16, 89:1, 119:172).

B. Thanksgiving (Psalm 50:14, 23, 95:2, 100:4, 1 Thessalonians 5:18; Hebrews 13:15)

C. Confession, including repentance and submission (Leviticus 26:40–42; Nehemiah 9:2; Acts 19:18; James 5:16; 1 John 1:9)

D. Prayer (Numerous public prayers utilized in Israel’s worship are found in the Psalms; Matthew 21:13; Acts 6:4; Colossians 4:2.)

E. Intercession (2 Corinthians 1:11; 1 Thessalonians 5:25; James 5:14–16)

F. Ordinance of baptism (Matthew 28:19; Acts 2:38; Ephesians 4:5; Colossians 2:12)

G. Ordinance of the Lord’s Supper (Communion) (Matthew 26:26–29; Acts 2:42; 1 Corinthians 11:23–26)

H. Giving (Acts 2:45, 11:29; 1 Corinthians 16:2; 2 Corinthians 9:5–7; Philippians 4:16–17; 1 Timothy 6:17–19)

I. Reading of Scripture (Nehemiah 8:1–6; Luke 4:16; 1 Timothy 4:13; Revelation 1:3). Bear in mind that during the remainder of the worship service, God’s truth is filtered through our lips, and this is the only time when the people hear God’s word directly.

J. Instruction in the Word (Acts 6:1–4; Romans 10:14–15; 1 Timothy 4:13; 5:17; 2 Timothy 3:16; 4:2)

K. Application of the Word (Nehemiah 8:7-8; 2 Corinthians 10:11; 2 Timothy 3:16, 4:2; Hebrews 4:2)

L. Fellowship, and the exercise of spiritual gifts (Acts 2:42, 46; 1 Corinthians 12:7; Galatians 2:9; Ephesians 4:11–12; Philemon 1:6; Hebrews 10:25; 1 John 1:3–4)

M. Church discipline (Matthew 18:15–20; 1 Corinthians 5:13)
Note that singing isn’t on this list. While it definitely is an activity of biblical corporate worship, lyrical content can make the function of a song overlap multiple items in the above list, including praise, thanksgiving, corporate prayer, reading of Scripture, and application of the Word.

III. Biblical Principles That Pertain to Music in Any Culture, Any Church, and Any Age

If all of the following are vibrantly true of your church, the style and approach to worship will decrease in significance, even as the issue is settled in a godly and biblical manner.

A. Content-driven worship.

The greatest value of music used in worship should be found in what it says. Having a mind filled with scripture and knowledge of the truth is a priority not only because of corporate worship, but because it’s part of a God-pleasing lifestyle (see Psalm 16:7; Rom. 12:2; 1 Cor. 14:15; Eph. 4:23; Phil. 1:9; Col. 3:2). Such is the essence of “whole-life” worship, the goal of every true believer.

One purpose for corporate worship is equipping, which includes helping the flock be able to speak to one another with those psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Therefore, if anything should drive public worship first and foremost, it’s content, and that content is the Word of God. This upholds the standard of worshiping “in spirit and in truth” (John 4:24).

B. Skillful worship.

Don’t ignore the Old Testament example of diligent craftsmanship. God is worthy of it, and much is communicated to others through skillful artistry about honor and respect of God. While all believers are to participate in speaking to one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, afford the greatly skilled a skillful place of service, so long as the effort directs the focus to God and not to a “performance.” Here at Grace, the congregation has ample opportunities to sing together, while the choir, soloists, and instrumentalists also offer musical praise. Our desire is that the congregation stay mentally engaged with the lyrics of the music so that they are not mere spectators.

In some instances, having skillful worship will mean pushing a church’s talent to strive for new musical goals at the next level up, or helping them grow as musicians by offering training (see Jones, Singing and Making Music, pp. 148–154). Remind them of the biblical precedent for this.

Pastors spend years of study to become skilled in the Word, and spend many hours (I trust) preparing each sermon. What does it say, by contrast, if the rest of your service
involves music and musicians that have not studied their craft and have not invested preparation time so that their offering is the best of which they are capable? In many instances, extremely skillful music-making transcends style because it is presented in an unusually compelling manner.

