

HOW SHALL WE SING TO GOD?

Leonard Payton

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We are, more times than not, a people defined by our music. We fight over it in the church. We change congregations because of worship music style, with little concern for the theology of the new or the old congregation. Whole denominations are embroiled in debate over worship music style with no clear outcome in sight. My prayer is for a deep reformation in church music—that all alike will be led to insist, within their own spheres of influence, that comprehensive biblical principles be brought to bear on every detail of worship music.

Indeed the real crisis is this: Ecclesiastical authorities, while recognizing that music is important to congregational life, usually fail to see that its biblical role puts it squarely within the ministry of the Word as a partner to preaching. For, as the apostle Paul told us, the word of Christ dwells richly within us with all wisdom when we teach and admonish one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs and sing with gratitude in our hearts to God with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs (Col. 3:16).

If we are to recover the authority of Scripture in our worship, then we must likewise recover it in our music, which is an important element of true God-centered worship conforming to the principle of *sola Scriptura*. Just as the sixteenth-century Reformers gave major attention to this area, so must we.

THE SCRIPTURES AND MUSIC

I once examined the entire worship music repertoire of my congregation, most of which I had inherited, placing each song under one of three biblical categories: (1) “teaching”; (2) “admonition”; and (3) “singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God.” Of some four hundred praise choruses and hymns, I found that most of them fit within category three, with about thirty in category one, and fewer than ten in category two. A new gnosticism’ has crept in, convincing us that feeling good is an inextricable component of orthodoxy. Admonition just does not fit “orthopathos,” an orthodoxy of shared feelings and experiences. Having stumbled onto this feature of my own congregation’s worship music diet, I then went to the 150 Psalms to see what the proportions of these categories would be. I read the Psalms with three colored highlighters in hand. I used one highlighter to mark teaching, one for admonition, and one for gratitude to God. More skillful Bible scholars than I will anticipate what I found: There was simply no way to separate the categories. Consider Psalm 103. The way we “bless the Lord” is to reel off a long list of blessings:

- He forgives all our iniquities
- He heals all our diseases
- He redeems our lives from destruction
- He crowns us with lovingkindness and compassion
- He satisfies our years with good things, and so on

Later in this psalm, it becomes clear that these blessings are given to those who fear the Lord. Taken together, we have a song of gratitude to God that teaches us about God’s provision and further admonishes us to fear the Lord. This is the nature of true biblical worship music. The glorification of God and the edification of the saints occur concurrently.

WORSHIP MUSIC AND THEOLOGY

Until the time of King David, the role of music in worship was somewhat incidental. It was no accident that “the man after God’s heart” institutionalized the Levitical musicians. But just what did the Levitical musicians do?

In 1 Chronicles 6, we learn that the chief musicians Heman, Ethan, and Asaph came from the three separate clans of Levi. It may be that musical skill and wisdom necessitated drawing from the whole tribe rather than from a narrower pool, as was the case with the priests. Toward the end of the same chapter, we find that the Levites were given towns and accompanying fields scattered throughout the entire land of Israel. Thus, the land of Israel would have been sprinkled with “local” Levitical musicians.

First Chronicles 24 and 25 indicate that the priests and the musicians had two-week tours of duty at the temple in Jerusalem. This raises the fascinating question, “What were they doing the rest of the year?”

Part of this is answered in the authorial ascription of some of the psalms. It was Asaph who thundered that God owns “the cattle on a thousand hills” (Ps. 50:10). If a modern church musician wrote a worship text like Psalm 50, he would probably not get it published in the contemporary Christian music industry. And Heman’s Psalm 88 is incontestably the bleakest of all the psalms. In short, Levitical musicians wrote psalms, and those psalms plainly were not obligated to accommodate the gnostic, emotional demands of the twentieth-century evangelical church.

We know Solomon composed 1,005 psalms, most of which are lost (1 Kings 4:32). Nevertheless, this demonstrates that the writing of psalms was apparently a flourishing activity at the time. We also know that Solomon “was wiser than Ethan the Ezrahite, Heman, Calcol and Darda, the sons of Mahol” (v. 31). If Solomon had not existed, *two of the wisest men in Israel would have been musicians!* They were teachers of the highest order. This leads me to suspect that Levitical musicians, scattered throughout the land, served as Israel’s teachers. Furthermore, the book of Psalms was their textbook. And because this textbook was a songbook, it may well be that the Levitical musicians catechized the nation of Israel through the singing of psalms.

