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## SINGING IN THE CHURCH





# The Founders Journal



Committed to historic Baptist principles

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Fall 2012

Singing in the Church

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Cover Image by Ken Puls

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# The Founders Journal



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# Singing in the Church

Tom Ascol

People tend to believe what they sing which makes singing in the church of utmost importance. The message of a song becomes internalized by those who sing it thoughtfully and wholeheartedly. Martin Luther understood this and so often extolled the value of music and singing—especially congregational singing—in the church.

In the forward to a 1538 symphony by Georg Rhau, Luther wrote,

Next to the Word of God, music deserves the highest praise. She is a mistress and governess of those human emotions—to pass over the animals—which govern men as masters or more often overwhelm them. No greater commendation than this can be found—at least, not by us. For whether you wish to comfort the sad, to terrify the happy, encourage the despairing, to humble the proud, to calm the passionate, or to appease those full of hate—and who could number all these masters of the human heart, namely, the emotions, inclinations, and affections that impel me to evil or good?—what more effective means than music could you find?... After all, the gift of language combined with the gift of song was only given to man to let him know that he should praise God with both world and music, namely, by proclaiming [the Word of God] through music and by providing sweet melodies with words.<sup>1</sup>

The Christian faith sings. We have reason to sing—to express the truth of God in Christ in ways that give vent to our raised affections as we contemplate them. Sadly, few subjects provoke more angst and reveal more misunderstanding than the place of music and singing in the church. What we should sing, how we should sing and why we should sing are questions that must be addressed in the light of Scripture. God has spoken plainly on such things in His Word, admittedly, not always to the extent and in the sort of detail that we might wish, but sufficiently and helpfully.

This issue of the *Founders Journal* is given to the topic of singing in church. It is a topic worthy of study. Heaven will be filled with praises directed to our Lord through song. All those who look forward to that eternal dwelling place, and who want to live submissively to Scripture today, should heed the call to “Shout for joy to God,... sing the glory of His name” and “give to Him glorious praise” (Psalm 66:1–2). ☺

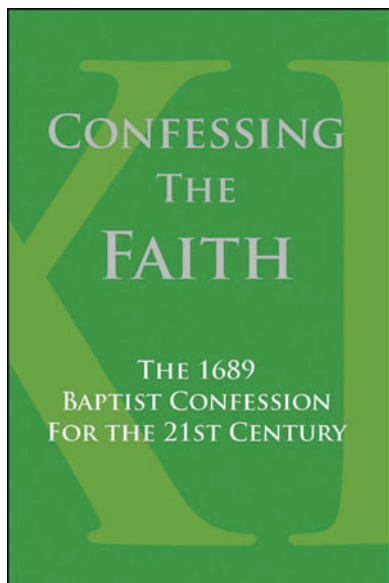
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## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, *Works*, (Fortress: Philadelphia, PA, 1965) 53:323–24.

# New from Founders Press

December 2012



## *Confessing the Faith The Baptist Confession for the 21st Century*

60 pages, soft cover

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The truths that this confession promoted fell out of favor for much of the twentieth century, but in the last fifty years there has been a great recovery of gospel truth among Evangelicals and once again there are those deeply committed to the doctrines of this confession. The English language, however, has changed over time, and just as there are phrases in the Authorized Version (1611), also known as the King James Version, that are no longer as clear as they once were due to linguistic change, so it is the case with the 1689 Confession. For this reason, this new rendition of the confession by Dr. Reeves is indeed welcome. He has sought to render it readable by the typical twenty-first-century Christian reader, but with minimal change and without sacrificing any of the riches of the original text. I believe he has succeeded admirably in both of these aims.

From the Foreword  
Michael A.G. Haykin  
Professor of Church History  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, KY

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# Songs of Salvation

*Exodus 15:1–21*

*Tom Ascol*

From a sermon preached at Grace Baptist Church,  
Cape Coral, Florida, September 9, 2012

The Christian faith is a faith that sings! It is God's intention that His people sing. Throughout both Old and New Testaments we find not only examples of God's people singing but also repeated commands to do so. There are over 400 references to singing and 50 specific commands to sing in the Bible, including two commands by the Apostle Paul that we sing "psalms, hymns and spiritual songs" (Colossians 3:16, Ephesians 5:19). Our faith sings. It is inherent in the Christian faith to sing. It is the way God has designed us. It is the way He calls us to respond to Him.

Zephaniah 3:17 tells us that God Himself sings. He sings over His people in delight and joy. So it only stands to reason that when the Lord saves a person by His grace, He would turn that man or woman into a singer! To know God savingly is to respond in praise to God, including praise through singing. It is only by a complete disregard for the Word of God or because of serious spiritual immaturity that a professing Christian who is able to sing would choose not to express praise to God by singing.

The great 16th century reformer, Martin Luther, understood this and placed great importance on congregational singing. He wrote,

God has made our hearts and spirits happy through His... Son, whom He has delivered up that we might be redeemed from sin, death, and the devil. He who believes this sincerely and earnestly cannot help but be happy; he must cheerfully sing and talk about this, that others might hear it and come to Christ. If any would not sing and talk of what Christ has wrought for us, he shows thereby that he does not really believe and that he belongs not [to the realm of] New Testament [religion].<sup>1</sup>

That same understanding is reflected in the old Isaac Watts hymn, “We’re Marching to Zion,” part of which says,

Come, we that love the Lord  
And let our joys be known  
Join in a song with sweet accord  
And thus surround the throne

Let those refuse to sing  
Who never knew our God  
But favorites of the heavenly King  
May speak their joys abroad<sup>2</sup>

Those who know God must sing. This attitude and spirit has resonated wherever the church of Jesus Christ has been found walking in spiritual health and vitality. People who are happy in God sing praises to God and for God.

### **The Song of Moses**

We have a shining example of this in Exodus 15. The first 21 verses of this chapter record the very first song of praise to God that is found in the Bible:

Then Moses and the people of Israel sang this song to the LORD, saying,  
“I will sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously;  
the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea.  
The LORD is my strength and my song,  
and he has become my salvation;  
this is my God, and I will praise him,  
my father’s God, and I will exalt him.  
The LORD is a man of war;  
the LORD is his name.  
Pharaoh’s chariots and his host he cast into the sea,  
and his chosen officers were sunk in the Red Sea.  
The floods covered them;  
they went down into the depths like a stone.  
Your right hand, O LORD, glorious in power,  
your right hand, O LORD, shatters the enemy.  
In the greatness of your majesty you overthrow your adversaries;  
you send out your fury; it consumes them like stubble.  
At the blast of your nostrils the waters piled up;  
the floods stood up in a heap;  
the deeps congealed in the heart of the sea.

The enemy said, 'I will pursue, I will overtake,  
 I will divide the spoil, my desire shall have its fill of them.  
 I will draw my sword; my hand shall destroy them.'  
 You blew with your wind; the sea covered them;  
 they sank like lead in the mighty waters.  
 Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods?  
 Who is like you, majestic in holiness,  
 awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders?  
 You stretched out your right hand;  
 the earth swallowed them.  
 You have led in your steadfast love the people whom you have redeemed;  
 you have guided them by your strength to your holy abode.  
 The peoples have heard; they tremble;  
 pangs have seized the inhabitants of Philistia.  
 Now are the chiefs of Edom dismayed;  
 trembling seizes the leaders of Moab;  
 all the inhabitants of Canaan have melted away.  
 Terror and dread fall upon them;  
 because of the greatness of your arm, they are still as a stone,  
 till your people, O LORD, pass by,  
 till the people pass by whom you have purchased.  
 You will bring them in and plant them on your own mountain,  
 the place, O LORD, which you have made for your abode,  
 the sanctuary, O Lord, which your hands have established.  
 The LORD will reign forever and ever."

For when the horses of Pharaoh with his chariots and his horsemen went into the sea, the LORD brought back the waters of the sea upon them, but the people of Israel walked on dry ground in the midst of the sea. Then Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a tambourine in her hand, and all the women went out after her with tambourines and dancing. And Miriam sang to them:

"Sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously;  
 the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea."  
 (Exodus 15:1–21)

### The God who saves deserves songs of praise

Though this song is often called "the Song of Moses" it was sung by all of the people of Israel. Verse 1 says that "Moses and the people of Israel sang..." Quite literally it says, "and the sons of Israel" which probably suggests that the men sang the verses of the song. But the singing certainly wasn't limited to the men. Verses 20–21 specifically say that Miriam—who was Moses' and Aaron's



sister—led the women in singing, also. Again, literally, verse 21 says that Miriam “answered” them.

It may be that all of the Israelites, both men and women, sang all the words of the song but verses 20–21 do indicate that Miriam and the women sang a special chorus in response, perhaps after each section of the song. This antiphonal, or responsive way of singing was common among the Israelites and is reflected in some of the Psalms.

