

Music and Worship Ministries: Seeking a Godly Balance

We are committed to striving for worship that pleases God both in our corporate worship services as well as our private times of adoration. Worship should be a perpetual experience of the heart whereby God is ascribed supreme worth! It is the cultivation of a moment-by-moment God-consciousness so that in all things we demonstrate the ultimate preeminence of almighty God. The very heart of worship is expressed in Psalm 27:4-6, "One thing I have asked from the Lord, that I shall seek: That I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life; To behold the beauty of the Lord, and to meditate in His temple. For in the day of trouble He will conceal me in His tabernacle; In the secret place of His tent He will hide me; He will lift me up on a rock. And now my head will be lifted up above my enemies around me; And I will offer in His tent sacrifices with shouts of joy; I will sing, yes, I will sing praises to the Lord."

True worship from the heart results, among other things, in a bursting forth of praise through music and song. God Himself seeks true worshippers who offer up adoration and exultation which is grounded in His self-revelation and deep faith and conviction (John 4:24). Worshipping "in spirit" is that which engages the heart of a person. True worship flows from the inner dimension of a man and involves the intellect, the emotions, and the will as the following texts illustrate:

- Psalm 45:1 - "***My heart overflows with a good theme***"
- Psalm 103:1 - "***Bless the Lord, oh my soul, and all that is within me bless His holy name***"
- Psalm 51:17 - "***The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise***"
- Romans 1:9 - "***...God, whom I serve [lit. 'worship'] in my spirit***"

Music is not only an outflow of the new song of redemption which has transformed the heart, it is a tool God commands us to use for giving corporate expression to the praises of His people when they gather in His name.

- We ascribe supreme worth to God through music (Psalm 27:6/150:3-4).
- The emotions of the heart are lifted Godward through music (James 5:13).
- The truths of Scripture are learned through music (Psalm 32:7-8; Ephesians 5:18- 19; the entire Psalter; Isaiah 55:11-12).
- The lost can be reached through music (Psalm 40:3).

Music is not an end in itself. Rather, it enhances our worship of God beyond that of the spoken word alone (Psalm 147:1) and enriches our convictions with the wonder and majesty of God-given musical expression.

A. PRESUPPOSITIONS UNDERLYING MUSIC AND WORSHIP AT CBC

1. **The Authority of Scripture.** Foundational to substantive corporate worship is pastoral leadership that is committed to teaching the whole counsel of God, and instruction that guards the flock against intrusions such as superficial fads, subjectivism, post-modernism, and every wind of false doctrine that would otherwise undermine the Bible and the Reformation principle of *Sola Scriptura*.

2. **Whole-life worship.** God's intention is that worship be a whole-life focus (Romans 12:1), since in all of life "we live and move and have our being" in Him (Acts 17:28). The Father doesn't seek merely Sunday worshippers but those who worship Him "in spirit and in truth" (John 4:23-24) everyday.

3. **Music and Scripture is a God-ordained marriage.** It is God who ordained the marriage between music and His Word for the church when He spoke through the Apostle Paul, commanding us to speak to one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs (Ephesians 5:18-19, Colossians 3:16). Singing God's praises is a future heavenly activity as well (Revelation 5:9), and was a central part of Israel's worship (e.g. the Psalms, and 1 Chronicles 15:16-22).

B. SIX GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR THE MUSIC AND WORSHIP MINISTRY

1. **Promote content-driven worship.** Colossians 3:16 sets forth two functions for music: "teaching and admonishing", and worship—singing to God out of gratitude. Both are predicated on one crucial priority, that the Spirit-controlled believer is richly indwelt by the "word of Christ." The greatest value of music used in worship generally should be found in what it *says*. What is at stake here—having a mind filled with Scripture and knowledge of the truth—is not only corporate worship, but a God-pleasing lifestyle (see Psalm 16:7, Romans 12:2, 1 Corinthians 14:15, Ephesians 4:23, Philippians 1:9, and Colossians 3:2). This upholds the standard of worshipping "in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24). Such is the essence of whole-life worship. Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16 indicate that music of differing content should be used in communicating the Word of God within the Body. While the difference between "psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs" may be difficult to distinguish with technical definitions, we believe that "psalms" generally refers to the psalms and canticles in the Bible, "hymns" most probably refers to ancient songs of praise written to teach more theological content in their poetry and verse, and "spiritual songs" are likely the varied and broad songs composed for praise, adoration, and to express the testimony of a heart transformed by Christ.

