

PSALMS, HYMNS, AND SPIRITUAL SONGS

Striving for a Balanced Approach to Music in Worship

Clayton Erb

Minister of Worship & Music, Grace Community Church

Bill Brandenstein

Assistant Minister of Worship, Grace Community Church

I. MUSIC MINISTRY FOUNDATIONS (Erb)

A. BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

1. Biblical purposes for music in our worship services

a. To worship God through music.

Psalm 27:6 “And I will offer in His tent sacrifices with shouts of joy; I will sing, yes, I will sing praises to the Lord.”

b. To praise God through music.

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.”

c. To lift the emotions of the heart.

James 5:13 “Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praises.”

This can be important at the beginning of a service when not everyone has exercised sanctified attitudes in the effort to get to church. Music can help to focus the heart, and therefore may be most effective for all involved that most of it be placed prior to the sermon.

By the way, place “Ministry Opportunities” in the middle of your service if it pertains to the whole body and benefits the whole congregation as biblically important. Otherwise, avoid.

d. To learn Scripture and spiritual truths by singing.

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

e. To encourage one another with Biblical truth through music.

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.”

f. To instruct and convict by the scriptural texts of the songs.

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.”

- g. To introduce others to Jesus Christ through special concerts which can be an outreach to the unsaved.**

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.”

2. Spiritual music comes from spiritual people

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

- a. The Old Testament musicians were very skilled.**

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.

- b. Not only were they skillful, but there were many of them.**

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.”

- c. God used this combination of sanctified, skilled, and unified men in meaningful worship.**

2 Chronicles 5:12–14 And all the Levitical singers, Asaph, Heman, Jeduthun, and their sons and kinsmen, clothed in fine linen, with cymbals, harps, and lyres, standing east of the altar, and with them one hundred twenty priests blowing trumpets in unison when the trumpeters and the singers were to make themselves heard with one voice to praise and to glorify the Lord, and when they lifted up their voice accompanied by trumpets and cymbals and instruments of music, and when they praised the Lord saying, ‘He indeed is good for His lovingkindness is everlasting,’ then the house, the house of the Lord, was filled with a cloud, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled the house of God.”

- d. However, music offered from a wrong heart is unacceptable to God as worship.**

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.

Amos 6:5 records judgment sent by God 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.

2. How can we know that the music we use is worthy of being used for corporate worship?

Are the words doctrinally sound? Is the text biblical? Does it stimulate spiritual thought? Does it properly instruct? Does it inspire high spiritual ideals? Does the music fit the text? Is it excellent? Does it fit the need? Does it produce a wholesome response? Do harmful associations come to mind because of the musical style or the composer's name?

B. PRACTICAL MINISTRY FOUNDATIONS

1. Essential qualities in a church music ministry

a. Sensitivity to the Holy Spirit's direction

Soundness in Christian doctrine and its application in the personal, daily lives of the leadership and musicians must characterize the leadership.

b. Driven by Biblical content

This will be evidenced by the lyrics and appropriate musical styles, as well as the musicians' attitudes, appearance, and conduct. Over time, excellent biblical teaching will produce godly musicians who will, in turn, reflect that teaching in how they minister. The teaching of the senior pastor, and the spiritual commitment of the music pastor, largely determines the spiritual depth of the musicians.

c. Enhancement of, but never overshadowing, the teaching ministry.

Always be mindful that the teaching of the Word of God is central in the church.

d. Breadth in its range of musical content and style; always tasteful, but designed to speak to all in a diversified congregation.

e. Consistency in high quality so that the Lord is glorified, the heart is blessed, and the message is reinforced—not diminished—by the art that conveys it.

See that your piano is tuned!

Have an excellent sound operator who is well prepared!