C. “Let all be done to edify.”

In the context of spiritual gifts and specifically the use of tongues, 1 Corinthians 14 speaks to several issues regarding corporate worship. Two of these have significant implications for music. The first is in verse 26, “Let all things be done for edification.” If this principle is applied on a musical level, personal preferences about music style fall below the greater priority of what builds up the Body, while at the same time inferring that some kinds of music may be more desirable than others if they more readily help to edify. If it is applied on a personal level, it takes the emphasis off of what some individuals come to get (emotions, experiences, healings, what they like to hear, and so forth) and places it back on what the individual comes to give (exaltation of Christ and spiritual service to the church). That principle alone would turn the way some churches do worship on its head.

Secondly, we are admonished in verse 40 to do “everything decently and in order,” which can have implications about everything from the substance of a service to its demeanor and logistics. Anything that is disorderly or connotes an element of chaos in corporate worship is inappropriate. God is not a God of confusion (v. 33), nor are visitors or nonbelievers observing the service to be given an opportunity to think that the church body is lacking in sound judgment or is outright crazy (v. 23). The standard of what edifies is a good safeguard against such distractions.

D. Do not use “worldly” music, which means you must define both what is “worldly” and appropriate for your church.

(This principle is addressed to those in the local church as a group.) Firstly, we cannot elevate personal preferences or traditions to appear as authoritative as the Bible because that would be to “exceed what is written” in the Word of God (1 Cor. 4:6). A blanket condemnation of a particular music sound encourages legalism, a danger that Jesus denounced in Mark 7:6–13.

On the other hand, if people in your congregation confuse what you do on Sunday with something that they consider worldly, there’s going to be a conflict of interest. James 1:27 speaks of keeping oneself unspotted from the world, and James 4:4 says that “friendship with the world is enmity with God.” First John 2:15 commands, “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him” (NKJV). How is music appropriate for worship if our brother hears in it that from which he was “delivered from [in] this present evil age” (Galatians 1:4)? Personal temperance applied by those who lead in the church can help in the avoidance of extremes. (See 1 Corinthians 9:25; Philippians 4:5; 1 Timothy 3:2, 11; Titus 1:8, 2:2.)
We believe that each local church, with godly discernment, must define what is appropriate for worship and what is perceived as worldly. The answer will vary according to the musicians God has brought to the local church, the makeup of the congregation, and its geographical location. Bear in mind that conservative choices are typically “safer.” It also may vary between the main services of the church and youth meetings or fellowship groups because of different target ages and groups. While it is good to promote diversity within the main services, a wider diversity may desirable for the subsidiary groups. In any case, we need penetrating perceptivity over what our Christian brothers and sisters hear in the music, and in some cases be quick to exercise forbearance. While it is tempting to take the easier path by offering black-and-white mandates or solutions, it is important to biblical ministry to understand and act discerningly on that what is truly intrinsic in music and what comes to it by association. In so doing, the commands to avoid spiritual compromise, “touch not the unclean thing” (2 Cor. 6:17) and “do not be bound together with unbelievers” (2 Cor. 6:14), will be fulfilled in the local body.

E. Do not offend your brother or sister.

(This principle speaks to the same issue, but is addressed to the individual believer.) As followers of Christ, we are to be known by our love for one another. It would be wrong to cause one to stumble, to “put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother’s way” or to “destroy with your food him for whom Christ died” (Romans 14:13, 15) because of a music style that is perceived to be sinful. (See also Paul’s discussion in 1 Corinthians 8.)

On the other hand, this is an issue of maturity and shepherding. Styles and preferences may have strong relevance, but they should not become such a strong priority as to negate the principle of “in honor preferring one another” (Rom. 12:10). And the music preferences of one person shouldn’t be allowed to put a stranglehold on true ministry. Jesus’ words to the apostles should also be heeded in this context, for “if anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all” (Mark 9:35). Discipleship and maturity should bring an understanding that others (and their preferences) are more important. The greater priority is to have a servant-hearted concern about the Lord’s work and His body.

However, you cannot force the application of this latter principle for the eradication of a stumbling block and still be obedient to Scripture. It seems that few pastors who force or allow a wholesale shift to contemporary music love their flock enough to make sure that they won’t drive out some of the saints. How many true saints are expendable because of a change in music style?