On the shores of the Red Sea Moses set a precedent for Israel’s praises. It was set to music to help them remember and delight in the works of God. It was thoughtful and poetic, intentionally designed to offer up to the Lord not only that which is true, but that which is beautiful. The people didn’t engage in singing half-heartedly. They all entered into it—both men and women—and no doubt the children, as well. This is only appropriate because they all had experienced the saving work of God in rescuing them from Pharaoh and the Egyptian army.

Though there are various ways that we could study this song I want to look at it by calling attention to the fact that it is all about God. Not only is it about God but it is also sung to God. “Yahweh,” the covenant name of God is used 10 times in the song—9 times in the verses that Moses and the men sang and once in the chorus that Miriam and the women sang. All together, this song offers up praise to God for 1) His work—what He has done, 2) His character—who He is, and 3) His promises—what He will do.

## **Sing praise for what God has done**

The Song of Moses is a song of response. It was provoked by the works of God in saving His people. The “then” in verse one points us back to chapter 14. In Exodus 14 we read the account of God rescuing His people, bringing them through the Red Sea on dry ground and destroying the armies of Pharaoh. Verse 30 concludes:

Thus the LORD saved Israel that day from the hand of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore.

In verse 31 we see Israel’s response:

Israel saw the great power that the LORD used against the Egyptians, so the people feared the LORD, and they believed in the LORD and in his servant Moses.

This is how it worked. God provided salvation in a miraculous way. Then the people were filled with awe and faith (14:31). And then they responded in praise (15:1–21). God acts, we believe, and in faith we declare and celebrate what He has done.

The song is focused on the saving work that God had just performed for His people. They sing in verse 1 that He “triumphed” over His enemies, vividly describing God’s actions: “The horse and his rider He has thrown into the sea” — a phrase echoed in the chorus sung by Miriam and the women (15:21). Verses 4 and 5 recount: “Pharaoh’s chariots and his host he cast into the sea, and his chosen officers were sunk in the Red Sea. The floods covered them; they went down into the depths like a stone.” God saved His people. They had just seen it. They had just experienced it. It was fresh to them. The right hand of God, glorious in power, had reached down and shattered their enemies. And so as they sing, they dwell upon His saving work.

Included in the song is an awareness of the enemies arrayed against God. In verse 9 the enemy said: “I will pursue, I will overtake, I will divide the spoil, my desire shall have its fill of them. I will draw my sword; my hand shall destroy them.” The enemy was intent. Pharaoh had set himself against God and had come against the people of God. But God made clear that those who oppose Him will be opposed by Him. God came against Pharaoh and defeated him. In verse 10 we read:

You blew with your wind; the sea covered them;  
they sank like lead in the mighty waters.

And in verse 12:

You stretched out your right hand;  
the earth swallowed them.

God did that! And so His people sing in verse 11:

“Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods?  
Who is like you, majestic in holiness,  
awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders?”

There is exuberance in this song of praise because there was a fresh awareness of what God had done to save them from the Egyptians. They are on the shores of the Red Sea. Only a few hours before they were stuck between an angry army and an impassable sea. BUT GOD... but God had come and rescued them. So they sing His praises. Their joy and relief are turned to song.

There is something inevitable in true praise. It is an overflow of our joy. You cannot help but praise what you enjoy and delight in. Just watch a dedicated fan when his football team makes a great play. What does he do? He rejoices! Claps! Shouts! He celebrates. Why? Because it is inevitable. It is a natural expression of His joy.

We praise what we value, what we appreciate. What we enjoy we naturally praise—whether that is a football team, an Olympic record, a child or a friend or a lover. C.S. Lewis put it like this, “I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation.”<sup>3</sup> Praise completes delight.

Wherever you find anemic praise of God, you can be sure that there is diminished joy in God. Wherever you find anemic praise of God for His great works you can be sure that the reason is that there is little of enjoyment of God or appreciation for all that He has done.

This can serve as a real diagnostic tool for us. You will extol what you enjoy. You will celebrate what you appreciate. You will praise what you delight in. So if your worship is half-hearted or weak, don’t look for emotional tricks or gimmicks to get back on track or pump yourself up. Look to the mighty works of God! Go to the source! Bring back to your mind and affections in a fresh way to all God has done for you in Christ. Think about the cross! Think about what Jesus has done to accomplish our salvation! Look and consider! Ponder and rejoice! Because, when you see and exult in all that God has done for you in His Son, you cannot help but sing praises to your Redeemer-King.

This is exactly what is going on in heaven. The revelation that John was given into the experience of heaven includes a scene recorded in Revelation 5:9–10, when the 24 elders—representing all the people of God—and the 4 living creatures—representing all the rest of creation—see Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, seated on the throne of heaven. And John writes,

And they sang a new song, saying, “Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.”

They cannot help but praise God when they think about God. You can’t stop heavenly beings from thinking about and praising God. Their delight is in Him. Heaven is a place overflowing in joy and praise. If you don’t learn to love God and delight in Him now—to express your praise to Him now—I wonder what makes you think you will be fit for heaven? If praising God is a drag for you, it is an indication that you have not yet come to see the glories of His saving power.

Has the great work that Jesus Christ accomplished for you become stale in your mind and heart? Can you think of it or speak of it without being amazed by it anymore? Some of us need to go back to the shores of the Red Sea, and remember where we were—what we were—when God reached down and saved us. It was while we were yet sinners that Christ died for us (Romans 5:8). Think of what it took to save you. Remember your sins, your spiritual indifference and your rebel-

lion. Yet, God loved you and sent His Son to die for you! God brought someone into your life to teach you the gospel. God sent His Spirit to give you new life. He turned your heart away from vain idols and gave you saving faith!

Have you seen Jesus? Have you laid hold of the truth and magnitude of what He has done? Our God has done great things, and that's worth singing about!

## **Sing praise for who God is (what He is like)**

What God has done tells us a great deal about what He is like. His works reveal His character. And this song praises God for who He is as well as for what He does. Five attributes of God are highlighted in this song.

### ***1) His eternity***

Ten times God is called by His covenant name, “Yahweh,” meaning “I am that I am.” God is self-existent, without beginning and without end.

### ***2) His sovereign power***

Verse 6 and verse 12 speak of God’s “right hand” shattering the enemy and causing the earth to swallow them. The “right hand” of God is often used as a metaphor to depict His great power and authority. Certainly, with what the Israelites had just witnessed, they were freshly aware of the incredible, sovereign power of their God. He is almighty!

### ***3) His anger and wrath***

Verse 7 speaks of God’s fury consuming the enemy like stubble. God’s “fury” (חֵרָה) denotes His “burning anger.” The term conveys the idea of a fire that has been kindled and is now burning hot.

God’s wrath is not like our sinful anger. Our anger is often unbridled, selfish and misdirected. God’s anger is always righteous. It always opposes all that is unrighteous (Romans 1:18) and it always opposes unrighteousness in the right way.

It is a sobering thing to consider that the God of the Bible is a God of wrath. We tend to emphasize His love, and well we should because “God *is* love” (1 John 4:8), but, as verse 3 celebrates, our God is also a “man of war.”

Did you know that the Bible speaks more of God’s wrath than it does of His love? Hell is the place where the unending wrath of God will be poured out on His enemies for all eternity. It is the place where God’s justice will be eternally displayed in the punishment of evil. Jesus spoke more about hell than heaven.

Can you praise God for His wrath? You can, if you are overwhelmed by the mercy and grace of God that has spared you from the wrath you justly deserve! The Israelites felt this and so they praised God for who He *really* is, not who some



merely imagine Him to be. And included in our great God's attributes is His holy, just wrath.

If you refuse to acknowledge the wrath of God or diminish it in any way, you will not be able fully to appreciate the death of Jesus Christ. On the cross we see both God's love and God's wrath on display. On the cross, Jesus endured the wrath of God against our sins. This is why Isaiah prophesies what He does about the sufferings of Jesus. In 53:4–10 he says that Jesus was “stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; ... and with his wounds we are healed. ... the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was ... like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, ... it was the will of the Lord to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for guilt.”

Our sins deserve God's wrath as surely as Pharaoh's sins deserved God's wrath. But God sent His Son, Jesus, to the cross, in order to bear the punishment for our sins, so that whoever trusts Him as Lord not only escapes God's wrath but also becomes reconciled to Him. This is how we can praise God for His wrath without being terrorized by it—in Christ we have a wrath-removing Savior!

#### *4. His supremacy*

Verse 11 reminds us that God is supreme. He is supreme in who He is, “majestic in holiness.” Holiness is the essential attribute of God—His “otherness.” And He is supreme in what He does, “awesome in glorious deeds” and “doing wonders.” The word used for “awesome” (אָמִיגָוִי) is a word that means fearful. God is the author of activities that rightly should invoke fear.