Besides the fact that God is worthy of it, we should be as excellent as we possibly can because people are used to hearing excellence every time they put in a CD—even if it meant the artist had to record each phrase 8 to 10 times to get the desired result. Why should our church do less for God's glory than these other ministries, or put out less effort than secular performers?

f. Offering a broad range of opportunity for those whom the Lord has gifted with musical ability, using instrumentalists as well as vocalists.

- g. **Encouraging** those in the church who are not involved in the music ministry, but are musically gifted, to become involved.

2. **The ministry team: music personnel.**

Essential to the mechanics of developing a music ministry is having someone to be in charge—someone who is godly, a natural leader, and very musical. This individual usually is a paid staff member, but could be a volunteer. Others who help in the ministry may be either staff or volunteer.

a. **Minister of worship or music director (usually staff)**

1). Spiritual Qualifications

- a). Must have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.
- b). Spiritually sound in Christian doctrine (2 Timothy 2:14–19, 3:16–17).
- c). A life that demonstrates the character of an elder (1 Timothy 3:2–7).
- d). Sensitive to the Holy Spirit’s direction.
- e). Supportive of the pastor’s teaching ministry (not isolated in music alone).
- f). Demonstrates the Fruit of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; Galatians 5:22–23).
- g). Shepherds the musical “flock” through prayer, the Word, counseling, fellowship, hospital visits, phone calls, etc.

2). Personality Qualifications

- a). Enjoys working with people. *If you’re an excellent musician, you’ve spent a lot of time by yourself practicing and learning your craft. People skills might not be as good as they could be if too much time has been spent in isolation.*
- b). Good teaching skills and communication level.
- c). Ability to administer and organize. *Musicians are notoriously bad at this. I want to know what has been sung, when it was sung, and how we did it. Being well-organized means that I can tell you what we sang thirty years ago if you wanted to know.*
- d). Has a servant’s heart

3). Musical Qualifications

- a). Experience in choral and instrumental conducting
- b). Experience in planning and leading congregational worship
 - 1). Integrity in musical taste (pastor and music minister must have similar musical tastes)
 - 2). Additional abilities that would enhance the music minister’s ministry (but are not essential):
 - aa). Keyboard or instrumental proficiency
 - bb). Ability in arranging choral, orchestral, and instrumental music
 - cc). Vocal or instrumental soloist

b. Accompanist (piano, keyboard, organ).

If an accompanist is not available from within the church, check with local high schools and colleges for students or faculty who might be able to serve. Many times your best local musicians are born-again believers because so often they begin to learn music from having grown up in the church. Also, local piano teachers may be a resource—either directly, or because they can recommend others. Check with local chapters of the Piano Guild, MENC, AGO, and other educational groups...

- 1). Spiritual Qualifications: a life that demonstrates the character of a deacon/deaconess, (1 Tim. 3:8-13)
- 2). Personality Qualifications
 - a). Able to take direction; not self-willed
 - b). Flexible
 - c). Even-tempered
 - d). Dedicated
 - e). Punctual
- 3). Musical Qualifications
 - a). Proficiency on instrument
 - 1). Willingness to spend the necessary practice time
 - 2). Good sight-reader
 - 3). Capable of improvisation
 - 4). Capable of playing from lead sheets (chord charts)
 - b). Able to follow director, vocalist, instrumentalists, etc.
 - c). Has musical tastes similar to music minister and pastor
 - d). Has a good repertoire of church music

c. Additional personnel

- 1). Music secretary.
- 2). Other choir directors: Children's, Junior High, High School, College, Senior Adult, Handbells
- 3). Instrumental Director, *and instrumentalists! I do try them out to make sure they are able to play well. There's no point to making it difficult for you and the congregation by having musicians who can't do the job. It would be better to sing the congregation more than to have "special" music that is presented poorly. Also, there can be more reading of God's Word, the prayers of God's people, testimonies, a letter from a missionary; fill your services with excellence. It does not always have to be music. Congregational music, though, usually is excellent. However, encourage your people to sing out. There are many today who will just stand there, but not sing.*
- 4). Worship leader who puts together and rehearses worship teams.
- 5). Technical director—e.g. sound ministry, media preparation

d. Vocalists (lay musicians)

