

PHILOSOPHY OF MUSIC IN CORPORATE WORSHIP

Magic Valley Bible Church

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The Purpose of Music in Corporate Worship

The purpose of music in corporate worship is to lead the congregation in Christ-exalting adoration through psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, with joy and skill.

An Overview of Music in Scripture

From the beginning of creation, to the end of time, singing and making music has been entrusted to believers for the glory of God. Over 150 references in Scripture point to music as a means of giving praise to God. In Old Testament narratives, singing was often associated with the recounting of God's protection over His people (Ex 15:1–18; Deut 31:19–32:44; 2 Sam 22:1). The Psalmists, on many occasions, would command the listener to sing praise to God for His being and character (e.g. Ps 7:17; 95:1; 101:1; 145:7), and the outpouring of music for the Lord is ongoing (Ps 146:2).

In the New Testament, music has several intended purposes. Paul, in his letters to the Ephesians and the Colossians, commands believers to encourage one another with songs, hymns, and spiritual songs as a result of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and the instruction of Scripture (Eph 5:18–19; Col 3:16). At the close of Scripture, John writes that the saints will sing a new song, in conjunction with the return and reign of Christ forever (Rev 5:8–10; 14:2–3). Music also carries the purposes of celebration (Lk 15:25) and mourning (Mt 9:23).

As can be seen, Scripture highlights the importance of singing and making music for the Lord from the beginning to the end.

The Synthesis of Music in Scripture

Music within the Bible can be understood as a synthesis between two art-forms. The first pertains to the content, or lyrics that are sung. For example, the song of Moses in Exodus 15 focuses on God's deliverance of His people from Egypt. In Judges 5, Deborah and Barak sang about God's power over the enemies of Israel. In both of these instances (as well as many others) the song that is sung contains a powerful message, and as such the content, or lyric of the music, is critical.

The second art-form pertains to the musical composition, or the sound itself. The Psalmists, for example, often reference the use of one's mouth and voice for singing (Ps 40:3; 51:14; 89:1). There are also numerous references to musical instruments being used for praise (Ps 92:3; 144:9; 149:3; 150:3–5). During David's reign, the king had individuals specified for serving the people musically with instruments and skillful singing (1 Chron 25:1, 6–7).

Application of the Synthesis of Music in Scripture to the Local Church

In the context of the local church, there are several aspects of the two aforementioned categories that ought to be observed as it pertains to corporate worship. Each of these components will be considered below.

The Content of the Songs (the Lyrics)...

...Must be Biblical

The foremost priority of corporate worship through song is that the content of the music must be biblical. That is, the lyrics that are sung must have their root in biblical theology. Stated another way, each song that is incorporated into worship must be supported by Scriptural truth. For example, David's song in 2 Sam 22 contains truths that are consistent with the rest of the Bible. The same is true for Moses' song (Ex 15), Deborah and Barak's song (Judg 5), and others (Ps 108; 120–134; Rev 5:9–10). Biblical content is the primary element of music in corporate worship.

...Must have Clarity

The message of every worship song must be clear and simple to understand. This does not mean that the message cannot be profound. Rather, the way in which the message of the song is communicated must be clearly understandable. This parallels the fact that Scripture itself is written in plain language so that it can give understanding to the simple (Ps 119:130). Therefore, a worship song should not contain unending allegories or vague, imprecise imagery which cannot be understood by the worshiper, but it ought to be written in plain words, which can still communicate deep truths from Scripture.

...Must be Edifying

A central aspect of corporate worship through music is that it must be edifying to fellow believers. In Paul's letters to the Ephesians and the Colossians, he instructs them to speak and admonish one another with songs, hymns, and spiritual songs (Eph 5:19; Col 3:16). The music and words that are sung are both a praise to God, as well as an encouragement to other believers. Hence it is again important that the songs be biblical, for Scripture itself is edifying (1 Cor 14:26; 2 Tim 3:16–17).

The Sound of the Songs (the Music)...

...Must be Accessible

Since all believers are commanded to sing (Eph 5:18–19; Col 3:16), all believers must be able to sing, and the music must be accessible to the singer. It should not include difficult rhythms or challenging intervals that discourage the average lay member from singing, but rather the music should be fairly simple to follow, allowing those who are untrained musically to join the corporate singing. This does not mean, however, that the congregation should be lazy in their

singing. God desires that believers do all things with excellence (Phil 4:8; Col 3:23; 2 Cor 8:7), and therefore the congregation ought to learn and grow in their ability to sing more elaborate songs in praise to God.

The accessibility of music primarily pertains to the singing of music by the local congregation. The body can still be edified by music that may be outside of their musical skill level, as played or sung by skilled musicians. For example, the psalmist declares that praise should be given to God via musical instruments (Ps 150), yet there may be many who are not skilled in an instrument. Therefore, simply listening to a skilled musician play or sing praise to the Lord can be edifying in corporate worship. Additionally, the psalmist is instructed to “sing praises to Yahweh...[and] declare among the peoples His acts” (Ps 9:11). This can be done by a skilled musician for the edification of the body.

...Must be Skillfully Executed

An important aspect of corporate worship is that the music is executed in a skillful manner. In the temple construction and the eventual temple reconstruction in the Old Testament, there were those specified as musicians for the service of praise in the temple (1 Chron 9:33; 25:1-7; 2 Chron 34:12). These musicians were dedicated to their craft, and were skilled in accomplishing excellence through music. In the same manner, the musicians who serve the church ought to be skilled in their craft. Musicians who are not skilled can easily create distractions in worship through poor musicianship and continual musical mistakes. Therefore, the musicians in the church ought to be thoroughly prepared in their discipline.

...Must be Orderly

As part of corporate worship as a whole, it is critical that the music and its presentation be structured and orderly. This imperative stems from the command for all believers to be orderly and disciplined in all things (1 Cor 14:40), since God is orderly in His being (1 Cor 14:33). This is reflective of the orderliness of creation, and God’s purposeful structure in redemptive history. The music, therefore, must use natural, structured tones and follow a logical, universal instrumental pattern.