

How Should We Sing to the Lord?

Colossians 3:16 *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.*

If God had said nothing about singing to Him, or making music for Him, we could dismiss the matter of music, like some do, as a non-issue. If God had said nothing about music in His Word, then choosing our music would be like choosing our brand of coffee, or what tablecloths we should use.

But once God has spoken, the whole matter changes. God has indeed spoken to us about music, not only in the Old Testament, but also in the New. This means that He has made His will known. He has called for something, and those who call Him 'Lord, Lord,' must do the things that He instructs.

As you know, music is one of the most contentious things in the church today - and rightly so. Music reflects something bigger than the methods of any particular church or ministry. It reflects a church's ideas about God. It reflects its beliefs about who God is and what He requires.

Tozer said.

'What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.

We tend, by a secret law of the soul, to move toward our mental image of God. This is true not only of the individual Christian, but of the company of Christians that composes the Church. Always the most revealing thing about the Church is her idea of God, just as her most significant message is what she says about Him, or leaves unsaid.

Were we able to extract from any man a complete answer to the question, "What comes into your mind when you think about God?" we might predict with certainty the spiritual future of that man. Were we able to know exactly what our most influential religious leaders think of God today, we might be able, with some precision, to foretell where the Church will stand tomorrow.'

If you understand those words, you are on your way to understanding how God expects us to sing to Him. Our singing and our music must reflect who He is, and what it means for a human being to be in His presence. Whereas the debate today always centres round personal preferences and styles which have to do with *us* – the first and biggest question is – who is this God? What do you say in front of Him? What do you feel in His presence? In other words, the question is firstly, '*Who is God and what does He expect*'; not '*What do I like and prefer*'?

Packed into verse 16 is enough knowledge to guide any sincere church along the path towards God-pleasing music.

Let's start with the most basic question: *To whom are we supposed to sing?*

1. The Direction of Our Songs

To whom are we singing? Verse 16 tells us "*to the Lord*". The Lord Himself is the object, the centre and the focus of our songs. Now you might say, "Well, obviously! Who else would we be singing to in a church service?"

I'm glad you asked, because judging by some songs, I'm not entirely sure.

Let's suppose that I composed a song for my wife, in which I sang about her golden blonde hair, hair and sky-blue eyes. I sing it with tears streaming down my cheeks, and everyone is moved. Everyone, except my wife, because her hair is not blonde, and her eyes are hazel, not blue. Now, if my song addressed her by name, but said things about her that weren't true, who was I singing to? Did the fact that I dedicated it to her make it about her? Did the fact that I sang it with deep feeling

make it about her? No. What I sang was false, whether or not I meant those lies with all my heart. So who was I singing to?

Certainly, the same is true today. You hear and read of songs that sing to a being that does not resemble the God of the Bible. They do not say true things about Him; nor do they provoke affections which are like the affections the Bible describes.

It's been so long since
You felt like you were loved
So what went wrong
But do you know
There's a place where you belong
Here in My Arms

Chorus:
When you feel like you're alone in your sadness
It seems like no one else in this whole world cares
And you want to get away from the madness
You just call My name and I'll be there
You just call My name and I'll be there

Who is that song sung to? Who is it aimed at? Jesus the boyfriend? Jesus the buddy? Jesus the psychotherapist?

That song, and other similar songs, are sung in churches claiming the Christian faith, sung by people with tears streaming down their faces. So who are they singing to?

The problem is this: we have become convinced that if we like the feel of the music, and if we offer it in the direction of the God of the Bible, He will be happy. Does such an attitude reflect a big view of God, or a big view of ourselves?

This is a very egotistical view of self, and a very low view of God. It imagines that God is so complimented when we sing to Him, that He will take anything, even if it doesn't resemble Him.

What about Cain? What about Aaron and the golden calf? What about Nadab and Abihu?

Tozer said, "*What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.*" If what comes into your mind when you think of God is something other than who God is, what do we call that?

To sing in that way is to sing to an idol, and name it Jesus. It is to sing to ourselves and call it praise.

We must know Him as He is, in order to sing to Him as we ought.
So how do we know who He is and what we should sing to Him? The answer is in verse 16.

To know His character '*We should let the Word of Christ dwell in us richly*'. It is when we are familiar enough to teach and admonish one another with the Word, that we are ready to recognise songs that portray God in His truth, and songs that don't.