F. Include the mature and elderly in the life of the church.

Passages such as Titus 2:4–5, 1 John 2:12–14, and the greetings of 2 and 3 John attest to the importance of “seasoned saints” teaching and leading younger believers. If a
local body caters only to a specific (e.g., younger) age range, how can this occur? Cross-generational ministry isn’t merely a characteristic of the “optimal” local church—it’s a biblical mandate for discipleship.

G. Show reverence and awe in corporate worship.

Respect, awe, and honor are to be characteristics of the believer’s thankful lifestyle (Heb. 12:28–29). A “whole-life” worshipper should bring this to corporate worship as well. Two of the great worship scenes in scripture (Isa. 6; Rev. 5) strongly emphasize God’s holiness and loftiness. Not only should our worship reflect this, it also should be carefully conceived so as not to generally “dumb down” the worship of God.

IV. Criteria for Choosing New Music

A. Evaluating the music within new songs

1. Is the music memorable and singable? Examine the structure, melody, harmony, and rhythm of the song. It must be sophisticated enough that it creates a unique interest, while being accessible enough for people to readily participate. The songs that are memorable enough to stay with us for a long time tend to be both substantial and interesting. Much music today is so strongly rhythmic and melodically weak that it does not meet these criteria.

2. Is the music well-crafted, or is it trite or cheap in some way? By virtue of its compositional quality, music should enhance the meaning of the lyrics, and in a general sense contribute to the reverence and substance of your services.

3. Does the sound and style of the music appropriately support the lyrics? If not, the music will fight or obscure the message of the song.

4. Is the style of the music able to be appreciated by many in the church family, or is it extreme or highly transient (of fleeting interest) in some way? Music with staying power always creates a long-term advantage.

B. Evaluating contemporary lyrics

Examine the content of every lyric used in your services. Is everything in a song doctrinally sound? Does it contain a small or significant amount of truth? Many times the lyrics are not objectionable in what they say, but what is left unsaid is significant. Is the message a helpful addition to the music you already use, or redundant? For example, the majority of contemporary songwriters overlook central doctrinal themes or the redeeming work of Christ in their lyrics. Singing only praises from psalm texts would be Biblical, yet incomplete. Discerning choices can circumvent this. Look for wrong or weak theology and avoid those songs.
1. **Use lyrics that say something reasonably unique.** Some new song lyrics seem to be written by drawing several popular phrases out of a hat, so that what is said is neither unique nor stated in a poetically interesting manner. Compare this to the example provided for us in the Psalms.

2. **Check the lyrics for Charismatic and experience-driven theology.** This is now widespread in new congregational, choral, and solo music, even from publishers that have traditionally catered to non-charismatic denominations. (e.g. “Rain down more of your presence…”) Avoid lyrics that ask for more of the Spirit (see no. 5 below).

3. **Look for a balance between subjective, testimonial lyrics and objective, fact-telling ones.** Do the words “I” or “me” occur so frequently that the emphasis no longer seems to be on the Lord but about me and what “I” get out of worship?

4. **Pursue emotion-filled worship instead of emotion-driven worship.** As creatures made in God’s image, we are capable of enjoying and expressing powerful emotions. True biblical worship is to involve the emotions (for example, Psalm 33:1; 100:1–2)—this is a command! However, it is not to be ecstatic merely for the sake of ecstasy or divorced from the use of the intellect. We come to “give” and offer worship, not to focus on “getting” an experience. Emotionality is often mistaken for true spirituality or substance (it is not necessarily evidence of “Spirit-filled” worship). A right understanding of the Word shows that emotions are to follow in response to biblical truth, and that our experiences are to be understood in light of it.

5. **Avoid the unbiblical trend to create an experience of God’s presence.** God is present at a true worship service whether we feel it or not. On the other hand, if we magnify God in true worship, confess sin, pray, hear and understand His Word, fellowship with one another, and so forth, how can we possibly not experience Him on some level? Also, God is present at all times indwelling us through the Holy Spirit; believers already have been blessed with “every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ” (Eph. 1:3); and have been fully given the Spirit “so that we may know the things freely given to us by God” (1 Cor. 2:12). We serve a God who has given “the Spirit without measure” (John 3:34). If we are unable to “experience” God, it isn’t for lack of His presence, power, or provision, but is due to our calloused insensitivity and sin.