2. **Do everything for edification.** In the context of spiritual gifts, 1 Corinthians 14 speaks to several issues regarding corporate worship, two of which have significant implications for music. The first is in verse 26, "Let all things be done for edification." When this principle is applied to the area of music, 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 it more readily helps to edify. Practically speaking, the emphasis in corporate worship should not be upon individual musical preferences, nor upon what someone desires to *get* (emotions, sensations, what they *like* to hear, and so forth) from the experience. Rather, **corporate** worship should focus on what a person comes to *give* (exaltation of Christ and spiritual service to the church). Second, 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 and the unsaved to think that the church body is lacking in sound judgment or outright senseless (v. 23). Upholding the clarion purpose of corporate edification is a good safeguard against such distractions.

3. Avoid confusing associations with the world (define what is appropriate).

Musical preferences are often sharply divided along generational or even church denominational lines. However, it would be wrong to elevate personal preference or tradition to the level of scriptural authority, for that would be to "exceed what is written" (1 Corinthians 4:6). Moreover, Scripture does not condemn a particular music style. We must be careful not to equate our preferences with the principles of God's word. Doing so fosters legalism, a danger that Jesus denounced in Mark 7:6-13.

This is not to say, however, that the style of the music doesn't matter at all, nor dare we say that music is entirely "neutral." By God's design, music utilizes thought, emotion, meaning, and has a unique and potent ability to influence by learned association (see Philippians 4:8-9, Romans 12:2). There are even undeniable physiological responses to sound (i.e. David soothing Saul with music). Consequently, music can have profoundly strong meaning in the mind of a hearer, which has the power to motivate thought patterns and even behaviors. As a basic framework, the worship of God should at the very least reflect His transcendence, majesty, and the redemptive wonder and glory of Jesus Christ. All such truths evoke a combination of dispositions such as reverence, celebration, humility, formality, and exultant joy. Music in the corporate setting should inspire the loftiest biblical ideals, and it should reflect a style that never confuses or diminishes the above dispositions. Establishing clear distinctions requires biblical clarity, maturity, and prayerful discernment. Godly leadership, sound & powerful preaching, and a selfless music team will ensure discernment where latitude is permitted. Defining what is appropriate will also vary according to the musicians God has brought to the local church, the makeup of the congregation, and its geographical location. Stylistic variations may occur between the main services of the church and other gatherings or small groups because of different ages and ministry emphasis. It is God who brings His people together, saving and gathering whomever He chooses. With the variety of backgrounds and traditions potentially converging in one church, it is wise to prepare corporate worship music that reflects a *moderate middle* between the outer reaches of the congregation's demographics. This reflects the natural make-up of the community

from which the church draws, and prevents any approach that caters to the extremes of opposing tastes and traditions.

It should be remembered that where various personal preferences in musical taste exist, an attitude of love, patience, mutual deference, and trust in God must prevail. Young and old in the family of God may personally indulge their preferred styles and tastes, but God calls us *together* for *corporate* worship in His Name.

4. Do not offend your brother or sister. This principle speaks to the same issue, but deals with our response to other believers rather than the culture. How has the Lord gifted the congregation? Can some play hymns skillfully? They should. Can others form a proficient praise band? They should. But again, all must be done to edify. It is wrong to be insensitive or careless around others who are easily confused and prone to follow someone else's conscience to their own harm. We must be thoughtful so as not to "put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way" (Romans 14:13, 15).