That leads us to the next question: *What do we sing?*

II. The Content of Our Songs

What Should We Sing? We should sing Psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.
Since these flow out of the command to allow the word of Christ to dwell richly in you, it follows that psalms and hymns and spiritual songs flow out of the Word of Christ.

Psalms are the very psalms of Scripture. Hymns are like psalms; they are metrical songs that sing the truth of God from the Word. We read that Jesus and His disciples sang a hymn on the night of His arrest. Paul and Silas sang hymns in the Philippian jail. Even the spiritual songs are songs saturated with truth from the Spirit. What does the Spirit use to teach us? *The Word*.

Whatever we sing, must be clear, accurate and correct statements about God, ourselves and the world. The Scriptures are the authoritative revelation of who God is. Personal experience, personal dreams and visions, the religious music, art and poetry of 2000 years, is not authoritative. Scripture tells us who God is.

Our hearts must be saturated with the Word of Christ, so we will sing what is right.

We must sing nothing less than the truth.

This means at least two things:

a) We must not sing anything that is doctrinally false. If a song calls on God to come and indwell us, it is false, because God indwells us at the point of salvation. He doesn't need to be asked to indwell His church; He already indwells it. We don't sing for a mass baptism of the Holy Spirit, because God baptises us in His Spirit when we are saved. So we could list countless doctrinal errors that are sung today. We must sing what is true from the Scriptures.

b) We cannot sing something that is true, but stated in a shallow or trivial way. Do you know it is possible to say true things about God that detract from the truth? For example, we know that God is everywhere. He is omnipresent. That is a grand and glorious truth, celebrated in Psalm 139, and in hymns like '*God Reveals His Presence*.' But suppose we wrote a song that said, "God is here and there and everywhere, in your nose, in your toes, and even in your garden hose." I think we would agree that that would be blasphemy. Is it because it isn't true? No, in fact those statements are true, God is everywhere. But to put it like that, is to demean and diminish the truth. It is possible to say true things in a false way.

There are children's songs that sing of God's love, but they diminish it, until it is untrue. There are Gospel songs that sing of the cross in a way that makes it a trivial, chipper, shallow affair – they sing about true things in an untrue way. There are choruses that speak of our responses to God in a way that cheapens the true Christian experience. Worst of all, there are songs that speak of God Himself, saying true things, but in a manner that ends up presenting a false god.

To sing Scriptural truth is to say the right things about God, and to say them in the right way. Where do we learn to say things in the right way? We learn from the Scriptures.

I want you to understand that if you sing what is false – you will end up with a false idea of God.

This verse tells us more -it speaks of our attitude in song. *How Should we Sing?*

III. The Attitude of Our Songs

Notice the words '*singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord*.' This tells us how we are to sing. '*In your hearts*' does not mean the songs are to be silent and internal. This verse is telling us that the songs are to emerge from the deepest parts of us.

Do you remember when God said in **Matthew 15:8** *These people draw near to Me with their mouth, And honor Me with their lips, But their heart is far from Me.*

What was God saying? He was saying that their praise was insincere. When praise is sincere, it begins in the heart and emerges from the lips. God wants us to say what we mean, and mean what we say.

Now, I can think of three forms of insincere singing.

The first, and most obvious, is when our hearts are simply far away from what we sing. It is no fault of the song; it simply is that our own hearts are divided, cold, distracted, and dull. We are not singing to God, we are absorbed with ourselves, we are focused on self, not on God.

The second form is flattering God. Now you might say, 'How could we flatter God?' Flattery is saying nice things you don't mean to someone to gain advantage. Now, it is impossible to overstate or exaggerate the greatness of God and goodness of God. But it is possible to exaggerate or overstate how we are feeling about Him at the time.

The best hymns focus on the attributes of God, and leave the reactions up to us. The inferior songs sing about how much we are worshipping, how we are completely surrendered, totally devoted, so, so, in love with Him. And very often, the lyrics are quite simply exaggerated.

It is one thing to say, 'I want to surrender all' - it is another to say 'I do surrender all'. The one might be true, the other one plainly is not - it is flattery. It is one thing to say, 'I wish to love you more than I do' - it is another to say 'I love you with all of my heart'. It is one thing to say, 'You are great and deserve devotion' - it is another to say, 'I am awed and overwhelmed by you in this place,' when you really are not.

