

Corporate Worship - Music – the Theology

I wish to begin by doing a type of overview – a theology of music. The idea here is to understand what the Bible teaches us in general about music, to get an overview of how we are to approach the subject of music. My aim is to show you that music is not like tastes in food, or personal preferences for one colour over another. I want to show you that music affects us morally, and so the kind of music we listen to can be good or evil. I want to lay a foundation to show that there is music which is appropriate to worship God with, and music which is not appropriate to worship with.

There is no doubt that the Bible mentions music a lot. There are over 290 references to music in the Bible. We are introduced to such instruments as the Harp, Lyre, Psaltery, Sackbut, Viol, Cornet, Dulcimer, Flute, Horn, Organ, Pipe, Trumpet, Silver Trumpets, Bells, Cymbals, Sistrum, Tabret. We read of the Songs of Moses, Songs of Deborah, Hannah, Songs of David, and Songs of Asaph. We read of the great Levitical choirs organised by David. We read the Song of Solomon and find in I Kings 4 out he also composed 1005 songs. Isaiah is a wonderfully musical book – with a number of songs in it. The entire book of Psalms is a songbook – the songbook of ancient Israel and the early church, containing not only lyrics, but even the tunes they were to be sung to. In fact, fully one third of the Old Testament is Hebrew poetry – most of it to be sung. In the New Testament we read the songs of Mary, of Simeon, of Zechariah, of the Angels. Paul in his writing sometimes quotes what was almost certainly an early hymn – many believe Philippians 2:5-11 was one such example, another being 1 Timothy 3:16. Paul commands the use of music in Ephesians and in Colossians. The Bible finishes with Revelation, with numerous songs being sung in heaven itself.

So there is no room to say that the Bible is silent on music. The Bible gives such considerable space to music, the implication is – this will always be a part of the lives of God's people and we should give it our attention.

But here is why there is such controversy over music today (or at least one of many reasons): when the Bible speaks on music, it usually does so *descriptively*, not *prescriptively*. In other words, most Scriptural references to music are describing what took place in ancient Israel's worship, or a song sung by an individual after an event. And while they teach us, they are not explicitly prescribing to us how we are to sing or make music. Moreover, coming into the New Testament, there is even less in the way of musical commands. This has led some to believe that God was being deliberately ambiguous about music, and that we should not quibble at all about musical style or content. We should simply enlist any and all musical forms to praise God, sanctifying them by our use of biblical lyrics and themes. But this is a serious and, in my view, fatal error. Just because the Bible does not give explicit commands regarding the form of music does not mean there is no Biblical teaching on the subject. It seems in the area of music there is a wilful ignorance, a chosen blindness, to the kind of reasoned conclusions that are made in all other areas of the Christian life.

God does not always spell everything out that He wants us to know, believe and practise. God expects us to reason from the Scriptures. Paul used much logic and reason in his arguments in Romans. The writer of Hebrews does the same thing in

Hebrews 7. When Jesus answers the Sadducees – He takes the verse: “I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” and reasons from it to teach there is a resurrection, because God treats Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as if they are still alive. Now that wasn’t explicitly stated – it was reasoned.

The doctrine of the Trinity is a case of adding up explicit statements and deducting logic from them. The doctrine of Christ’s deity is the same. (Are these insignificant doctrines, simply because God did not spell it all out in one breath?)

There is a kind of legalism today in Christian circles that says, “Unless you can show me a detailed explicit verse to condemn this practice – I am at liberty to do it.” Since the Bible does not condemn my rock or pop or rap music – you can’t tell me it’s wrong. And yet, if you simply reasoned from the Scriptures – you would arrive at some very clear principles for music. Why is it that we adopt this kind of legalism with regard music but not with other areas of life?

Let me ask you this: Has God told us what kind of speech we should have? Yes. Has God told us, in detailed form, how to use the tone of voice, how to use pitch, inflection and pause to effect godly communication? No. Does that mean God does not care about our tone of voice? No, God does not spell out every detail of tone of voice, because He expects us to glean and understand such things from life and our culture, while submitting them to Scripture.

See, in any area of life where we apply Scripture in a reasoned way – we also require some additional information, some of which will not be contained in the Bible.

For example, how do you know taking crack cocaine is a sin?