All of these attributes of God are expressed by way of rhetorical questions: “Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like you...?” The obvious answer is no one! Israel is proclaiming in effect: YOU ALONE are God! There is no one like you. You are the only true God. Pharaoh and the Egyptians had their own gods, but they were not real gods. They were imaginary—impotent—the creation of fertile imaginations. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 8:5–6, “For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”—yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.”

#### *5. His unfailing, covenant love*

In verse 13 God's people sing, “You have led in your steadfast love the people whom you have redeemed...” “Steadfast love” (חֶסֶד)—“hesed” refers to God's covenant love, His particular love for His particular people. This song celebrates this love of redemption—the love of faithfulness.

God accomplishes His Word and keeps His promises. The deliverance of the Israelites out of Egypt and from the cruel intentions of Pharaoh was a fulfillment of the promise that God had made to Abraham. Moses and the people view their salvation in terms of God's covenant faithfulness and so they sing about it.

If you are a follower of Jesus Christ, your existence and devotion to Him is a testimony to God's covenantal faithfulness. The fact that you ever came to agree with God about your sin and turn away from it; that you ever humbled yourself before Jesus Christ and trusted Him; that you have not finally turned your back on Him despite many lapses and falls; the fact that you woke up this morning *still saved* is a testimony not to your strength or determination but to *God's* steadfast love—all this points to His unending grace and faithfulness! *Praise Him* for that! Praise Him with singing!

### **Sing praise for what God will do**

Not only does this song teach us to praise God for what He has done and who He is, it also instructs us to praise Him for what He will do. Note the change in focus from the present and past to the future in verses 14–18. Four different groups of people are mentioned: Philistines, Edmonites; Moabites and Canaanites. These are the future enemies the Israelites will face. Edomites and Moabites are enemies Israel will face on the way to the Promised Land. Canaanites are enemies they will have to displace to take the Promised Land. Philistines will be ongoing enemies that will harass them in the Promised Land.

The future is envisioned with such certainty that it is expressed as having already happened. Verse 14 says: “the peoples have heard.” No doubt word spread quickly, so the nations had heard, but God was preparing to do even more. Moses was familiar with the different nations they would come against and he was full of confidence that God would fully defeat all of Israel's enemies, and so they sing praise to God.

Though enemies will come against them, those enemies will not thwart God's purposes. Verses 14 and 15 say they will “tremble.” They will be filled with “terror and dread” (16) and become “still as a stone” (16), in other words, “petrified.” God will dispose of all His enemies and fulfill His saving purposes for His people. He will protect them and provide for them (16) and get them safely and securely to the Promised Land (17). Verse 17 speaks of Jerusalem, the place God chose for His Old Covenant people: “You will bring them in and plant them on your own mountain, the place, O Lord, which you have made for your abode, the sanctuary, O Lord, which your hands have established.”

All this happened in the ensuing history of Israel. Forty years later when Joshua sent two men on a reconnaissance mission into Jericho, one of the citizens of that city named Rahab said this to them: “I know that the Lord has given you

the land, and that the fear of you has fallen upon us, and that all the inhabitants of the land melt away before you. For we have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you devoted to destruction. And as soon as we heard it, our hearts melted, and there was no spirit left in any man because of you, for the Lord your God, he is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath” (Joshua 2:9–11).

God delivered His people into the land of Canaan just as He promised, and many of those singing this song by the Red Sea would live to see that promise fulfilled. But the song’s future perspective does not end with the Israelites inhabiting the Promised Land. Rather, the song ends with a declaration about eternity. In verse 17 they sing: “The LORD will reign forever and ever.” God’s saving purposes are not limited history. Jerusalem and the Land of Promise were earthly symbols of heaven. Day by day God continues to bring more and more people into the promise of heaven by the power of His saving work in Christ. All God’s people can sing now and will sing eternally: “The LORD will reign forever and ever.”

## Conclusion

The song of Moses teaches us much about how we as the people of God, saved by His grace, purchased through blood, ought to respond to the Lord with praise-filled, whole-hearted singing.

The song is all about God. It is sung for Him in response to what He has done. Though Moses served as a great leader and was the useful instrument God used to deliver His people, Moses is not even mentioned in the song. The glory and worship belong to God alone!

The song is also sung to God. Note the change of voice of verse 6. Israel addresses God, saying, “Your right hand, O LORD, is glorious in power.” We are commanded to sing to the Lord as well as about the Lord. We must sing words that not only declare truth about God, but express our praise and adoration to God.

How do you imagine Israel sang this song? How should God be addressed? Lackadaisically? Apathetically? Thoughtlessly? Heartlessly? NO! Wholeheartedly! With passion! With honesty! Authentically! Emotionally! This was their song and they expressed it personally. Notice all the personal pronouns. “The Lord is *my* strength and *my* song, and he has become *my* salvation; this is *my* God, and *I* will praise him, *my* father’s God, and *I* will exalt him. (15:2)” The Song of Moses sets a precedent that we see throughout the psalms and songs of Israel—music filled with deep, heart-felt, personal praise.

We must learn from the Song of Moses. When we declare our praises to God we must not do so in a detached, clinical manner. *This is our God!* The God who

sent Jesus into the world is *our God*. The God who created and rules the world is *our God*. The God who establishes rulers and throws down empires is *our God*. The God who rules the winds and waves is *our God*. The God who is working all things together after the counsel of His own will is *our God*. The God who sends His Spirit to teach us His Word and to draw people to Christ is *our God*. The God who has promised that the nations will come to worship before Him is *our God*!

This is why we must sing—why we cannot help but sing! Praising God is what we will be doing in heaven throughout eternity. The book of Revelation closes Scripture, with a reminder, like bookends, calling for us to sing praise to God. We will be singing throughout all eternity because it will take that long to declare the greatness of our God. John describes this for us in Revelation 15 where he gives us a glimpse into heaven. There he sees God’s people standing beside another sea—this one “a sea glass mingled with fire.” And, John says, “they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying, ‘Great and amazing are your deeds, O Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are your ways, O King of the nations! Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship you, for your righteous acts have been revealed.’” That is why we sing! That’s our song. That’s our God! 🐦

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## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> from Luther’s Introduction to the *Baptsche Gesangbuch*, WA 35:476f.

<sup>2</sup> Isaac Watts, *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, 1707.

<sup>3</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (San Diego, CA: Harvest Book, 1964), 94–95.



# Ten Principles for Church Song

*Kevin DeYoung*

From the DeYoung, Restless and Reformed Blog  
(Gospel Coalition), June 28 and 30, 2011  
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When it comes to singing on Sundays, churches have more options than ever before. From hymnals to Hillsong to homegrown creations, pastors and worship leaders have thousands of songs to choose from. A nice problem to have.

But still a problem. No music leader or pastor can keep up. No church can sing all the great hymns and all the latest greatest songs on the radio. No musician can excel in all the available styles. No leader can please all the people all the time.

The proliferation of choices often leads to conflict. Should we do hymns (Wesley, Watts, or Fanny Crosby?) or contemporary (70's folk music, early seeker service contemporary, or edgy punk rock?). Should our music have a Latin flavor or an African American feel? Should we use chants, chorale music, metrical psalms, jazz, country western, or bluegrass?

There are other questions too. What sort of instruments should we use? How much should cultural context come into play? Is there only one right kind of song to sing? If not, are there any wrong ways?

I can't possibly answer all those questions. But there are some general principles we can use to make wise decisions with our church music. Let me suggest ten principles for congregational singing.

## **1. Love is indispensable to church singing that pleases God.**

There are more important things than the kinds of songs we sing. Music should not be the glue that holds us together—the cross, the glory of Jesus Christ, the majesty of God, and love should. But even churches centered on the gospel disagree about music. So love is indispensable when we sing and when we are trying to discern what is best to sing.

John Calvin:

But because he [the Lord] did not will in outward discipline and ceremonies to prescribe in detail what we ought to do (because he foresaw that this depended upon the state of the times, and he did not deem one form suitable for all ages), here we must take refuge in those general rules which he has given, that whatever the necessity of the church will require for order and decorum should be tested against these. Lastly, because he has taught nothing specifically, and because these things are not necessary to salvation, and for the upbuilding of the church ought to be variously accommodated to the customs of each nation and age, it will be fitting (as the advantage of the church will require) to change and abrogate traditional practices and to establish new ones. Indeed, I admit that we ought not to charge into innovation rashly, suddenly, for insufficient cause. But love will best judge what may hurt or edify; and if we let love be our guide, all will be safe.<sup>1</sup>

Before we are quick to judge the lame songs some other Christians enjoy, remember C.S. Lewis' revelation. Listen to one of the century's most famous converts to Christianity talk about his early impression of church music:

I disliked very much their hymns, which I considered to be fifth-rate poems set to sixth-rate music. But as I went on I saw the great merit of it. I came up against different people of quite different outlooks and different education, and then gradually my conceit just began peeling off. I realized that the hymns (which were just sixth-rate music) were, nevertheless, being sung with devotion and benefit by an old saint in elastic-side boots in the opposite pew, and then you realize that you aren't fit to clean those boots. It gets you out of your solitary conceit.<sup>2</sup>

I imagine the Apostle Paul, if he were writing to the church today, might have something to say about our worship style. "If I sing in style of the hippest music, but have not love, I am only a banging drum or a strumming guitar. If I have a gift for reading music and enjoy the richest hymns, but have not love, I am nothing. If I am discerning of excellent music and fine poetry, but have not love, I gain nothing." The first principle for singing as a congregation and choosing music for the congregation is love.