- 1). Let your needs be known (church bulletin, newsletter, telephone or

- announcement).
- 2). Set a time for an audition with the worship pastor and/or music committee.
 - a). Determine spiritual commitment
 - b). Keep records on all who audition
 - 1). Vocal quality
 - 2). Reading ability
 - 3). Pitch
 - 4). Vibrato
 - 5). Diction
 - 3). Note those of solo quality, or proficient to sing duets, in small ensembles, etc.
- e. Instrumentalists (lay musicians)**
- 1). Let your needs be known (church bulletin, newsletter, telephone, or announcement).
 - 2). Set a time for an audition with the worship pastor and/or music committee.
 - a). Determine spiritual commitment
 - b). Keep records on all who audition
 - 1). Proficiency on instrument
 - 2). Reading ability
 - 3). Pitch
 - 4). Tone quality
 - 3). Note solo or ensemble quality
- f. Some suggestions in handling those who do not qualify vocally or instrumentally**
- 1). Encourage additional study with a private teacher or at a college (community, private, etc.). When some proficiency is achieved, ask the individual to return and re-audition.
 - 2). Suggest another ministry in the church. For those who are tone-deaf or monotone, liken the situation to a person who is color-blind, but who wants to be an artist. Explain that in rare occasions the basic ability to see color or to hear pitch is missing. Therefore, it is wiser for the person to choose a ministry for which they have a natural talent.

II. A CALL TO RETURN TO THE BIBLICAL FUNCTION OF MUSIC IN THE CHURCH (Brandenstein)

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires, and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age (Titus 2:11–12).

INTRODUCTION

Today I come before you as one who desires to “earnestly contend for the faith,” and am less concerned about songs containing obvious error and more concerned about the subtle erosion of music’s *purpose*. I believe the *primary* problem isn’t with music, though we will consider it later as a secondary matter.¹ Also, I am not going to delve into the implications of music-for-worship in obviously lukewarm or dead churches. Our concern is with ministries claiming to be evangelical and Bible-believing.

A. THREE INFLUENCES THAT HAVE SHAPED THE CONTENT OF CORPORATE WORSHIP perhaps even more than the Word of God itself. These are quagmires that trap sacred music from wholly fulfilling its intended, biblical purpose.

1. Trendy Evangelicalism

- a. Symptoms:
 - 1). Marketing strategies
 - 2). Secular fads being “Christianized” which, in turn, are pandered to the church
 - 3). The seeker-friendly movement
 - 4). The Emergent movement
 - 5). Replacement of preaching with “real-life” pep talks intended to make us feel better about ourselves and live life “successfully”
- b. Result: these pragmatic methods not only rob the pulpit of profound preaching, but can sidetrack the content of music, leaving it emaciated in content. That is to say, the issues that undermine solid preaching usually undermine worship music as well.

2. Pop Culture

- a. Symptoms:
 - 1). Saturation with entertainment
 - 2). Technology facilitates this avalanche—such as the Internet, satellite radio and TV, mobile home theater, iPods, iPhones, and so forth
 - 3). Entertainment can infiltrate every moment and corner of our lives for no better reason than we *like* it
- b. Result: two worldviews are on a direct collision course with each other: that of God’s Word versus the secular worldview of individual autonomy and hedonism. Scripture directs us to live in submission to one another, to “in honor prefer one another,” to set our minds on things above and not on

earthly things, and to evangelize and disciple others. Do our music and entertainment choices compromise these values, or edify us and make us useful according to God's purposes?

