

Biblical Principles of Music in Worship

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**I should be sorry, my lord, if I have only succeeded
in entertaining them; I wished to make them better.**

G.F. Handel to Lord Kinnoull after
the first London performance of *Messiah*

Worship is not an insignificant subject. If we are correct that the chief end (purpose) of man is, as the Westminster Shorter Catechism proposes, "to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever," then worship—glorifying God—certainly matters. And worship is not a do-it-yourself project or a designer-label product. The Word of God defines and delimits worship, and while there is certainly some freedom in the cultural style of worship, worship can never be regarded as an anything-goes free-for-all. I herein present four propositions which I regard as essential biblical principles of worship music.

Proposition #1: Worship is our appropriate response to God's **revelation** of His own character and works, which includes participation in corporate preaching, prayer, praise, giving, and service.

The OT (Hebrew) word translated "worship" literally means "to bow down to someone in acknowledgment of his superiority and one's own relative inferiority." It is used in this literal sense of David bowing to Saul (1 Sam. 24:8) and Ruth bowing to Boaz (Ruth 2:10). Worship is a response to God's revelation of His character (Exod. 34:6-8) or works (past [cf. Luke 5:8; Rev. 5:8] or promised [2 Chr. 20:18]). Without revelation it is impossible to worship, for though God's existence and power should be manifest to all (Rom. 1), His redemptive works and righteous demands are known only through His revelation to us which is now contained in the Scriptures, by common confession our sole standard for faith and practice. Praise, thanksgiving, confession, prayer, singing, giving, and the proclamation of God's Word are all appropriate elements of a worship service. In other words, the sermon and the offering are as much a part of "worship" as music. Ultimately worship encompasses every act of obedience in our daily walk of faith, though this is not normally what we mean when we refer to "worship."

Proposition #2: The primary purpose of worship music is the mutual teaching of **truth**.

In Colossians 3:16 Paul clearly admonishes us: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord." Compare Eph. 5:19. These are the only two NT passages which directly address the issue of music for the NT church. Since both of these texts place the purpose of congregational music in instruction, all other purposes, such as emotional expression or entertainment, must be subsidiary. The reference to singing in 1 Corinthians 14:15 seems to support this understanding, for there Paul is insisting that singing be comprehensible as well as "spiritual" (= emotional?). The OT confirms this picture. God is not pictured in the OT as an egomaniac who needs our praise, but as One who desires public praise as an instrument to bring the unbelieving world to faith (Psa. 67) and to build up the faith of the downcast (Psa. 22:22-26). The oft-repeated suggestion that God is the "audience" of our worship is only partly true.

According to the biblical picture of worship, then, if there is no *revelation*, no *truth-content*, **there is no worship**. Period. Consequently, lyrics which are unbiblical, frivolous, or disrespectful must not constitute any part of biblical worship. Lyrics which lack substantial, meaningful content must be used sparingly if at all and with the greatest caution. Any musical accompaniment which impedes congregational participation or understanding is unacceptable, including excessive volume. The excessive repetition of lines with little content aimed at manipulating emotions would fall under the same stricture. Psalm 136 is not proof, as some suppose, that repetition is, per se, acceptable. While the second line of each couplet in Psalm 136 is the same, the first lines of each couplet detail God's goodness in creation and history. And very few of the psalms even come close to this degree of repetition. This is far different than some modern songs which use only three or four lines of poetry or a verse or two of Scripture plucked out of context. Purpose is significant as well. Some worship leaders have expressly stated that their choice of simple lyrics, repetition, instrumentation, etc, are designed to appeal to everyone and send everyone home "uplifted" and "encouraged"—i.e., to give the people an emotional euphoria. (Emotions ranging from sorrow for sin to jubilation at God's goodness will often be the natural *result* of worship, but an emotional "high" or euphoria is not the *aim* of

worship.) This is not to say that there is no place for instrumental music or light, energetic choruses, but these must always be secondary. Style, taste, or instrumentation is NOT the issue; content is. Since worship is rooted in revelation and targets teaching, a lack of truth results in a lack of worship. Might we at times be offending God with what we call worship (Isa. 1; Psa.50)?