Furthermore, we must be careful not to "push the envelope" of a congregation's sensibilities with every new trend and sound proffered by those claiming to be on the cutting edge of worship. Changes in body life may be healthy to consider, but "trendiness" quickly leads to superficial and shallow moorings, driving an unnecessary wedge between the freshness of the new and the long-term strength of the old. God's balance is always "fresh" and contemporary, yet never detached from the anchor of a godly heritage. Maturity must prevail in these matters. Styles and preferences may have relevance, but should not become such a strong priority as to negate the principle of "...preferring one another" (Romans 12:10). And the music preferences of one person should not be allowed to put a stranglehold on *true* ministry.

Godly leadership will safeguard the quest for balance, and in the end the greater priority is to have a servant-hearted concern about the Lord's work and His body. Jesus' words to the apostles should be our moniker of ministry: "If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all" (Mark 9:35).

5. Show reverence in corporate worship. Respect, awe, and honor are to be the marks of our lifestyle and worship attitudes (Hebrews 12:28-29). Two of the great worship scenes in Scripture (Isaiah 6, Revelation 5) strongly emphasize God's holiness and loftiness. Not only should our worship reflect this, it should also be carefully conceived so as not to "dumb down" the worship of God.

6. 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?

C. FOUR WEAKNESSES TO AVOID IN THE MUSIC AND WORSHIP MINISTRY

1. **Lyrics of dubious quality.** A large number of the great classic hymns were not written by musicians, but theologians. Yet, biblically illiterate and experience-driven theology is now widespread in much of today's congregational, choral, and solo music, even from publishers that have traditionally catered to a more biblically critical constituency. Other lyrics are so generic in content so as to say very little that is meaningful or God-ward. Still other lyrics tend to express the Christian life in such romantic terms that it is unclear who is being adored, God or one's girlfriend. We must evaluate the content of every lyric used in our services. Is everything in a song doctrinally sound? Does it communicate the truth *in the way God intended*? Does it contain a small or significant amount of truth? For example, many contemporary songwriters repeatedly touch on key biblical truths but overlook other central doctrinal themes. Singing only praises from psalm texts would be biblical, yet incomplete. Diligently strive for a more comprehensive exposure to "the whole counsel of God". Learn to recognize weak theology disguised as artistic expression.

2. **Emotion-driven worship instead of emotion-filled worship.** True biblical worship is to involve the emotions (for example, Psalm 33:1, 100:1-2), and Scripture teaches that emotions are to follow in response to biblical truth. However, corporate worship is not to be ecstatic for the sake of ecstasy or divorced from the use of the intellect---where *emotions* overshadow the truth and *become* the experience. This makes the "worship experience" the consuming focus to the detriment of equipping for whole-life worship. In other words, many churches are now worshipping the emotions of "worship" rather than God because people are *addicted* to the experience. This emotionalism is reflected in the lyrics of an ever-increasing quantity of contemporary songs. It isn't hard to find a lot more froth than substance in Christian bookstores because publishers and retailers market what people will buy, as opposed to what is necessarily good for us. So too, some of the worship music today is musical and emotionally stirring, but little else. We must be concerned with the depths of God where real growth is produced, rather than the emotional candy that tastes great, yet offers no nourishment for the soul.

3. **Catering to cultural trends and pragmatic interests.** A ministry with a welcoming environment is certainly more attractive than one without "life and passion", but we must avoid turning evangelistic fervor into tampering with God's design for the gathering of His people. We gather on the Lord's Day primarily to praise God, to pray, to share spiritual resources ("fellowship"), to edify one another, to be equipped by doctrinal teaching, to meet needs, and to prepare for evangelism through the week. Ephesians 4:11-16 gives us a clear treatise on church growth, with an emphasis on individual spiritual gifts and maturity in the truth. Our churches should welcome unbelievers to "eavesdrop" on our Sunday activities that they might hear the gospel, but we must not turn the main Sunday service, or its music, into a pragmatically-determined strategy

for attracting the lost. The unsaved come to salvation by the supernatural regenerating work of God through the Word alone (1 Corinthians 1:21, Romans 10:17). The music and praise of our worship should *not* be designed around the preferences of curious non-believers or what is culturally appealing to the masses. Our worship should be something strange and attractive to the soft-hearted, and something uncomfortable and detestable to the hardened.