## **2. Our singing is for God's glory and the edification of the body of Christ.**

God is the one we want to impress, the one we most want to honor. Our first aim must not be to win over the culture or appeal to the unregenerate. Worship is for the Worthy One.

Following closely on this priority is the goal of edification. The singing on Sunday morning should benefit God's people. This is a fair application of Paul's concerns in 1 Corinthians 14. It's also part and parcel of teaching and admonishing each other with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs (Colossians 3:16). We should never approach the music as an entertaining lead-in to the sermon. Before you employ secular songs as your background music prior to the start of the service, consider whether a vaguely spiritual song from U2 will really build up the body of Christ.

Congregational song is part of the teaching ministry of the church. Church musicians and pastors should ask themselves: if our people learned their theology from our songs what would they know in twenty years about God, the cross, the resurrection, the offices of Christ, the Holy Spirit, the Trinity, creation, justification, election, regeneration, the church, the sacraments, and all the other fundamental doctrines of the faith?

### **3. We ought to sing to the Lord new songs.**

Isn't that a command? A command we haven't exhausted yet? There are still new songs to be sung to the Lord. What if the Church had stopped singing new songs in the 15th century? We wouldn't have "A Mighty Fortress is Our God." What if Christians stopped in the 16th century? No Charles Wesley. No Isaac Watts. What if the Church stopped a generation ago? No one would be singing "In Christ Alone" this Sunday. What a pity.

Sometimes I want to ask to very conservative Christians: "Do you really think the last good song of praise to Jesus has been written?"

### **4. Church singing should swim in its own history of church singing.**

The metaphor is intentional. We should swim in this big ocean of church music, an ocean that is continually receiving new streams. I am not advocating a certain percentage of old v. new—every church will look and feel a little different, but I am suggesting that we should understand ourselves to be a part of this deep ocean of Christian song.

It's amazing to me that any church would consciously (or unconsciously for that matter) step completely out of the ocean of the historic hymnody and step into a wading pool of nothing but contemporary song. I'm not saying newer songs are inferior to older ones (see previous point). What I am saying is that it is an expression of extreme hubris and folly to think we have nothing to gain from older songs and nothing to lose when we throw out the songs Christians have been singing for hundreds of years.

Think of what you get with a hymnal (whether it's an actual hymnal or the contents of the hymnal on your screen):

- *A link to history.* Our people, not to mention the world, needs to know that Christianity is not a novel invention. We sing in concert with two millennia of believers.
- *Diversity.* I guarantee that those churches using hymns are being exposed to a wider variety of Christian song than those who are exclusively contemporary. The hymnal has twenty centuries of styles: chants, folk tunes, ethnic tunes, carols, psalms, Welsh ballads, English melodies, stout German hymns, gospel tunes (black and white), and dozens of other musical variations.
- *Excellence.* Yes, there are some real clunkers in most hymnals. But by and large, the bad songs have been weeded out. If we are stilling singing a song five hundred years later it probably has strong lyrics, good poetry, and a singable tune.
- *The whole counsel of God.* Hymns give you a wide range of themes and biblical categories. Contemporary music is getting better in this regard, but the hymnal is still the best place to find a song on the ascension or the exaltation of Christ or a song of illumination or a lamentation or a communion hymn. Kudos to the Getty/Townend team and Sovereign Grace for trying to fill these kinds of gaps.

## 5. Sing the Psalms.

I am not convinced by the arguments for exclusive psalmody. But in 95% of our churches the problem is not that we are keeping out good non-Psalms. It's strange, even though we are commanded to sing Psalms and even though Psalms have been at the center of the Church's singing for centuries, still we easily ignore the 800 pound gorilla in the middle of our Bibles (to borrow a phrase from Terry Johnson). On a cheerier note, I'm thankful we are beginning to see some contemporary musicians turn their attention to the Psalms.

## 6. We should strive for excellence in the musicality and the poetry of the songs we sing.

I'm not for a moment suggesting elitism. A time has to be relatively simple for hundreds or thousands of people to sing it at the same time. But we can still insist on undistracting excellence (to use Piper's phrase). We want the cross to be the stumbling block, not our poor musicianship or faltering powerpoint.



While I believe a wide variety of styles can be used in worship, I am not a musical relativist. Some songs are better than others. Some styles work better than others. And when it comes to lyrics, we should avoid obvious sloppiness like using thee and you in the same song or heaping up trite cliches. I heard a song on the radio a couple weeks ago whose chorus had something about a fragrant rose in the early spring and an eagle soaring to spread its wings. If your church sings this on Sunday, love your worship leader all the same. But if you're the worship leader picking this song, try for something with a little more artistry, something that doesn't sound like it came from a random page in your inspirational pocket calendar.

Some songs are simply deep and some are deeply simple, but there is a way to do both well. With so many songs to choose from, there's no reason churches can't make an effort to sing songs with some sense of poetry and musical integrity. The Hallelujah chorus is repetitive, but it's musically interesting. Most songs, choruses, and verses aren't good enough to be repeated for very long.

## **7. The main sound to be heard in the worship music is the sound of the congregation singing.**

Everyone is responsible to sing. The young girl with her hands in the air and the old man belting out the bass line. What people want to see in your worship is that you mean it. And no matter how chill or how reverent your worship is, if no one is singing, it's lame.

And if the main sound is to be the congregation singing, this will have implications for how we play and choose our songs.

- Is it singable? Pay attention to range (too high or too low), and beware of syncopation and lots of irregularities in the meter and rhythm. Make sure the melody makes some intuitive sense, especially if you don't have music to look at or people can't read music. When your guitar strums between G, C and D there are a lot of notes to choose from.
- Is the instrumentation helping or inhibiting the congregation to sing? This means checking the volume. Is the music too soft to support the human voices? Is it so loud it's drowning them out? One mistake music teams make is to think that every instrument needs to be used with every song. Some songs should get the whole kitchen sink, but just because you have a drum, piano, guitar, bass, lyre, zither, flute, chicken shaker, banjo, cello, and djembe up there doesn't mean you have to use them all.
- Is this song familiar. People cannot handle a new song every week, let alone two or three new songs. Stick with your basic sound and core songs and go

out from there. On occasion you may have to admit, “That’s a great song, but I don’t think we can do it well.”

## **8. The congregation should also be stretched from time to time to learn new songs and broaden its musical horizons.**

Every church will have a musical center. You should not reinvent the center every week. But you should not be enslaved to it either. We need to be stretched once a while, not only with a new song but a new kind of song—something from the African-America church, or something from Africa or Latin America (with an English translation so it is intelligible), or something from the classical choral tradition. It’s good to be reminded that belong to an ancient and global church.

## **9. The texts of our songs should be matched with fitting musicality and instrumentation.**

Music should support the theme of the song. Different texts have different moods. The words for “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” would not work with the tune for “Children of the Heavenly Father.” The campy song “Do Lord” does not quite capture the mood of the dying thief’s final words. On the other hand, you have to love the Getty song “See What a Morning” where the triumphant, celebratory music perfectly matches the resurrection lyrics.

Musical style is not neutral, but it is elastic. Music conveys something. Some melodies are too syrupy or too raucous or too romantic. I’ve always felt like “This is the Air I Breathe” was too sensual sounding. Plus I’m not sure what the song means. But styles are not rigid categories. There isn’t a sharp line between contemporary and traditional, or classical and popular, or high culture and low culture. We don’t have to make absolute rules about musical style, but we do need to be intelligent.

Let me just say a word about organs. No church should die on this hill. But if your church already has an organ my advice is to keep using it. Organs were originally associated with paganism. So there is nothing inherently spiritual about them. When they were introduced into churches, the average Christian in the Middle Ages knew as much about organs as your average teenager does today. They were introduced into worship because of the fitness of the instrument. As Harold Best argues in his fantastic book *Unceasing Worship*, there is no instrument we know of in the West better suited to support congregational singing.<sup>3</sup> The organ fills in the cracks, provides an underneath sound, and encourages churches to sing louder and freer. If you don’t have an organ they can be expensive to get. We mustn’t lay down any commands. But if an organ is an option for you, don’t ditch it.