6. **Avoid the misrepresentation of spiritual warfare by storming the gates of Hell instead of standing firm.** The most violent passage in Scripture on spiritual warfare, as far as our actions are concerned, is 2 Corinthians 10:4. When it refers to the “pulling down strongholds,” it is not speaking of the actual domain of Satan himself, but rather is a call to be armed with the knowledge of God’s Word and use it to tear down worldly philosophy and wisdom—any knowledge raised up against the things of God. This passage, along with Ephesians 6, indicates that the only offensive weapon of our struggle is the truth of the Word of God.
Furthermore, when putting on the whole armor of Ephesians 6, nowhere does it say to run headlong into battle, but merely to “withstand” or “stand, therefore” (vv. 13–14).

7. **Avoid materials created specifically for the aid of “seeker” services, which redefine redemption and please the pagan.** First Corinthians 14:23–24 shows that the apostle Paul expected non-believers to be present in a normal functioning Sunday service of the church. This isn’t to say evangelistic meetings are to be avoided. Rather, this implies that turning the main Sunday service into a pragmatically-determined strategy for attracting the lost misses the point. The unsaved come to salvation by the supernatural regenerating work of God through the Word alone (1 Cor.1:21; Rom. 10:17). Don’t use material that redefines this.

8. **Avoid vain repetition.** Someone has coined the stereotype: “7–11 choruses”—songs with seven words repeated eleven times! Few things “dumb down” worship and emphasize the emotions over the mind like mantra-like repetition of the same thing over and over. This has become increasingly commonplace. Jesus condemned this practice while teaching about prayer (Matt. 6:7); many of the overly repetitious choruses are prayers.

This principle can also apply to the church liturgies of old. When the texts of worship are based on long-standing tradition so that the entire service is “scripted,” the same error occurs if the people are merely reciting liturgical forms.

V. Creative Service Planning for Musically Diverse Services

A. Pre-Service Options

1. Prelude
   a. Organ, piano, or instrumental music
   b. Recorded music (which may be more effective if instrumental only)
2. Prayer
   a. Corporate
   b. Silent
   c. Meditative
3. Instruction or announcements. (Be aware that on-screen announcements can seem “cold,” and those arriving late will miss out on these opportunities.)

B. Corporate Worship

1. Call to Worship
   a. Brief scripture and prayer
   b. Choral call to worship

2. Congregational singing
   a. Hymns, choruses, responses
      1) A cappella
2) Descants  
3) Rounds  
4) Counter melodies  
5) Women or men only verses  
6) Free harmonization  
7) Modulations  
8) Instrumental fanfares (transitions only; avoid instrumental refrains or verses)  
9) Various instrumental combinations for accompaniments  

b. Hymnal (valuable for part-singing)  
c. Lyrics printed in bulletin  
d. Song sheets  
e. Projected lyrics (assisted by PowerPoint, SongSelect, or other software)  
f. Memorized hymns and choruses  

3. “Special” Music (better termed “Ministry through Music”)  
   a. Vocal  
      1) Choirs  
      2) Select vocal groups or ensembles  
      3) Solo, duet, trio, quartet  
   b. Instrumental  
      1) Instruments: acoustic, electric, or combination of both  
      2) Solo, solo with accompaniment, or ensemble  

4. Scripture by pastor or congregation, separate from the sermon.  
5. Confession  
6. Prayer  
7. Testimonies (if implemented carefully)  
8. Interviews  
9. Baptism  
10. Communion  
11. Fellowship or greeting  
12. Recorded messages or video presentations (e.g. from missionaries). These must be of high quality so they are clearly seen and easily understood over the sound system.  

C. Ministry Opportunities  

Don’t call them “announcements” because you’re informing people of how they can be involved in ministry the rest of the week or in upcoming weeks. And if you can’t call them by this title, don’t have them in your service.  

1. Praise for specific ministries  
2. Upcoming church events  
3. Announce passing of members/regular attendees, including time and location of the memorial service
D. Worship through Giving (Offering)

1. Dedicatory prayer usually precedes the offering
2. Offering
3. Offertory special music. A vocal number is best here because people tend to talk during instrumentals. (It is better to use instrumentals at a different time in the service.)