4. Form over Substance. Music should be offered with an attention to excellence (Ps. 33:3). Musicians and singers should strive to honor God with the best of their talents and spiritual maturity. Artistic excellence, however, without godly maturity leads to pretentiousness and shallow praise. Conversely, musicianship that is carelessly offered and poorly rehearsed can dishonor the Lord – contributing to distraction and lack of passion. This is no less important than excellent preparation in the preaching of God’s Word or any other ministry gift and talent offered in the church. In addition, we should never allow the healthy routine of ministry forms to rule over the need for fresh change. Traditions connect us to the richness of Christian heritage while change prevents us from becoming stagnant and self-protective. Both are vital to excellence, balance, and stability in the ministry.

D. PRACTICAL TIPS FOR THE “BLENDED WORSHIP SERVICE

1. Blend the timeless and contemporary into one service. Essential to cultivating good balance is blending classic/traditional music with the best of the contemporary music being written today. Of course, this requires a degree of deference from contemporary-minded musicians toward the traditional, and from classic-minded musicians toward the contemporary. When a broad range of styles is tastefully harmonized in one service – and if your musicians are mature! – the body benefits from each aspect of the spectrum represented by the demographics of the fellowship. If each group must demand their own genre of music, the end result will be two churches meeting at different times in the same building.

2. Teach the importance of historical hymnology.

a. Benefits of using hymns from the past.

1) Thrilling Theology – The best hymns of past generations reflect a theological depth and doctrinal precision unparalleled by many contemporary offerings.

2) They foster an appreciation for the legacy of godliness passed on through previous generations.

3) Creates a bridge between the older and younger generations in the body.

4) Many hymns of the past have a timeless connection with the unbelieving western cultures (“How great Thou Art,” “Amazing Grace,” etc.).

b. Suggestions regarding their use.

1) Not every hymn of the past sounds good when modernized. It’s wonderful when an excellent new melody or arrangement is written for an old classic, but some older works are timeless as originally penned. At times, allow hymns – presented with excellence, or course – to stand on their own ground.

2) Some instruments, depending on their use, may need to be employed for a more classic and traditional sound.

3) Should an older hymn be stylized in a contemporary manner, occasionally include a traditional verse or chorus to preserve a bridge to the older generation.

c. Disadvantages of eliminating older hymns.

1) Profound lyrics that rehearse theology can be more difficult to find in contemporary praise and worship music.

2) A completely contemporary church tends not to use its classically trained musicians and therefore ends up losing them.

3. Use good contemporary music.

a. Benefits of using contemporary hymns and praise music.

1) Many modern “spiritual songs” consist of direct praise or prayers to God.

2) Allows the lyrical and compositional gifts and talents of today’s generation to be used in the worship of God’s people.

3) Creates a bridge from the older saints to the younger.

4) Challenges new generations to think deeply and more carefully about theology

b. Evaluating contemporary hymns, praise choruses, and spiritual songs.

1) Music should focus upon the majesty of God the Father, the person and work of His Son, Jesus Christ, and the ministry of His Holy Spirit. It should be God-centered.

2) Music should convey truth with accuracy and clarity. It should be sound in its expression of Christian doctrine and its application in personal, daily life.

- 3) Music should reflect Spirit-led creativity (i.e. evidence of the fruit of the Spirit).
- 4) Music should communicate and inspire high spiritual ideals and thoughts. Believers should be built up in their faith and unbelievers instructed in matters concerning salvation.
- 5) Music should result in a wholesome response toward holiness, spiritual fervor, thoughtful expression, and deep conviction.
- 6) Music should enhance, but never overshadow, the teaching ministry, always mindful that the preaching of the Word of God is central in the church.
- 7) Music should reflect the variety of spiritual expression given by God to His people, never allowing style to become master over substance. Content and style may be broad in its range, tasteful in its composition, and carefully crafted to give meaningful expression to a diversified congregation.

May our worship be unto His glory!