3. The charismatic movement

- a. Symptoms
 - 1). The preeminent focus is on momentary experience
 - 2). The idea of having "entered the very presence of God" is a subjective feeling
 - 3). General emphasis on emotions overshadows what the lyrical content of the music says
 - 4). These influences have now "mainstreamed" into many non-Charismatic churches
- b. Results: this influence weakens the impact of God's Word because personal, subjective experiences and revelations take attention away from the revealed, timeless, and written Word.

B. THE PLACE OF MUSIC IN CORPORATE WORSHIP

1. **A Scriptural introduction to worship.** Worship is not just the song of the redeemed, but is the individual's whole life offered as a sweet savory sacrifice for the purpose of magnifying God, giving Him glory, and calling people to repentance. This is a central focus of scripture from its opening sections to the final chapter (cf. Romans 12:1-2).
2. **A faddish view of worship.** In many evangelical churches the "worship" time is equated with singing led by the "Worship Leader," the goal of which often is subjective, such as entering the "true presence of God."
 - a. Integrity Music corporate motto: "Helping people worldwide experience the manifest presence of God."²
 - 1). Evaluate: precisely what is meant by "manifest presence of God?"
Vague.
 - 2). The "experience" is not promoted by any direct use of God's Word, except the occasional snippet in a lyric.
 - 3). The main "tool" is pop-trendy rock music that whips up a crowd's energy but does little to teach and know about the One whom they've supposedly come to experience.
 - b. An online commenter, Jan, furnishes an example of a typical misunderstanding.

I find it very difficult to get into the Spirit while looking at the monitor and reading. The leaders just keep adding more and more new songs. I feel that I can never catch up, relax, and really enter the Holy of Holies where the true Presence Of God is! [sic] Isn't that why we worship? Isn't the goal of worship to lead the church into the presence of God?³

- 1). It is true that if we “draw near to God...He will draw near to you” (James 4:8).
- 2). Jan’s question is best answered by looking at New Testament examples of corporate worship, which follow.

3. Biblical examples of corporate worship.

- a. Acts 2:42 (four activities)—“the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread [communion] and to prayer.”
- b. The Great Commission establishes the other ordinance, baptism.
- c. 1 Timothy 4:13—public reading of scripture, exhortation, and teaching.
- d. 1 Corinthians 16:2—giving.
- e. James 5:16—“confess your sins to one another.”
- f. 1 Corinthians 14:15—singing with both the spirit and the mind.
- g. 1 Corinthians 14:26—each person has a psalm.

1 Corinthians 14 clearly establishes that edification is the primary goal of corporate worship—not emotional stimulation. The pleasure we personally receive from musical participation—though there’s nothing intrinsically wrong with such enjoyment—is simply not in view. However, is the point to have “a great time,” or to be edified and equipped? Or, in the words of Jan, the online commenter, is the goal of worship to lead people into the true Holy of Holies? Well, no, not particularly.

In other words, associating music as the main worship activity, or worse, equating music and worship, ignores most of what scripture shows is to happen when the church gathers. The first priority, stated clearly in 1 Corinthians 14, is that we edify one another, and most of the biblical examples of activities that accomplish this are non-musical. There is a conspicuous absence of positive examples of someone getting some sort of “experience” out of it. Furthermore, as we will see in the following sections, music can be used as an offering of worship, but it must not be elevated beyond what it really is: a tool. The place of music in corporate worship: to facilitate praise and scriptural edification.

C. NEW TESTAMENT WORSHIP MUSIC

1. Some passing musical references

- a. Instruments in Heaven
 - 1). Trumpet blasts heralding judgment (Revelation 8–11)
 - 2). Harps of the 24 elders (Revelation 5:8)
 - 3). “Harps of God” belonging to those who will be victorious over the Beast (Revelation 15:2)
- d. Instruments in 1 Corinthians
 - 1). Clanging cymbal (13:1)
 - 2). Flute, harp, bugle (14:7–8)

2. Hymns in the new testament. What distinguishes a portion of scripture as a

hymn? As befitting a poetic text, there will be a change in the rhythm of the phrases, the vocabulary, sentence structure, and even theme.