E. Message

1. Teaching
2. Preaching
3. Exhortation
4. Multimedia

F. Closing

1. Invitation
2. Prayer
3. Hymn
4. Choral benediction
5. Ordination of pastors
6. Commissioning of pastors and special ministries
7. Welcome new members

G. Post-Service Options

1. Instrumental postlude
2. Recorded music
3. Counselors and prayer room available

VI. Discussion

Music for children: Don’t give children metaphors (“Climb, climb up Sunshine Mountain”) unless you’re willing to explain them carefully, because children do not readily appreciate the meaning of metaphors. Stick with direct biblical concepts (“Jesus loves me, this I know”).

“Special” music: The idea of calling a solo, ensemble, or choir piece “special” music needs to go away. How is congregational worship of God not special? Call the other music something else, such as a “musical offering” as Paul Jones does in Singing and Making Music.

Varying the instrumental combinations: The way traditional music (choral, orchestral, etc.) is produced involves carefully scoring every part note-for-note to create a pleasing composite. By contrast, contemporary music has an improvisatory element to it that provides the smaller church a tremendous advantage. This is because when you put an
instrumental combination together, you don’t have to write everything out exactly if “lead sheets” are used. Only the melody, chord names, and lyrics are written exactly; everyone then determines their musical role from that information.

Make sure you have one excellent accompanist at your church. That person can play piano or synthesizer. There’s a chain here: to piano or keyboard you can add electric bass. Immediately you have a new sound. Third, add acoustic guitar. Last but not least, add drums, but not before those other instruments are available to add their part to a complete sound. Piano only with drums is a bad sound unless electric bass is added. Tasteful drumming is also essential so that the words are not covered up. Plexiglas containment or electronic drums are ways to help control the sound.

Vary the instrumentation—don’t use drums on everything. “Tacit” is a very nice word! By varying who plays, the music can be made more interesting.

VII. Q&A

Q: Professors at a Bible college or seminary have encouraged us to bring in musicians who are non-believers to lead in worship.
Clayton: The leadership must determine whether this is a legitimate opportunity for evangelism. In Eugene, we had a few players in the orchestra who, at first, found our services to be quite amusing. Today some of them are saved, love the Lord, and are serving as ministers of music in churches. Here at Grace Church, we try to use believers for everything. The attitudes and the end result are completely different. But this is really up to the elders of your church. Also, there is a big difference between “passively” sitting in an orchestra and “actively” standing and leading or singing. (Having unbelievers do the latter is always unacceptable.)

Q: For the small church in a small community, what are some qualifiers as far as who can participate in music ministry?
Clayton: If they’re not musically gifted, it’s better to have congregational singing or do something other than music in your service, rather than to have the congregation suffer through something that everyone knows is not good. People ask me what my job is, and I tell them that it’s to protect the congregation from bad musicians. There are many things you can do in worship without going to music.

Q: Coming from the Southern California “rock band style” dominated by a lead singer, then coming here and seeing the conducting where it’s the worship of the church, I notice that it takes a lot of emphasis off the lead person, and I like that. Where does the “band style” fit in the church today? Should it be there?
Clayton: It depends on your church. It’s nice when you’re having a group singing rather just an individual. By the way, some of you have gotten rid of your choirs. When you have a choir up front, keep in mind that their families will be there, too, in the service! With the band and lead singer, you only have about eight in the group, but I’d keep a choir so you’re sure to have a healthy bunch there along with them!
Bill: I think the issue of pride, which is endemic to the sinful condition of the human heart, can be a temptation to anyone in leadership. So I wouldn’t want to characterize it as being either easier or more difficult because you’re a conductor instead of a lead singer. Pridefulness or sanctification can be found in either situation. Transitioning from one to the other is a strongly cultural thing, with which there are a lot of musical issues. It takes a lot of musical preparation, and the right personnel. Tomorrow morning I will lead with six singers around me. I want to lead you in the musical sense with beautiful harmony, and together as a team, so that we exemplify praising God to you, the larger team. So there are more people involved.

Q: Regarding protecting the church from poor musicianship, in our church we’ve been without a pastor, and people who have been there longer than me have pitched in to help out with the music. It’s apparent that some of them aren’t good. So do you just turn down the extra guitar? Or…?
Clayton: You have to be very careful. When I came here, people were singing who should not have been singing. It took me a year or two to transition from the not-so-good musicians to all good musicians. It was a slow change. That’s the way to do it. Also, whenever someone comes to me who doesn’t sing well, I ask them who they’ve studied with. When they say they’ve never studied, I ask them why—they have an excellent vocal sound and vocal tract and just don’t know how to use it. I’ve had people who have studied with good teachers, come back to me two years later, and are some of my soloists now. Also, people will ask me what to do about choir members who can’t sing at all. I liken a tone-deaf person to a color-blind person. They can’t help it that they can’t see colors—but I just suggest that they not go on the bomb squad for their job. So, if someone can’t carry a tune, they shouldn’t try to be in the choir. For everyone else, training is very helpful.