The Biblical principles are: don’t harm your body, don’t do what is illegal, don’t be enslaved to something. But I ask you, how do you know those principles apply to crack cocaine? How do you know crack cocaine is harmful? How do you know crack cocaine enslaves? How do you know crack cocaine is illegal? Did the Bible tell you that? No, it didn’t. You got that information from outside the Scriptures. In order to reason correctly you need to know the principles from Scripture, but you also need to know about crack cocaine from everyday life. Now the Bible’s principles are authoritative; the information you receive from life is not. But you nevertheless need that information to rightly apply the principles.

The same is true in music. We will see principles about the kind of communication that pleases God. We learn it must be true. It must be pure. It must be beautiful. It must be excellent.

We then go to outside information which is as available to anyone as the effects of crack cocaine are to anyone, and draw them together and say – yes, this music is fitting, this music is not. To say – “where does the Bible say that this music is inferior in quality?” is to ask the equivalent of “where does the Bible say that crack cocaine is harmful?” So to close your mind to learning about the inferior or superior status of music from extra-biblical sources will render you an immature Christian who cannot apply the Scripture because you refuse to learn about life from any outside source.

So coming to music, a type of modern legalism says – if God didn't see fit to spell out exactly – in terms of the combinations of melody, harmony and rhythm and texture then you can't make any judgements on it. That is like saying because God did not tell us about the chemical composition of crack we cannot make any judgements about it. Legalism can only obey the letter, but refuses to reason so as to understand the spirit of God's Word.

So we have to do two things – we have to find the Biblical principles, and we have to understand something of music from the considered opinion of both saved and unsaved people who have studied the composition and effects of music. We are to examine what the historical church has regarded as excellence, and not arrogantly regard our era as superior.

Now I want to give you four principles, I'm sure most would agree with.

Music communicates an idea about God, the world and reality

Music is not just background noise, as much as our culture has so dulled our senses by drowning us in near constant, trivial music. Music was designed by God to be a language of sound. By the way it is constructed, it carries forth an idea.

The Bible is very clear on this. Certain musical forms can carry meaning and "fit" best with specific purposes. For instance Scripture speak of songs of the drunkard (Ps 69.12), songs of the harlot (Is 23.15), songs of praise (Nehemiah 12:46), songs of devotion (2 Kings 3.15), songs of celebration (1 Kings 1.18-40; 1 Chr 15.28), songs of war (Ex 32), and songs of pagan worship (Ex 32). Different music sends different messages. The message of war is different from the message of seduction. The message of drunken revelling is different from the message of praise (how we need to meditate on that for a while). The music speaks an idea, a concept.

The different genres of music – rock, jazz, rap, classical usually reflect a belief system. Heavy metal rock typically reflects a philosophy of life. The lyrics of "gangsta" rap reflect their belief system.

But all that is to say that music communicates meaning. Sounds are neutral, but sounds combine to communicate an idea. It is capable of transmitting an idea. As such, it is a form of communication. Certainly we see this when Paul says in Ephesians 5:18 – '**speaking** to yourselves in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs' and in Colossians 3:16 where he says, '**teaching** and **admonishing** one another in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs'. *Speaking, teaching* and *admonishing* are forms of communication.

Now let us reason together. Can communication be corrupted? Yes. Communication is corrupt when it is deceitful, destructive or defiling. Forms of deceitful communication include lying, boasting, justifying, exaggerating, flattering manipulating, telling half-truths. Forms of destructive communication include slander, gossip, innuendo, diminishment. Forms of destructive communication include dirty language, blasphemy, profanity, insults, murmuring, nagging, crude joking, sinful topics.

Now if music is communication, and communication can be corrupt – can we have corrupt music? Yes.

If music is deceitful – it is corrupt. If music is not true in what it says about creation, about order, about harmony, symmetry, unity, proportion, it is deceitful. Until the late 18th century, people believed that music reflected an order in the universe. The order in the universe should be the model for art. And if the music is not faithful to God, creation and His image in us, it does no justice to us as humans or to God. It is untrue.

Now to find out how music can be disorderly, disproportionate, chaotic we will need some extra-biblical information. But that's OK. If we take the time to inform ourselves about the nature of crack cocaine, we can take a certain amount of time on this too.

Now consider for a moment, if the idea is God – the music must communicate truly about God.

God is a **spirit**. The idea must not be sensual, earthly, fleshly. If music can communicate a transcendent, high, pure sound, it must do it when speaking about God.

God is **holy**. If music can communicate being common, profane, worldly, then it must avoid those sounds when speaking about God.

God is **beautiful**. The idea must not be ugly, impure, defiling. If music communicates a false idea about God and creation, it is corrupt music.