I can only think that the motive is something like flattery in the human realm - we overstate the extent of our admiration, hoping it will impress the person we are talking to. So, many songs exaggerate our responses so as to supposedly impress God. But the result is not that God is impressed. It is that we are moving away from sincerity, and into a self-centred focus.

A third form of being insincere is to sing what is vague or clichéd. What is a cliché? It is a word or a group of words that is overused, to where it ends up becoming almost meaningless. But lazy people keep using clichés, because it saves them the trouble of really thinking about what they are saying, and meaning it. Now, how would you feel if a person spoke to you using clichés?

How would you feel if someone simply kept repeating Hallmark greeting cards sentences to you every time they saw you? Would you feel this person was truly engaging with you? Are there songs and hymns filled with clichés? Yes, overused, worn out, sentimental phrases that don't mean much to us or to anyone.

So when we sing something we don't really know the meaning of, is this sincere? *We are to sing with sincerity.*

Colossians 3:16 also tells us to *sing with grace in your hearts to the Lord*. What does that mean exactly? The same wording is used in 4:6, which tells us that our words are to be with grace. Many translations render this as 'gratitude', and that is how this Greek word is often used. Sing with gratitude.

Sometimes, it refers to God's empowerment. God's will worked through us by His Spirit is often called grace, like when God said to Paul, 'My grace is sufficient for you.' In that case, the idea would be, sing with God's empowerment.

Whether grace means gratitude, or empowerment - it really comes back to one thing - **submission**.

A heart submitted to God is a grateful heart. A heart desiring and needing God's power is a heart submitted to God. The attitude God wants from us is not only sincerity, but submission. The heart that is pleasing to God when praising Him, is the heart that is humble and yielded to God's authority and person.

Let me illustrate what this looks like from the mouth of David:

1 Chronicles 29:11-12 *Yours, O LORD, is the greatness, The power and the glory, The victory and the majesty; For all that is in heaven and in earth is Yours; Yours is the kingdom, O LORD, And You are exalted as head over all. ¹² Both riches and honor come from You, And You reign over all. In Your hand is power and might; In Your hand it is to make great And to give strength to all.*

Submitted hearts do not believe their praise enriches God. Submitted hearts recognise it is what belongs to God, and we have the privilege of returning to Him what is His. It is not about somehow adding to God.

It is also not about amusing ourselves.

Psalms 115:1 *Not unto us, O LORD, not unto us, But to Your name give glory, Because of Your mercy, Because of Your truth.*

Singing is not about adding to God, but it is also not about entertaining ourselves, indulging our appetites, pleasuring ourselves while using God as the supposed end.

Ask yourself this question: 'What if I got nothing out of praising God? Would I still do it? Would I be obligated to do it?' Now, the delightful truth is that knowing and praising God is the sweetest thing we can do. But submitted hearts are not trying to use praise for self, but forgetting self to praise.

Singing with grace is a heart of submission that says, 'I was made to worship God, not the other way around. I was made for His pleasure, not the other way around.' Therefore, our attitude is one of submission to that task.

We come to the last matter, which is this: *how should our songs sound? What kind of music should accompany them?*

IV. The Sound of Our Songs

Now many will say, 'The Bible doesn't say what kind of music to use.' And to a degree, they are right. The Bible doesn't say in so many words what the combinations of melody, harmony, rhythm and tone colour should be. But to say that because of this fact the actual music doesn't matter is a wrong conclusion.

The Bible doesn't tell you what tone of voice to use when speaking, it simply tells you to be kind, gentle and meek. Does that mean that tone of voice is irrelevant?

The Bible doesn't tell you how high a skirt can be, how low a neckline should be, it simply tells you to dress with modesty. Does that mean that the clothing is irrelevant?

The Bible doesn't tell you what the swear words are you should avoid, or exactly what it is to take God's name in vain, it simply tells you to avoid filthy speech and do not take His name in vain. Does that mean the actual words are irrelevant?

The Bible doesn't tell you what foods or substances are harmful to your body, it simply tells you not to defile the Temple of the Holy Spirit. Does that mean the actual substances are irrelevant?

The point is this – God does not spell out the application of every command down to the finest details, because that would remove from his children the need to prayerfully think, decide, grow and apply wisdom. Moreover, it would mean the Bible would have to be about a thousand volumes.