Q: What are some of the best ways to introduce a new song to the congregation?
Clayton: First of all, note what Bill said about the music being “singable.” Secondly, have a group do it so everyone hears it. Sometimes I introduce a hymn to our congregation by having the instrumental ensemble play it, with the lyrics printed in Grace Today so the congregation can read them. The congregation can then sing it subsequent to this.

Q: Does music, apart from lyrics, have any effect physiologically?
Clayton: People will put it to me this way: is music moral or amoral? I say that you can’t compare it that way. For instance, Bill, what was it you mentioned in the realm of art?

Bill: Is a painting moral or amoral? Well, it depends on whether the painting directly connotes something that has moral meaning to it. It’s very difficult to do that with music. It is possible to imitate with music certain sounds that have direct connotations, and (I don’t know the number offhand) above a certain volume the body will respond to sound stimulus by producing adrenaline. It’s no accident that we have an adrenaline-addicted culture—it’s like a cup of coffee. So, yes, that’s a God-given physiological response to sound. We either use it or abuse it—do we use it for His glory, or do we get addicted to it and just feed on it?
Clayton: Also, remember that without the soundtrack, a movie would be as blah as blah can be. So you can’t tell me that the sound of music doesn’t have an effect on the people who are listening. It brings up in your mind thoughts, places, etc., by the sound, so you need to be careful.

Bill: The term for that adrenaline rush is a “psycho-acoustical response” to loud sound.

Clayton: Also, those of you in youth ministry, make sure OSHA would be pleased. Always go to church with a dB meter!

Bill: Mental connotations, associations, and memories—these are where much of the so-called moral dimension of music comes from. But if you say that such-and-such sound is always wrong, well, it may not mean the same thing to someone else, or when it’s heard at a different volume.

Q: What’s your policy for practice? Do you have a set time for practice? If I miss a rehearsal, do I get to sing on Sunday?
Clayton: Yes. I have music in the folder for weeks, and if they all know it, I just go through it once or twice. If they don’t know it, we’ll work on it for a number of weeks. Plus, we’re in a new day and age with technology and the ability to make or purchase rehearsal tracks for your musicians. (Singers are permitted to miss a small fraction of rehearsals.)

Q: What’s your process in creating a rehearsal track?
Clayton: Many times we’ll put the accompaniment on one side and their single part on the other, so they can start out with an even balance, then eventually get rid of their part and sing through it with only the accompaniment. This also brings up the matter of choir rehearsals: in our choir room, we use two pianos. One pianist plays the parts, and the other plays the accompaniment. If it’s really difficult music, then I have the pianos play the parts seated nearest to them (soprano/tenor on one side, bass/alto on the other). We learn our music far faster that way than anyone would with just one accompanist.

Q: Please speak of bad improvisation, which seems to be somewhat counter to the concept of corporate worship—like if the lead guitar player plays something that might be a personal expression on a good day, but that other people can’t relate to because there’s no sense of melody.
Bill: I want to clarify something I said earlier when I used the word “improvisation.” There’s the kind of improvisation where they go off and do a solo for a minute or two. I’m not referring to that. I’m referring to the fact that in contemporary music, you can have everyone play off of a lead sheet where you have the melody line written out (I hope you do that—it’s far more accurate that way), with the chords written over it. Then the bassist works out his notes from it, the keyboardist fills in the chords and improvises little figures that add accompanimental interest, and the singers can sing the melody and work out harmonies based on the notes on the page. They’re all reading the same thing. That’s
an improvised accompaniment, as opposed to an orchestration where every exact note, dynamic, and phrasing are already on the page.

Clayton: If someone gets too wild, I would say something and ask that it be reined in.

Bill: I don’t like long instrumental breaks in a worship medley because it often takes attention away from what the lyrics say, or puts attention on a “performer.”

Clayton: Anyway, guys, what a privilege. I hope it’s been helpful.