## 10. All of our songs should employ manifestly biblical lyrics.

We must start by asking of all our songs: is this true? Not just true, but accurate to the biblical text. For example, I like the Third Day song “Consuming Fire” but the lyrics, while true, misuse the biblical text. According to the song, our God is a consuming fire because he reaches inside and melts our cold hearts of stone. That’s true, but the text in Hebrews is about God our judge.

Similarly, our songs should be manifestly true. That is, we shouldn’t have to put a spin on the lyrics to get them to be ok. We are not looking for subtlety. We don’t want to sing songs that leave us wondering “what exactly does that mean?”

On the flip side, don’t be too hard on “I” songs. About 100 of the 150 Psalms have the word “I.” “I” is not the problem. The problem is with songs that are too colloquially, or use “I” thoughtlessly (I just want to praise you—well then praise him), or never move from how I am feeling about God to who God is and what he’s done to make me feel this way.

In all our songs we want to be teaching people about God. If we aren’t learning good theology and biblical truth from our songs, then either we don’t care much about our songs or we don’t care much about rich biblical truth, or both. 🙏

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### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4:10:30.

<sup>2</sup> C.S. Lewis, *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1972), 62.

<sup>3</sup> Harold Best, *Unceasing Worship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 73.

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# What Then Shall We Sing?

*Ken Puls*

From the teaching notes of a series taught at Grace Baptist Church, Cape Coral, Florida on August 22 and 29, 2010

[kenpulsmusic.com/Sermons\\_and\\_Articles.html](http://kenpulsmusic.com/Sermons_and_Articles.html)  
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## Part 1: Thoughts on Music

**M**y focus for this brief study is music—the music we make, sing and hear around us. I want to share with you some thoughts on music and consider how we can use and enjoy music both in our times of gathered worship and in all of life.

I have 10 questions that I want to address and answer. The first five relate to music in general—music that we employ and enjoy in all of life.

### Part 1 — Thoughts on Music

- 1) What is music?
- 2) What does music communicate?
- 3) How does music communicate?
- 4) Can music be evil or worldly?
- 5) What music can we enjoy as Christians?

The last five relate specifically to music in the context of gathered worship.

### Part 2 — Thoughts on Music and Worship

- 6) What is the relationship between music and worship?
- 7) Can all music be used equally well in worship?
- 8) What does music add to our worship?
- 9) What should worship music sound like?
- 10) Should all Christians sing the same music in worship?

We begin with the first question:

## I. What Is music?

There are many ways to describe and define music. I want to give you three ways to think about music that will be helpful in laying the groundwork of our study.

### A. Music is a gift of God

Music comes from God; it belongs to God; it serves His purposes. Listen to how some of the Reformers spoke about music:

Among all other things which are proper for recreation of man and for giving him pleasure, music is the first or one of the principal and we must esteem it as a gift of God given to us for that purpose [from John Calvin's Preface to the *Genevan Psalter*, 1543].

Music is a beautiful and glorious gift of God and close to theology. I would not give up what little I know about music for something else which I might have in greater abundance. We should always make it a point to habituate youth to enjoy the art of music, for it produces fine and skillful people [Martin Luther, 1538].

### 1. Music is a part of God's creation

As part of God's creation it was created *good* for us to use and enjoy. The beauty and order in its design are testimonies to its Creator and give evidence of God's delight in beauty, order, and harmony. Zephaniah 3:17 reveals that God Himself sings as He dwells in the midst of His people and rejoices over them.

God has filled creation with music and He has adorned His Word with music. There are many references in the Bible that command and commend music, references that speak of music accompanying worship, work, recreation and rest.

Many verses contain the words to songs, hymns and spiritual songs. There are 31,173 verses in the Bible; 3,521 contain music texts (about 11%). About 14% of verses in the Old Testament are psalms and songs. About 3% of verses in the New Testament are songs, hymns and quotations from psalms and songs in the Old Testament.

### 2. Music is designed for God's glory

Along with all of the good gifts of creation, God gave us music that He would be glorified in it. Scripture testifies to this—music all through the Scriptures exalts God and His work.



Many of the major events of the Bible are celebrated through music. Job 38:7 records that the morning stars sang together and the angels shouted for joy as God created the heavens and the earth. Israel celebrated God's victory over Pharaoh and his army at the Red Sea with singing (Exodus 15:1–21). Music was heard at the giving of the law at Sinai (Exodus 19). It accompanied the bringing of the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem (1 Chronicles 15), the dedication of the Temple in Jerusalem (2 Chronicles 5, 7:1–11), and the restoration of the Temple (Ezra 3) and the wall of Jerusalem (Nehemiah 12:27–43). The birth of Jesus was announced with the song of the angels (Luke 2:13–14) and His coming again will be announced with the sound of a trumpet (1 Thessalonians 4:16).

God commands all of creation in Psalm 96:1–3

Oh sing to the LORD a new song;  
sing to the LORD, all the earth!  
Sing to the LORD, bless his name;  
tell of his salvation from day to day.  
Declare his glory among the nations,  
his marvelous works among all the peoples!

Music is a good gift of God that we are to enjoy for His glory—in worship and in all of life.

## **B. Music is an art**

- 1. It is designed for expression**
- 2. It is comprised of elements**

As painting has color, line, texture, shades of light and dark, music also has elements:

Pitches or Notes / rhythms / dynamics (loud / soft) / tempo (fast / slow)

Timbre (sound qualities of the various musical instruments)

Composers combine all these elements to express something they believe is of value.

## **C. Music is a language**

- 1. It has written and audible structure**
- 2. It communicates meaning**

Music is not just sound, it is intentionally composed to communicate. It has content. Music is an art. It is designed to be expressive. Music is a language. It is meaningful.

## II. What does music communicate?

### A. Music communicates emotion—it expresses feelings

Another way music is an art—like painting and sculpture—is that it can be abstract or representational.

Painting can be abstract—lines and shapes, lights and darks, textures and color—all for their own sake with no association with objects, places or people. Or you can take these elements of painting and use them to represent something on a canvas—like a person or a landscape.

Music can be abstract—pitches, rhythms, dynamics, timbres and sonance—sound for sake of sound. Or music can be representational. The vast majority of the music we hear and sing—in church, in the car, at the symphony hall, at the concert, on the radio, on our iPods—is representational, conveying emotion—we tend to prefer representational music for the simple reason that we want to listen to music that moves us and connects with our feelings.

Music helps us emotionally interpret and express poetry, movies, drama, and events. So if you think of emotions—love, contentment, excitement, hope, joy, wonder, anger, rage, regret, envy, fear, hatred, sadness, grief—music is a capable means of helping us express such emotion.

### B. Music is designed to “raise the affections”

In other words, music shapes and gives voice to our feelings. It not only allows us a means to express what we feel, both individually and corporately, it can stir and heighten such emotion in us.

## III. How does music communicate emotion?

Music communicates primarily by—

### A. Reflection

Music conveys emotion, but not in the same way as a spoken language. You can't combine notes and chords to directly express emotions in the same way that you put together letters to make specific words—as J + O + Y = JOY. Music conveys its message indirectly by reflecting and imitating gestures, inflections, and movements that are associated in human experience with specific emotions and feelings.

If you walk into a room and someone is joyful, how do you know they are joyful (if they don't come right out and tell you)? You can tell, right? You might notice the inflection of their voice or buoyancy and energy in their movements. Music is extremely proficient in imitating and reflecting these kinds of signals that we use to interpret our emotions.

PLAY EXAMPLE: Bach — “Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desiring”  
What is Bach trying to communicate? How does he do it?

Ladies, let’s say you are putting your children down for a nap and you want to play some Classical Music as they rest. How would this work?

PLAY EXAMPLE: Bizet — “March Of The Toreadors” from Carmen  
How would you describe the emotion of this song? Why would it not work for a nap?

Music is a marvelous means to express emotion. For example, if a composer wants to convey rage, he might make the movement of the notes agitated or violent. To create a feeling of peace, he might fashion the sound to be still and quiet with soft tones and little movement. To express joy, as we heard with Bach, he might create a melody that is buoyant and energetic. By reflecting and imitating the gestures and movements of emotion, the music seems to take on the character of the emotion itself, undergirding and giving voice to our feelings and sometimes even stirring and heightening the associated feelings.

This expression of feeling in a song is not always entirely clear or apparent. We can miss cues in physical gestures, and often we need other clues from words, actions and the surrounding context to confirm our interpretation. The same is true in music. Sometimes a composer may change a song to suggest a different feeling.

PLAY EXAMPLE: Edelman — “Dixie” from Soundtrack of Gettysburg  
This is a familiar tune. Normally played upbeat and joyful.  
What has the composer done here? Why? [He slowed the tempo and cast the song in a more somber, reflective tone.]

A skilled songwriter will be very intentional to emotionally interpret and set the words of a song to music that fits the affections that are evident in the words or the context (like a movie score).