So when it comes to music, we must do the same thing. We must combine Scriptural information with outside information. What information do we need?

Well, we know that music speaks an emotional language. It stirs up affections. It creates musical images and feelings.

So, first, we need to ask, ‘How should we feel in His presence?’ Our first stop is to ask, what kind of emotions are appropriate in His presence?

In fact, the Scriptures often explicitly tell us. We are told to come before Him with reverence and awe. It tells us to come before Him with thanksgiving and gladness. It tells us to have thoughts that are true, pure, just, upright, lovely.

But here is where agreement breaks down. One group of people say that reverence means singing “I Sing the Mighty Power of God” with the accompaniment of an organ; another group says, reverence is singing “The Power of Your Love” to a driving drum beat. One group says that gladness is singing “Rejoice the Lord is King”, with an orchestra; another group says that gladness is singing “Shout to the Lord” with a guitar band.

The problem is this: the affections can't be put in a test tube and explained by a formula. You can only understand clearly from the inside. A reverent person knows reverence. An irreverent person thinks even his irreverence is reverent. A modest person knows modesty. An immodest person thinks their lack of modesty is still quite modest.

You can't explain it to someone on the outside; it must be known and felt on the inside.

The Bible says that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, not the other way around. Once you are on the inside of fearing the Lord, you understand.

Try to convince someone who is dressed immodestly that they are dressed immodestly. How do you do it? Do you use centimetres and amount of skin revealed? Do you show them a chart? No, it must be felt and sensed.

How do you convince someone that a word is obscene? Do you take them to the dictionary? Do you explain nice words versus bad ones? In fact, how do you explain obscene to someone who denies it?

The fact is, it is when our affections are being shaped by the fear of the Lord, that we sense, and we know, that something is inappropriate, obscene, unfitting.

That is why it all comes back to our idea of God. *“What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us...We tend by a secret law of the soul to move toward our mental image of God.”*

This is why the argument about it all being about styles, and we can pick and choose between styles, is really silly. Imagine for a moment that we line up a group of people to meet the president of the country. The people are taken from differing ages. Do you think that when the 15 year old comes up, he should high-five the president, and start rapping to him, and then give him a ‘homey-gangsta’ hug? The boy might protest that it is ‘my style’ or ‘this is the language that we speak as the

youth' but the point is that regardless of what he thinks, it is not appropriate to speak to a dignitary like that.

Are there really age-appropriate ways of speaking to a president? Maybe there is a “youth way” or an “old way”. The truth is that the status of the president demands that we all respond a particular way. The only reason why he might think that speaking to a president like that is acceptable is because he is irreverent, and from the vantage point of irreverence, he thinks he is being quite reverent.

You need to have the right affections.

Wrong idea of God = wrong affections. Wrong affections = wrong music.

Assuming you have a more Biblical idea of God, you will have the right affections in His presence. And assuming you have those, the next step of information gathering would be to ask musicians, composers (past and present) and musicologists – what kind of sounds represent those affections.

They don't need to be believers. As Kevin Bauder said, “So it is with unsaved critics. They cannot tell us what sort of worship our God deserves, but they can tell us what a particular musical or literary combination will accomplish.”

You will be hard-pressed to find an unbelieving composer who will tell you that pop music carries the ideas and affections of reverence, awe, seriousness, humility. It is musical clichés, musical shallowness, and musical untruth. The emotions it evokes are not the profoundly deep joys, sorrows, gravity, that come out of dealing with God as he is. It is all fast food – loud taste, no getting used to, but not very nutritious and probably unhealthy. Is this the music we should use to evoke the right affections and ideas about God?

We must start with our idea of God. Who is He really? Then we must be reflective about what we do and say and feel before Him.

We must only say what is true – not flattery, not clichés, not false doctrine. We must say it with sincerity, and with submission, gratefully taking our place as those created to praise. We must always be reflective about what kind of love, what kind of joy, what kind of fear, what kind of sorrow we are to have before Him.

Then, we must be serious about understanding what combinations of music convey those kinds of affections. Do we need to become musical experts? No, but it would help to be teachable. I think we should aim at least to gain some understanding, some competence at knowing what we are dealing with. After all, it is not the flavour of the coffee, or the tablecloths we are talking about. It is a divine gift, given to enable us to know God, and express true affections to Him. That is a powerful tool. We have been instructed to use it. Let us use it fittingly.