Most worship music traditions have failed miserably to see this teaching mandate. The revivalist music of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and contemporary Christian music have both been significant offenders on this score.

Consider the well-known chorus, Bless His Holy Name.

Bless the Lord, O my soul,
and all that is within me
bless His holy name.
He has done great things.
He has done great things.
He has done great things,
bless His holy name.

It is true that the opening sentence of the chorus is a verbatim quote of Psalm 103:1, and that is to be applauded. Beyond that, however, the remaining twenty-one verses of Psalm 103 are compressed into a scant eight words that give the vague notion that we should bless the Lord because of the great things He has done. What those great things are is left to the imagination, not the plain teaching of Scripture. The problem is that true, biblical gratitude must have its basis in objective facts or doctrine. If it doesn't, it is mere sentimentality.

How odd it is that the current visible church is embracing diversity and multiculturalism uncritically, completely setting aside the wisdom of the early church Fathers. The lyrics in many of the praise choruses often contradict Scripture. Consider the chorus "Highest Place" directly associated with Philippians 2:9: "Therefore God exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the name that is above every name (NIV).

We place You on the highest place,
for You are the great High Priest;
We place You high above all else,
and we come to You and worship at your feet. 12

The trouble is that these lyrics indicate it is Christians—not God—who exalt Jesus to the highest place, directly contradicting the Scripture on which the song is based.

The larger problem with much commercial Christian music is not what is said but what is left unsaid. Two of the common troubling types of music that emerge feature God as hero and God as felt-need meeter. In itself this is not wrong, but it is consistently done at the expense of other essential doctrines.. Unfortunately, the gospel of the New Testament is offensive. It is a stumbling block. The fact that Christ died for sinners according to the Scriptures is the baseline article of our faith. And yet the blood sacrifice for sin, that doctrine that shows how disgusting our depravity really is, receives conspicuously short shrift in commercial Christian music. It just plain doesn't sell.

A PRACTICAL RESPONSE

The biblical church musician has the ministry of the Word and prayer just like the pulpit preacher, but with musical means. He needs a training corollary to that of the preacher. He needs to operate under the same standards of accountability and scrutiny as the preacher. And like the ox and the preacher, he must not be muzzled while he is treading out the grain.

To the overwhelmed pastor I would say two things: Take the long view and take heart. Here are some measures the pastor can take now.

First, retake ecclesiastical authority over the music and over every word sung in corporate worship and in small groups. When approached with a doctrinally inadequate special music project (usually an accompaniment track from some favorite commercial Christian artist), the pastor must be able to say, "You can't have it because it is not good for you." Remember, worship music is an issue of shepherding.

Second, vociferously denounce the widely held notion that entertainment is good whereas boredom is bad. Gene Edward Veith shows that the corresponding biblical concept of boredom is sloth. In other words, boredom is primarily the hearer's problem, not the

speaker's. Until this point is won, much biblical teaching and admonition will remain off limits.

Third, read Calvin Johansson's excellent book Discipling Music Ministry. Recognizing that pastors' reading lists are already overburdened, I restrict my recommendation to one small book. A wise man once said, "with all thy getting, get understanding" (Prov. 4:7 kjv).

Fourth, register complaints with your seminaries over the minuscule and sometimes nonexistent place music holds within their Master of Divinity training.

Fifth, within congregational life foster children's choirs that have as a major goal the teaching of great hymn texts. Start early. Children are not born believing that they should like popular culture while disliking great old hymns. It is amazing how many children enjoy Mr. Rogers's operas. Children will acculturate to what is placed before them. Remember, worship music is an issue of shepherding.

Sixth, grow worship musicians from inside the four walls of the church under your theologically watchful eyes. Congregations should seriously invest in the continuing education of musicians. Remember, worship music is part of the ministry of the Word. We would be appalled by a preacher who read at a third-grade level and did not understand grammar, yet we handicap the ministry of the Word when we leave our musicians unprepared.

Should all these measures be implemented, I would not expect overnight and glamorous results. Still, if we care about our children's children, we need to begin to take the tough, disciplined steps now. We need to seriously pray, "Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10). Even better, we might consider singing it.

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