The Bible demonstrates the connection between music and emotion. In times of joy music adds delight and enjoyment to celebration. In the Old Testament, for example, music accompanied the celebration of victory over an enemy (1 Samuel 18:7–8), celebration at the beginning of a journey (Genesis 31:27), and the celebration of springtime (Song of Solomon 2:12). In times of sorrow music deepens and enriches lamentation. David taught the children of Judah the Song of the Bow in 2 Samuel 1:17–27 to lament the deaths of Saul and Jonathan. In 2 Samuel 3:33–34 David sang a lament over Abner.

A great many passages in Scripture where you see a personal outpouring of emotion (both joy and sorrow) are musical passages, especially the psalms.

Oh come, let us sing to the LORD;  
let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!  
Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;  
let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!  
(Psalm 95:1–2)

This is the day that the LORD has made;  
let us rejoice and be glad in it.  
(Psalm 118:24)

Glory in his holy name;  
let the hearts of those who seek the LORD rejoice!  
(Psalm 105:3)

There are also examples of sorrow and grief:

For my soul is full of troubles,  
and my life draws near to Sheol.  
I am counted among those who go down to the pit;  
I am a man who has no strength  
(Psalm 88:3–4)

Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am in distress;  
my eye is wasted from grief;  
my soul and my body also.  
For my life is spent with sorrow,  
and my years with sighing;  
my strength fails because of my iniquity,  
and my bones waste away.  
(Psalm 31:9–10)

Music communicates emotion by reflection, but it is not always that simple. There are at least two other factors that can undergird or complicate the message.

## B. Identification

Identification takes place when a song becomes well known. For example who recognizes these four notes?

PLAY EXAMPLE: Opening to first movement of Beethoven's 5th Symphony: *Allegro Con Brio*

Those familiar with this music can immediately identify it.

Identification can also occur in the bonding of text and tune. The music can quickly call to remembrance the lyrics.

Identification can be distracting when you try to change the words of a well-known song, add words to a well-known tune, or even use a tune that sounds similar to a well-known tune. Rather than supporting the new words, the tune can confound them, as it brings to mind the previous words or musical work.

### C. Association

Association is the bonding of music to our experience. Sometimes association can be reinforcing, heightening the meaning of the song. In the summer of 2004 my church in Florida, Grace Baptist Church in Cape Coral, learned the song “Made Me Glad.” This song expresses to God:

You are my Shield, my Strength, my Portion, Deliverer,  
My Shelter, Strong Tower, My very present help in time of need.  
[2001 Hillsong Music Publishing; Words and Music by Miriam Webster]

A few weeks after learning the song, Hurricane Charley hit Southwest Florida. Many in the church sang the song while riding out the storm. We sang the song together when we met for worship the first time following the storm. It now has strong associations that heighten its meaning. Through the event of the hurricane we lived the truth of the song. God was and is our “Shield, our Strength, our Portion, Deliverer, our Shelter, Strong Tower, our very present help in time of need.”

Associations can also be distracting to the emotional expression of a song. Someone may know a very joyful song that was a favorite of a loved-one who is now with the Lord. Though the song was composed to express joy, it can now stir some sorrow as well as it invokes memories and bereavement.

Or take another example of association. Maybe God saved you out of a sinful and rebellious lifestyle in the past, and music was a part of how you expressed and indulged in that passion. Now when you hear music that sounds similar, the assumptions and connections they form are instinctively negative.

And you begin to wonder: Was that music sinful? It sure feels like it was?

## IV. Can music be evil or worldly?

You may have read books or watched videos that teach on music and warn against various styles of music, pointing to their association with things that are ungodly. Those discussions about music can be both helpful and at times misleading.



They are helpful in that—

- 1) They make us aware that we should be concerned about the music we hear.
- 2) They expose some very real issues of sin and abuse of music to promote evil.

But they can be misleading in that:

- 1) They tend to pick on just 1 or 2 styles of music (Rock, Pop), and give the rest a pass.
- 2) They often misidentify the problem.

Let me give you some guidelines for thinking about music as it relates to sin. First we must realize that—

#### **A. All music belongs to God.**

All music that we create is a part of this world. And all music belongs to God as a part of His creation. God gave us music to enjoy and glorify Him in all of life.

#### **B. Music itself cannot be “sacred” or “secular.”**

When you are considering just the music—not music and words together—not music in other contexts—just evaluating the tune—music itself is not “sacred” or “secular.” It is a false dichotomy to divide music into categories—thinking that God has His music over here—music that He prefers and delights in—and the world has its music over there that it delights in and prefers—and the really bad stuff—that is the devil’s music.

There is no “God’s music,” “world’s music,” and “devil’s music.” It is all God’s music. No tone or beat has ever been sounded in this universe that does not belong to God.

Music is not inherently religious or worldly, good or evil. There is only music—which can be employed for worship, for recreation, for celebration, for numerous occasions in which we wish to raise our affections and give voice to our emotions.

#### **C. Music can’t be evil because “evil is nothing, i.e. no-thing.”**

Evil does not consist of things, be it bullets and guns or tones, rhythms and instruments.

For an explanation of this principle listen to the message by R.C. Sproul from Ligonier National Conference held in June 2010 on “What Is Evil and Where Does It Come From?”

Evil does not consist of things, rather—

#### **D. Sin is an issue of the heart.**

When we see music that is wed to words or actions that dishonor God, if we are not careful, we can come to the conclusion that the problem is the music, when the real problem is sin. Sin is always an issue of the heart. Sin is found in our motives and intents as we create and use music, not in the tones, rhythms, and instruments we use to create and make music. Music can certainly be used in sinful ways to express sinful desires and wicked intentions. But the music itself is just a tool.

It has been this way since the beginning. In Genesis 4:21 we read of Jubal—the father of those who play the lyre and pipe—the first time music is referenced in the Bible. Two verses later in Genesis 4:23 we have the first recorded song in Scripture—a boast exulting in murder and lust for revenge.

All styles of music can be abused in sinful ways. Often it's styles like Rock and Pop that are targeted as “worldly” or “evil,” while styles such as Classical are championed as wholesome and safe. Critics point to the perverse lifestyle and evil intentions of many Pop and Rock musicians. And we should heed their warnings and be on guard against using music to sin against God. But honestly, all styles of music can be abused by sin. Classical, Rock, Pop, Country and Jazz can all express a wide range of emotion. And all have a history tainted by sin. All have had composers and performers whose lives have been shattered by sin. We need discernment to judge every style and genre of music.

A better way to think of music in regard to evil is—

#### **E. Music can be used in ways that honor God or profane God.**

When music honors God, it is intentionally composed or used to praise Him, acknowledge Him or celebrate what is good and right. Music that honors God does not necessarily need to be worship music. It can be music that celebrates life, love, marriage, family, children, home, and many other gifts of God—and celebrates these good gifts in God-honoring ways.

When music profanes God, it is composed or used without thought of God, as an end in itself, making music to be an idol or empty. Or it is composed to celebrate or promote things contrary to God and His revealed will. And this can happen in all styles of music.

Music itself simply expresses and reflects emotion. It does not in itself distinguish between sinful expressions of emotion and pure expressions of emotion.

All emotions can glorify God when channeled and expressed in God-honoring ways. God created our emotions for us to express to His glory. But emotions can be hijacked, misdirected and used in sinful ways. And music has certainly been abused and misused to express emotion in sinful ways.

This world has produced some wonderfully passionate and expressive music. The music is for us to use and enjoy to God's glory. The problem lies in that the world is often passionate and expressive about the wrong things. Their emotions have been hijacked and sent in sinful directions. And so the music they use to express themselves has been hijacked and misdirected as well.

So how do we know—

## **V. What music can we enjoy as Christians?**

### **A. Some parameters for enjoying music**

#### **1) Do all to the glory of God**

All music, whether it is sung in church, at home, on the stage, in the car, in private, should be sung to the glory of God. That is NOT to say that all music must be suitable for corporate, family or private worship. God is glorified when a man sings a love song to his wife, when he uses music to teach his children, or sings about his home or nation, or many other good gifts that God gives.

#### **2) Keep a watch over your mind and heart—guard your affections**

Music is a powerful tool. It takes what we sing and embeds it in us. It shapes how we emotionally respond to truth as well as error. What we sing and what we listen to will have an impact on us. It makes memorable our words and gives voice to our affections. It heightens and inspires and connects with our emotions.

What you choose to imbibe will feed your soul. What you choose to listen to will stick in your head. This is especially true of music. How often does a tune come to mind that just stays with you? As you turn up the radio or iPod, ask yourself: Do I really want to wake up singing this in the morning?

### **B. Some questions to ask when evaluating music**

I have found it helpful to think through the following grid when evaluating the music.

## **A Grid for Evaluating Music**

You need to ask good questions about the music you hear and sing and play.