- a. Examples of singing
 - 1). The Last Supper. The Lord engaged in the singing of a hymn before departing for the Mount of Olives (Matthew 26:30, Mark 14:26).
 - 2). Hymns in prison. Paul and Silas sang “hymns of praise to God” (Acts 16:25).
- b. Examples of scriptural passages that are likely hymns
 - 1). John 1:1–14
 - 2). Colossians 1:15–20
 - 3). Philippians 2:6–11
 - 4). 1 Timothy 1:17
 - 5). 1 Timothy 3:16
 - 6). 1 Timothy 6:15–16
 - 7). 2 Timothy 2:11–13
 - 8). Revelation 4:8, 11
 - 9). Revelation 5:9–13
 - 10). Revelation 11:17–18
 - 11). Revelation 12:10–12
 - 12). Revelation 15:3–4
 - 13). Examples of *canticles*: the songs of Mary and Zacharias in Luke 2

3. Characteristics of new testament hymns. Do our song lyrics resemble those in scripture in any way?

- a. The texts all reveal something about the nature or work of God, or both
- b. Purpose: praise to God and instruction to singers
- c. Disposition: declamatory
- d. Content: luxuriantly theological
- e. Craftsmanship: high, as seen in poetic rhythm and rich vocabulary
- f. Repetition: used in insignificant amounts, if at all
- g. Perspective: objective propositional truth with no first-person statements

4. Characteristics of most current praise & worship music. These characteristics aren't necessarily “all wrong, all of the time,” but when this typifies the *majority* of the music—often the case—the biblical purposes and examples are thwarted.

- a. Praise is encouraged while little is stated of why God is to be praised (and in some cases, God's name is avoided altogether)
- b. Purpose: the praise of the moment, not learning
- c. Disposition: testimonial
- d. Content: minimal theology or scripture
- e. Craftsmanship: few lyrics would have any artistic merit as poetry apart from the tunes by which they are known
- f. Repetition: rampant
- g. Perspective: most frequently subjective, often first-person

5. The commands for music.

- a. Ephesians 5:15–21
 - 1). It is God’s will that believers are filled with the Holy Spirit
 - 2). One response is to “speak” in “psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs” (5:19)
 - 3). Note the emphasis placed on the communicative aspect
 - 4). Psalms: lyrics recorded for us in scripture, mainly Israel’s songbook. Sub-genres include doctrinal, personal, didactic, antiphonal, prophetic, imprecatory, confessional, praise, etc.
 - 5). Hymns: biblically-infused texts of praise that focus directly on the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ from a factual perspective.
 - 6). Spiritual songs: probably songs of personal testimony, recounting the work of God in our lives
 - 7). Two of these genres are from an objective perspective, and one subjective
- b. Colossians 3:14–17
 - 1). Context: letting “the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom,” through which also love, unity, peace, and thankfulness are manifest in the Christian’s life (3:14–16)
 - 2). Emphasis on content: it’s the *Word* that indwells with all *wisdom*; then the command follows to *teach* and *admonish*
 - 3). The tools for the teaching and admonishment are psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs
 - 4). Therefore, the spirit-filled Christian is a singing person. The repertoire is songs with lyrics rich in scriptural truth.
- c. Observations
 - 1). These verses are essentially saying the same thing
 - 2). As applied to corporate worship: preaching and music are to be redundantly focused on and saturated in the Word, thereby reinforcing one another
 - 3). Compare how this functions in the church to Deuteronomy 11:18–21 for Israel

These commands raise some hard questions: do the songs we use in church and dwell on at other times teach anything of significance? Do the lyrics enable us to meditate on a diversity of spiritual truths throughout the week? Are we worshipping only in spirit by stirring mostly just emotions, or is the mind engaged as well as we worship both in spirit and in truth (John 4:24)? Do we follow Paul’s example in Acts 20:27 of declaring to our flock the whole counsel of God? Should our music do any less?