Proposition #3: The lyrics of music selections for congregational worship have evidenced a regrettable lack of discernment in recent days.

Consider the song we've used recently which suggests "Come, just as you are, to worship." Certainly we can come to God boldly (Heb. 4:16). But we are never told that we can come carelessly, thoughtlessly, flippantly or casually. The very same NT writer says, "having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus...let us draw near *with a true heart*" (10:19-22; emphasis added). This writer goes on to remind his readers of the certainty of judgment for those who continue to sin willfully (10:26-31) and later urges his readers, "let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. For our God is a consuming fire [=Deut. 4:24]" (12:28-29). The OT lays down humility and purity (achieved through obedience and atonement) as absolute requirements for worship (Psalms 15 and 24). The expression "come as you are" in English usually connotes a casual disregard for one's state or appearance, an openness to sloppiness. The song "Just As I Am" certainly cannot be cited in support of the lyrics at issue. The song "Just As I Am" clearly suggests coming to God for forgiveness in humble acknowledgment of personal inadequacy (i.e., sinfulness) on the basis of Christ's atonement.

The same song which suggests that we "come as we are" later suggests that though every knee will someday bow to Jesus' authority, there is a "*greater* treasure for those who choose You now" [emphasis added]. "Greater" is a comparative adjective implying there will be a reward for those who will someday be forced to bow the knee before Christ, but a greater reward for those who choose Him now. There will be no reward for those who reject Jesus in this life. There is no second chance at the Judgment Seat. This theology seems to support a universalistic view of the atonement which is at odds with Scripture. Or perhaps the writer merely means that the sooner we choose Him in this life the greater our reward. While accepting Christ sooner rather than later provides greater *opportunity* for service (and hence reward), it does not assure greater reward, for our reward will be based on our service, not on our opportunities. Whether this is simply sloppy song-writing or determined heresy, I do not know the writer's heart, but the lyrics are at best ambiguous.

Another song with a seemingly universalistic message is "Shout to the North" by Martin Smith. The song suggests that "Jesus is Savior to all." Jesus' work on the cross provides the potential of salvation FOR all (i.e., unlimited atonement), but not all regard Him as Savior. When I say that someone "has been a father to me," I mean that he has functioned in that role and I recognize it. Jesus is, indeed, "Lord of heaven and earth" whether we recognize Him to be or not, but He is not Savior *to* all.¹ This particular song has numerous other problems which make it impossible to sing in any congregation which treasures biblical truth.²

Sometimes a song may simply have an incomplete message. We have sung a song drawn directly from Acts 4:12, "there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." The problem is that the song nowhere contains the name that the context of Acts states so clearly: "Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead" (4:10). Will an unbeliever in the service learn from this song? Not unless it is clearly coupled with either other music or an explanation which completes the message. The same could be said of other songs which merely say, "Praise the Lord, Praise the Lord, Hallelujah, Praise the Lord" and variations thereof. Or songs whose lyrics are drawn solely from the Psalms—I have never yet seen Jesus explicitly named in the

¹ In Luke 2:11 "unto you" (KJV) certainly does not mean the same as the modern "to you," but represents the Gk dative pronoun ὑμῖν, which should be translated today "for you" as in the NASB. In 1 Tim. 4:10, "the living God, who is the Savior of all men" (NASB), the genitive is ambiguous, but carefully qualified by the following phrase, "especially of believers," assuring an understanding that "of all men" means that salvation was provided for, is sufficient for, all men but applies to those who believe. Tit. 2:11 might also be suggested: "bringing salvation to all men" (NASB). Is this saying any more than that salvation is offered to all? Even if we are dissecting the lyrics a little too fine here, there are other issues involved in this particular song.

² In the first verse it says, "You are strong when you feel weak./ In your brokenness complete." I would suggest that there is a significant difference between being weak and feeling weak, and that neither being nor feeling weak automatically assures strength. It is true that God's strength may be manifested through/despite our weakness, but we are not strong merely because we feel weak. In the third verse it says "Rise up church with broken wings./...By His grace again we'll fly." Aside from the fact that the second and third lines of this verse seem to have nothing to do with the first and last lines, I find the imagery of the church as weak, broken, and impotent as offensive. Jesus said that HE would build HIS church and not even the rulers ("gates") of hell could overcome it. While individual congregations are chastised (Rev. 1-3), I do not find the church described as a broken-winged bird in the NT. The emphasis on healing in verses two and three makes me suspicious that the song comes out of Charismatic theology. The bridge section of the song, like so many songs that we sing, has a "little piggy" problem—"we, we, we."