Communication not only *reveals* what we believe about God, the world, and our humanity, it also *teaches* us. Music is also formative. It shapes our view of God, by putting certain emotions into musical form – teaching us and communicating to us who this God is and how we respond to Him. It can trivialise God, it can profane God, it can honour God. We can, through music, dumb down our God, sensualise and humanise, or even sentimentalise Him, or we can learn of Him as He is. This is why music, as communication has to be true.

Since music communicates an idea which teaches you, we should also reject the notion that there is some music for church, and a totally different kind of music for the car, and a completely different kind of music for the lounge. Whatever you listen to and enjoy shapes you. You are identifying with its statement about God and creation. If its message is trivial, banal, sentimental, and sensual, then you say, “I enjoy the trivial, the banal, and the sentimental. I think the sensual is a true way to look at the world.”

Music communicates emotions

Music is so able to represent an emotion and the Bible sometimes treats that emotion and the sound of the music as the same thing.

My harp also is turned to mourning, and my organ into the voice of them that weep.
(Job 30:31)

Most everyone recognises music as an emotional language. We all understood that films use mood music in the background to help us know if we are supposed to be happy, scared, in suspense, tense, excited, thrilled, titillated, saddened.

Why music does this is not fully understood. In one way, music seems to reflect something about us physically. For example when we are joyful, we tend to be more vigorous and energetic. Joyful, glad music is more vigorous. When we are sad, we tend to be subdued, sluggish, reserved. Music which has a sad tone reflects this in its makeup. By using slower tones, minor keys and a subdued approach, a sadder sound is communicated. The more rhythmical, the more physical the response seems to be.

So there is a connection between the sound, and our makeup and movement as humans. This is universal – and applies to all humans.

In a second way, different cultures put different meaning on different sounds. In the same way that languages are different cultures attaching different meaning to different combinations of sounds, so various cultures understand different music to mean different things by virtue of association.

I believe, while the cultural argument is true, it is only true because all humans share some common understanding of the meaning of sounds. Otherwise, we could conceivably say anything in music anyway we want to. Experience tells us that nowhere in the world will any culture play music that is loud, rapid, harsh and dissonant to create emotions of peace, calmness and rest.

Now again, let us reason together. Music can communicate emotion. Are all emotions fitting when it comes to relating to God? I could give you a range of different emotions, very different and yet all of them are at some point appropriate in our walk with God: Joy, gladness, delight, happiness, reverence, awe, contemplativeness, penitence, sadness, sorrow, grief, anger, relief, calm, gratitude, boldness, hope, longing.

Now I will give you a list of emotions which are very different but not appropriate for our walk with God: rage, depression, despair, morbidity, tedium, boredom, cockiness, apathy, lust, sensuality, intemperance, discontent.

Since music is capable of expressing all these emotions, it is quite simple – some music is inappropriate because it communicates emotions never appropriate for a belief in Christ.

Consider Israel in Exodus 32. Here you have a group of people indulging in an idolatrous worship of an image of Yahweh. As the worship is patterned after the paganism they are used to, it soon descends into a gluttonous, drunken orgy. But notice that there is music which accompanies this emotion. It is music which Joshua mistook for the sound of a battle – such was its clamorous, chaotic sound.

Some people want to say the problem with such and such music is that it is emotional, not intellectual. That is emphatically *not* the problem with bad music. Music is designed by God to affect us, to change our emotions. Music is the most powerful tool after the spoken Word for the shaping of religious affections.

Problem ‘Christian’ music is not a problem because it stirs up the emotions. It is a problem because it stirs up the wrong emotions. It stirs up feelings of ego-centric self-

gratification while talking about God. It stirs up feelings of intemperance and lust while talking about holiness.

Problem music is wrong because it stirs up the wrong emotions or it stirs up the right emotion in the wrong proportion, perverting it. You may have noticed – wrong emotions are sometimes right emotions taken beyond the limits God sets on them. Sadness at sin is not supposed to become despair –for there is forgiveness. Celebration is not supposed to become sensuality or intemperate carousing. In some ways, you can say that right emotions reflect an understanding of what is good. When you know what is indeed good, you feel rightly about it. You feel happiness, anger, sadness in the right proportions. A perverted man delights in what is cheap and ugly. A righteous man finds pleasure and reverence and delight in what is good.