### **Questions related to truth and worldview:**

- 1) What is this song saying?  
Ask this of the words; the music doesn't "say" anything.
- 2) What worldview is expressed in the words of the song?

What does the song say about God, the world around us, reality, humanity, the meaning of life, right and wrong, etc.?

- 3) Are the words true? Are they biblical? Are they God-honoring?  
Do they express what is true, honorable, just... (Philippians 4:8)?

### Questions related to affections and emotions

- 4) What affections does the music raise?  
• How does the song make me feel?
- 5) Are these affections reflected in the music itself or are they the result of associations I am imposing on the music?
- 6) Do the affections reflected in the music faithfully express the intent of the words?  
• Does the message of the words and the affections of the music undergird one another or distract from one another?
- 7) When and where and for what purpose would this song be useful?

### Questions related to identity and expression

- 8) Why do I want to hear (sing) this song?
- 9) Do I connect with this song? Is this who I am?  
• Do the *words* express what I want to say? Why or why not? Who says these kinds of words? As a Christian, should I be saying this?  
• Does the *music* express the way I feel? Why or why not? Who feels this way? As a Christian, should I be feeling this way about what is being said in the song?
- 10) Can I listen to (sing) this song to the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31)?

My prayer is that these questions will serve you as you seek to enjoy music to the glory of God.

## Part 2: Thoughts on Music and Worship

### VI. What is the relationship between music and worship?

A. These two terms have been misunderstood and misconstrued as synonyms.

1. People will sometimes use the term worship in reference to the singing portion of the service.

2. Because of the nature of music and its connection to our emotions—music can “feel” more like worship.

### **B. But each term has a wide scope.**

1. *Worship* is much wider in scope than music—it includes many elements: praying, preaching, reading Scripture, testimonies, giving—music is but one element. If you are not engaging in worship during the other elements, you are missing out on most of what takes place in times of gathered worship; in fact, you’re missing out on the very things that should fuel and impassion your singing in worship.
2. *Music* is much wider in scope than gathered worship—it encompasses all of life. At work, at rest, and at play—in movies, in celebration and in romance; music is all around us.

### **C. Is music necessary for worship?**

1. No—in the sense that what is necessary for worship is “Spirit” and “Truth” (John 4:24).
2. Yes—in the sense that music is commanded by God. “Sing to the Lord” is not optional! (Psalm 95:1; 96:1, etc.)

## **VII. Can all music be used equally well in gathered worship?**

NO—Not all music is suitable for congregational singing or useful for corporate worship.

### **A. Music must be fitting to what we are trying to express in worship.**

We have freedom to create and use music in a wide variety of venues: a football game, a parade, driving in car, in the symphony hall, at home. In all these venues, we can enjoy music to the glory of God. But a worship service is not a football game or a parade or a family drive. Not all the music that we enjoy hearing at venues outside of the church may be appropriate or fitting for the purpose of worship. In worship we are pursuing a well-defined purpose and seeking to communicate a clear message. As we choose music for worship, we need wisdom and discernment to find tunes that will serve as a suitable accompaniment to help us express our emotional responses to God and His Word as we commune with Him corporately in worship.

We need to consider the affections that are raised in the song. Songs that express anger or rage or discontent, for example, will have a very little or limited usefulness, if we are seeking to communicate a message of peace, reconciliation,



satisfaction and joy in Christ. You can't take words that express passions like peace, satisfaction and joy and wed them to music that was crafted and composed to express contrary passions and expect to have a coherent message.

### **B. Music must be an authentic expression of our own voice in worship.**

Not every song is written to be sung congregationally. Not every song is in a language or musical style we understand or express as our own. Musical expression arises out of our culture and experience. We use the musical instruments of our day. We sing in the language we share together. We sing with gifts and abilities God has given us.

For example: If the pastor told me that he was planning to preach a sermon from Genesis 1 on creation, I wouldn't bring in vocal scores and instrumental parts for Haydn's oratorio, *The Creation* for us to sing that day in worship. *The Creation* is great music, but it is more complex and more involved than we could handle here. However, if I were on a retreat with a group from an accomplished choir and symphony, maybe we could make it work. One of my filters for choosing music for our worship here at Grace, is finding music that fits our voice that we can sing well as an expression of worship together.

### **C. Music may have unhelpful associations or be identified in distracting ways.**

Some tunes and texts have become so closely associated over time, that to hear one brings to mind the other. For example, I would not want to use the tune of "Happy Birthday" to compose a worship song. "Happy Birthday" has a fine tune, but hearing it with different words would likely be distracting or even amusing to many people. It would take the focus off of worship.

## **VIII. What does music add to our worship?**

### **A. Music is a means of praise, thanksgiving, confession, proclamation, prayer...**

We are to—

Enter His gates with thanksgiving,  
And His courts with praise!  
Give thanks to Him; bless His name!  
(Psalm 100:4)

Music fulfills its highest purpose when it serves the communion of God and His people. Music accompanies, adorns and interprets the revelation, proclamation and teaching of God's Word as God speaks to His people. And music also

bears the prayers of God's people as we speak and respond to Him in petition, praise and thanksgiving.

### **B. Music raises our affections (it gives voice to our feelings in worship).**

Often in Scripture, where you see expressions of great joy and delight or great sorrow and distress, these feelings are expressed to God in prayer or to the community of faith in songs of praise or lament. The 150 psalms display the wide range of emotion that can be expressed in corporate worship (culminating with Psalm 150 in joyful praise). We are free to use music to express our emotions before God—everything from sorrow to joy—soft and contemplative to loud and celebrative.

The psalms actually have a much larger scope and vocabulary of emotion in worship than most of us are comfortable with. We are rather reserved in our day and in our culture with sharing the passions of our hearts (at least in church). There is passion and affection in the psalms—in the context of gathered worship—that would take us way out of our comfort zones, on both ends of the spectrum: from sorrow and grief and repentance to celebration and exuberant joy and praise. We get a little uncomfortable when things start getting too loud and excited or getting too low and broken. But the psalms and music give us voice for these affections.

### **C. Music unites us in worship.**

What may have started as a personal outpouring of emotion by David or another composer of psalms, becomes the voice of gathered worship, as it is sung together and shared together and expressed together in one common voice. Music helps us pray together, give thanks together, confess together in one united voice.

### **D. Music shapes how we emotionally interpret and respond to truth.**

It serves an important role in how we receive and understand the text. This is why we need to be thoughtful and discerning in the music we use to incarnate the words.

One example from hymnody are the hymns “O Sacred Head, Now Wounded” sung to the tune PASSION CHORALE and “O Lord, How Shall I Meet Thee” sung to the tune ST. THEODULPH. Both tunes are wed well to their texts. PASSION CHORALE expresses the sorrow and grief of Christ's suffering on the cross. ST. THEODULPH expresses the joyful expectation of communing with God in worship. Both are in the same poetic meter (7.6.7.6.D.), and the tune could be switched. But the result would be incongruent and contradictory.

The words and the music should emotionally tie together. There are many good tunes and good texts that are simply mismatched. One that I can remember while growing up was “Love Lifted Me.” It begins:

“I was sinking deep in sin far from the peaceful shore,  
Very deeply stained within, sinking to rise no more...”

A joyful tune—a good tune, but very mismatched, at least at the beginning of the verse, with words that are trying to communicate desperation and our hopeless state when we are outside of Christ. We want to wed music and words that strengthen the message, not confuse it.

One good example of matching words and music is the “Revelation Song” by Jennie Lee Riddle. Its tune communicates well a sense of wonder and profoundness suggested by the words. Another is Bob Kauflin’s setting of William Cooper’s hymn “God Moves in a Mysterious Way.”

Sometimes words can have more than one emotional setting. Having different arrangements of the same words can be helpful at times. We might feel a text differently depending on what we are going through or how it lands on us.

## IX. What should worship music sound like?

To answer this question, let’s turn to the book of Psalms. The psalms are a book of worship. They are our precedent and guide for understanding how to employ music in worship. But the book of Psalms is not just a book about worship, it is a book filled with the content and words of worship.

As we read through the psalms, we learn how to come into God’s presence. We learn how to worship Him. We can learn from the words of psalms themselves—as we see how God’s people expressed their hearts in song together before God—but we can also learn from the structure of the Psalter as a whole.

Note first how it begins. Psalm 1 begins with instruction to forsake the way of sin and find delight in the ways of God.

Blessed is the man  
    who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,  
    nor stands in the way of sinners,  
    nor sits in the seat of scoffers;  
but his delight is in the law of the LORD,  
    and on his law he meditates day and night.  
(Psalms 1:1–2)

Here we have a guide for our motives and intents. We are not to allow our desires and affections to run after unworthy things, unholy things.

We are to delight in God and His Law. This delight should be the foundation of all our singing and all our worship.