Psalms, not even in the Messianic prophecies given there. These songs may make an appropriate call to worship or a response to revelation, but fail the content test *on their own*, that is, the church cannot live on a steady diet of such songs alone. Such songs often talk about worship ("Let us worship...") but on their own they are not worship but only a call to worship. Like oatmeal, such choruses are warm and mushy—and they have their place—but they do not constitute a balanced diet.

Other songs are not coherent, mixing ideas—or merely patching together titles or names of God—in a random and meaningless way. Such songs fail the content test. Yet other songs have a serious "I" problem or a "little piggy" problem ("we, we, we, all the way home"). Certainly there is a place in our music for proclaiming our wretchedness ("I once was lost, but now am found") or weakness ("We are weak, but He is strong") or our desire to serve the Lord ("I'll go where You want Me to go, dear Lord"), but some songs are so filled with "I will" statements that they become reckless and boastful. Such songs are of dubious worth.

Though I have chosen some of the newer, more popular songs for these examples, I do not mean to suggest that we simply need to sing only old songs which contain a version of the King's English that is no longer comprehensible. Some of our old hymns need to be updated or explained! Our people probably need to be reminded occasionally what an "Ebenezer" is. The heretical universalism of Henry van Dyke's "Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee" is widely known (and this hymn is #1 in the hymnal currently in use in the church I attend!). And there are also some incredibly good "new" songs coming out—Twila Paris's "Lamb of God" and Stuart Townsend's "How Great the Father's Love for Us" both bring me to tears almost every time I sing them (And if our worship leaders knew this, they would undoubtedly ban them forever. Since almost half of the psalms are laments, why should worship music be aimed solely at expressing happiness? Do we harm the hurting by denying we feel pain? Do we harm ourselves by leaving no place for crying out to the Lord in pain and confusion and even doubt?).

There is no denying that there will be some disagreement on some specifics. "The little Lord Jesus, no crying He makes" is almost certainly inaccurate if it means that Jesus never cried as a baby, though the writer may merely be picturing a moment when all was still and silent. "Emptied Himself of all but love," in an otherwise exquisite hymn, must be taken as poetic exaggeration at best, for the Son of God did not become less than God in becoming the Son of Man. Nevertheless, some songs contain such gross inaccuracies or serious doctrinal errors that they are irredeemable and we must reject them as unbiblical. Some, indeed, may suggest that I've misunderstood the songs that I've used as examples above. Yet if the lyrics of some songs are so ambiguous or open to misunderstanding, why should we be singing them when we can sing songs that clearly and forth-rightly teach God's truth? If the purpose of music in worship is didactic, let's choose songs that "didact"!

Proposition #4: The pastor is responsible to God for the spiritual oversight of the church, its people, and its activities, and is accountable immediately to the congregation and ultimately to God for the execution of his duties. Particularly within his purview is the teaching of correct doctrine.

We are admonished to select pastors who are "able to teach" (1 Tim. 3:2) and deacons who are "holding the mystery of the faith with a pure conscience" (3:9). Pastors must shepherd God's flock, overseeing the spiritual needs of the people and providing an example to them (1 Pet. 5:2-4). They are responsible for ensuring sound doctrine in the church: "Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching" (2 Tim. 4:2). Each must be known as one "holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict" (Titus 1:9). Pastors must be "able to teach," "correcting those who are in opposition" (2 Tim. 2:24-25; cf. 2:14; 1 Tim. 4:6, 11). They must "Take heed to...the doctrine" (1 Tim. 4:16). The pastors exercise authority over the congregation (1 Tim. 3:5; 5:17; Heb. 13:17; 1 Pet. 5:5) but are accountable to it as well (Col. 4:17). Since the primary purpose of worship music is teaching and the pastor is charged with ensuring sound teaching, the primary responsibility for ensuring that the worship music is biblical falls squarely on the shoulders of the pastor.