So already we have said – music is communication. But it can be corrupt if it is not true. It can also be corrupt if it is not good – that is, if it does not reflect a correct love of what is right and stir up the right emotions.

Music is not primarily something we consume; it is firstly something we offer to God.

Unfortunately, our culture has made music so common-place that we think of it like a consumable – something we get and use and discard. We don't think of it as something we must strive to understand, learn, and produce. We evaluate music this way: Do I like it? Is it entertaining? But this is not the way to approach music if we are viewing it as an offering to God.

Hebrews 13:15: "Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name."

One more time, let us reason together. If music is an offering to God before it is something I use to please myself – what kind of music should it be? What kind of offering should we give to God?

Indeed, God rebuked Israel for the kind of sacrifices they were bringing – poor and blind and lame. They brought the leftovers, the disposables, the unwanted (Mal 1:8). And if our music is the leftover, the cheap, the tawdry, the tacky, the last-minute improvisation, the sloppy then it is not fitting to present to God. If some sacrifices were unfit, we can surmise that some music is too.

God commands the pursuit and discernment of excellence (Phil 1:10, 4:13). We are to approve the things that are excellent. We are to think, that is, fill our minds (and by implication, our ears) with what is true, noble, just, pure, lovely, commendable, excellent, praiseworthy.

Here is what is interesting – God regards excellence as objectively identifiable as truth. We are to pursue excellence in our service for God – seeking to do things well, skilfully. We are to pursue excellence in our careers. What it implies is to excel – to not be content with being mediocre or average, but to seek to do our very best.

Music can be excellent or it can be inferior. It can be commendable, or it can be lamentable. It can be beautiful – or it can be ugly. It can be of high standard of craftsmanship, or it can be sloppy, shoddy and tacky. And as Christians, we are to seek to produce and listen to music that is excellent.

If we for a moment think that God doesn't care about beauty, take into consideration the many verses in Exodus where God says the pattern or design is to be skilfully done. And it tells us He filled Bezalel "with skill, with intelligence, with knowledge, and with all craftsmanship". Speaking of Aaron's garments, God says, "*You shall make them for glory and beauty.*" (Ex 28:40). Read the accounts of the Tabernacle and of the Temple, and you get the sense God wanted it to be very beautiful.

We can say, music should be excellent as well, we must not offer what is common, degraded, profane or sensual as worship to God. We must not offer slothfulness, sloppiness, indifference, a lack of practice, a lack of training, a half-hearted effort. We must not offer being disorganized, haphazard or late. We must not take the poor methods of some secular music and mix it in, because it's easy, or it's what everyone wants. We must not give God the leftovers of our passion, our intelligence, our talents, our time, or resources.

Sacrifices cost. It costs us money- money to buy instruments and books, and pay for lessons. It costs money to buy good music that truly honours God. It costs time to learn music, how to play, how to sing. It takes time to sometimes learn how to appreciate good music.

It doesn't take time to learn how to appreciate candy. But it sometimes does take time to learn to appreciate certain food with more subtle tastes. The same is true of music. A sacrifice of time, effort and money is in order, if we want to say God is worth much. When you see Christian music as a consumable, you ask – what does this do for me? When you see it as a sacrifice of praise you say, "Did I give enough? Does it express God well enough?" Sacrifice is a statement of value.

Someone says, "But God sees the heart. He doesn't mind if it doesn't sound good if the heart is right. If the motive is pure, God accepts it." Now firstly, we have already seen that motive doesn't excuse disobedience. Uzza had a good motive but was still punished (I Chronicles 13). Good motives don't always make up for bad methods. Secondly – God's response to poor music will really be based on what He has given you. God will not judge you harshly for what He hasn't given you. God is pleased if He gave you little and you do all you can with what He has given you.

The only way you can know what is excellent music is if you stop regarding the whole topic as the domain of experts, and find out – what makes some music superior to other music?

So we can say that music isn't an impossible maze to work through. Yes, we do need some extra-biblical information because the Bible isn't a manual on music, just like it isn't a science textbook, a chemical composition book. But sometimes you need those facts to rightly apply the Biblical principles. So music can be good or evil.

Music can communicate truly or falsely. Music can stir up wholesome, godly emotions or impure, ungodly ones. Music is an offering to God, and that offering must be excellent. Music can be beautiful and excellent, or it can be sloppy and ugly.

Music is to reflect and teach the true, the good and the beautiful. When it fails to do this, it falls short of its created purpose. When it succeeds in doing this, it facilitates magnifying God's glory like nothing else.