A typical song lyric from a charismatic perspective would be a prayer for more of the Spirit to rain down, for more of God’s power to be poured out while the singing is going on.⁴ There’s a deep irony here. If we faithfully plumb the depths of what scripture says about music, faithfully apply it to our services, and faithfully model what lives look like to have music carry God’s Word into every corner of our day and week and life, then there will be

power. God's Word is unendingly powerful (cf. Hebrews 4:12). If we want to see more of God's power, we must unleash the Word by plumbing its depths in the pulpit, and then in our music as well. Exposing our flocks to such spiritual riches allows the music to be an agent for the mind's transformation all week long (Romans 12:1–2).

D. THE SOUNDS OF MUSIC

- 1. The language of music—king's English or gutter talk?**
 - a. What people are exposed to directly determines which cultural “language” they understand—or don't relate to. Typically, the main influence is pop culture.
 - b. The artistic language of “traditional” and much “contemporary” music simply is not the same.
 - c. Using music that is perceived as dignified and majestic is appropriate to the worship of a God who is dignified and majestic.
 - d. The cultural choice isn't about how many players you have but rather, concerns how you make use of the resources you *do* have.
 - e. The church is not to be a museum or showcase of musical culture, or to seek art for art's sake, but to furnish a fittingly profound accompaniment to profound lyrics as part of the unceasing quest for edification.

- 2. The skill factor.** Much of our musical “art” today compositionally is neither highly skilled nor lasting.
 - a. The commands to speak psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs apply to all believers without regard to ability or training.
 - b. This is a reversal from the Levitical system of Israel, whose musicians were highly trained and skilled, and served on behalf of the people.
 - c. The God of the Old Testament is the same God that we still serve today. If He saw excellence and skill as befitting His majestic name and glory then, should we do any less now if we have the ability?
 - d. Examples of skillfulness.
 - 1). Bezalel and his fellow craftsmen (Exodus 31, 36–38)
 - 2). Chenaniah (1 Chronicles 15:22)
 - 3). Commanded in Psalms 33 and 47
 - e. Christians pursuing God's glory should seek excellence (1 Corinthians 10:31).

E. CONCLUSION

- Entertainment has blinded us to the profound role music is to play in the life of the Spirit-filled Christian.
- The pastor is the architect of the culture of the local church, first by how committed he is to teaching the whole counsel of God and the manner in

which he presents it, and second, by what sort of worship music is a fitting accompaniment to his quest.

- In short, God expects us to use music that makes us *think*. What most people experience today in the musical realm is merely for entertainment, but such is contrary to God's purposes for music. Music that functions according to the biblical example will be redundant in content to the preaching. It serves an equipping purpose, not just one of praise or celebration. If the Word is taught profoundly, the flock also will hunger for music that reinforces these truths. They go hand-in-hand. The scriptural commands call us back to using more lyrics that contain objective, didactic truth.

END NOTES

1. This is not a "traditional vs. contemporary" discussion, or "hymns are better than choruses" rant. My take on it is that there is good contemporary music and bad contemporary music, just as there is good traditional music and bad traditional music. Time helps to sift out the musical value, and scripture helps us sort out the lyrical value.
2. Stackhouse, John G., Jr., "Memo to Worship Bands," *Christianity Today* online, February 2, 2009. <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2009/february/14.50.html>. "Jan," writing in comments thread at: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/comments/allreviews.html?id=72863> on February 11, 2009, 2:25 PM.
3. This motto is printed on nearly every product produced by Integrity Music, and can also be seen at www.integritymusic.com under the "About Us" heading.
4. For an insightful comparison of this sort of approach with *paganism*, see Dickson, John, "Worship and the Didgeridoo," *The Briefing* No. 173 (February, 1996), available online at <http://matthiasmedia.com.au/briefing/library/2072>.

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music@gracechurch.org