Psalms are a wonderful testimony to God’s faithfulness as He continues to deliver and uphold His people. As the psalms progress, you see the people of

God in a variety of circumstances and situations: some expressing joy, some in distress—some are singing praise, some lamenting—some declaring their love for God, some grieving over sin and wickedness. Many come with requests; many others come with thanksgiving because God has answered their prayers.

This is true of us as we gather for worship. We all come from different circumstances into the gathering of the church. Some of us are joyful, some of us are facing sorrow; all of us come with great needs that only God in the power of His grace in the gospel can supply.

But as the psalms draw nearer to the end of the Psalter, you notice that petitions and laments grow fewer and fewer, while praise and joy becomes increasingly dominant. After about Psalm 145 there is a crescendo of joyful praise to the end, where we see in the final verse (Psalm 150:6) “let everything that has breath praise the Lord!”

The structure of the psalms is a wonderful illustration of what happens in worship as we lift our eyes from looking at ourselves to fixing them fully upon God and the hope of the gospel. God takes all our concerns and trials—all our laments and pleas, and moves us in one direction, toward our chief end—glorifying God as we rejoice in Him forever. Everything is moving toward the glory of God. This is the trajectory of the psalms and should be the trajectory of our singing as well.

In Psalm 150 we hear a description of the sound of worship music.

Praise the LORD!  
Praise God in His sanctuary;  
Praise Him in His mighty heavens!  
Praise Him for His mighty deeds;  
Praise Him according to His excellent greatness!  
Praise Him with trumpet sound;  
Praise Him with lute and harp!  
Praise Him with tambourine and dance;  
Praise Him with strings and pipe!  
Praise Him with sounding cymbals;  
Praise Him with loud clashing cymbals!  
Let everything that has breath praise the LORD!  
Praise the LORD!

Verse 1 answers the question: *who* to praise: “Praise the LORD!”  
And *where* to praise:

Praise God in His sanctuary;  
Praise Him in His mighty heavens!

God is praised on earth = “in His sanctuary.” This is the tabernacle and Temple of the Old Testament—a foreshadow of its fulfillment in the New Testament: the hearts of God’s gathered people. And God is praised in heaven.

Verse 2 explains the reason for our praise—because of who God is and what He has done.

Praise Him for His mighty deeds;  
Praise Him according to His excellent greatness!

We are to praise and worship God “according to His excellent greatness!” Think of the magnitude of that phrase. This is what fills the content of our songs. This is what determines the scope of our songs. How much music will it take until we can say with satisfaction that we have fully praised God “according to His excellent greatness”?

Rejoice in the LORD, O you righteous!  
For praise from the upright is beautiful.  
Praise the LORD with the harp;  
Make melody to Him with an instrument of ten strings.  
Sing to Him a new song;  
Play skillfully with a shout of joy.  
(Psalm 33:1–3)

This is a command for every age and every generation, as the salvation of God is made known in the power of the gospel. There is continually a new song as hearts are conquered and voices are lifted up in praise in every place.

Verses 3 to 6 of Psalm 150 then describes the sound of music in worship.

We hear all kinds of musical instruments:

brass—trumpets

strings—lute and harp

wind instruments—pipe

and percussion—tambourine, cymbals, loud clashing cymbals

And we hear voices—everything that has breath

We also see something else in verse 4 that may make some of us a little uncomfortable.

Praise Him with tambourine and dance



We can save the discussion on dance for another time. But suffice it to say here, that this term here in this psalm does not carry with it all the meaning that some try to read into it. It is a word that simply means “moving the body to music.” It is not a sensual dance with immodest overtones, as our culture tends to think of dance. And it’s not necessarily artistic or structured dance, like a ballet or modern dance. It is simply moving to the music.

I mentioned earlier that we tend to be rather reserved in our expressions of worship. But there are peoples and cultures, in other places and at other times through out history, who would think it very strange, if not impossible, to sing praise to God while standing still.

God’s design for music in worship is “everything that has breath.” Every person called to praise, and every style, every culture, every musical instrument sanctified for God’s glory and purposes.

One of the questions I received is about musical instruments: “I have seen people get up and leave when they saw drums in a church service. Some teach that having drums is wrong in church.”

Some of this may be a lack of understanding about what the Bible says about music. But much of it, I think, is due to association. People have seen music used in frivolous and ungodly ways—ways that are obviously dishonoring to God—and for them it is hard to imagine how music like that—music played on those instruments—could be pleasing to God.

Drums have been on the hot seat in recent times, but there are actually two other instruments that had a much more difficult time being recognized as instruments suited to worship. Can anyone guess what these are?

## **One was the piano.**

The piano was invented early in the 1700s. It became popular, especially in the 1800s, but its use was in the home with the family or on the concert stage. The organ was the established instrument for worship of that day.

Pianos were frequently used in Sunday School and at youth meetings, but not in worship. What finally made the change for the piano was the contemporary music of the day—the gospel song—that was popularized with the evangelistic crusades of the early 1900s. As people learned the new music at the crusades, they wanted to sing the music in church. The only problem was the accompaniment. The organ worked fine with the old hymns, but it struggled to keep up with the lively, bouncing rhythm of the new music.

Compare for example the rhythm of: “Holy, Holy, Holy” to the tune NICAIA with “Standing on the Promises” by R. Kelso Carter.

Churches discovered that people sang the new songs well in Sunday School with the piano, but when they tried them in gathered worship, the songs were hard to follow and hard to sing.

One of the evangelistic teams found the answer. Charles Alexander began bringing a piano into the sanctuary to accompany the singing. He was a gifted pianist and he demonstrated how the piano could serve well to accompany the contemporary music of the day in worship.

Eventually the piano and gospel songs stayed, but not without some controversy. Critics of the day complained: “[it] sounds like a horse and buggy galloping through the sanctuary.” You knew you were in a contemporary church at the turn of the 20th century if you saw that the piano had been moved into the sanctuary.

### **The other instrument was the organ.**

For this we must go farther back in history. The organ was invented around the 3rd century B.C. Back then it was designed to use water rather than air in the pipes and was called the *hydraulis*. The water organ was quite loud and was used most prominently in the amphitheaters.

During the time of the Roman Empire it was used to accompany the processions and events at the gladiatorial games. Some ballparks today use the organ in a similar way to create a festive atmosphere—to signal and stir up the crowd. It was to the celebrative sounds of the organ that many Christians were paraded in before cheering crowds to be martyred.

So you can imagine the difficulties with association that early Christians must have had whenever someone finally had the idea to introduce the organ into church as a worship instrument.\* How could this instrument that accompanied so much death, ever be used in worship?

But God had a purpose for the pipe organ. He designed to rescue that instrument and use it for His glory. Rome was sacked in 410 and the empire fell over the next 150 years. The organ was finally brought into the church around 7th century A.D.—well after the fall of Rome. It was not until the 1300s that the first organ was permanently installed in a church. But for hundreds of years after the pipe organ was a prominent instrument in carrying the praise of God’s people.

\* Instrumental music as a whole had a difficult time in the early church. Most of the instruments of the day were associated to some degree with the worship of Greek or Roman gods. To play such instruments was regarded by many to be an act of worship to the gods.

Look now at Colossians 3:16

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.

What did Paul mean when he wrote in this verse: “psalms, hymns and spiritual songs”? What music would he have had in his mind’s ear? I can tell you what he could not have imagined—

Not the metrical psalms of the 1500’s

Not the hymns of Watts in the 1700’s

Not the gospel songs of the 1800’s

Not the praise choruses of the 1960’s and 1970’s

Not the worship songs of today

These were all still future expressions of God’s design for music. All music was once new music. This brings us to the final question—

## **X. Should all Christians sing the same music in worship?**

- A. No—there have been many styles throughout the history of the church.**
- B. There are believers singing to God’s glory all over the world (and throughout all centuries), and most are not singing like Americans—or even Westerners!**

What is “singable” and suitable for one culture (or time in history) may not be for every time and place. Singable to a congregation in Indonesia or Zambia may not work for Cape Coral, Florida or Mansfield, Texas. The voice of one generation may not sound like the voice of the generation that follows.

This brings up another perplexing question in music. It is a question asked by almost every generation, especially as that generation prepares to pass the baton on to the next.

Why does music have to change? Why don’t we just keep singing the same songs as our fathers and our forefathers? Or, if you’re on the other side of the equation: Why don’t our kids just keep singing the songs we like to sing? They were good enough for us. Listen to the opening verses of Psalm 96. Here is the answer:

Oh sing to the LORD a new song;  
Sing to the LORD, all the earth!  
Sing to the LORD, bless His name;  
Tell of His salvation from day to day.

Declare His glory among the nations,  
His marvelous works among all the peoples!  
(Psalm 96:1–3)

Music changes because there is *always* a new song. God is at work in the nations, through His people, taking the gospel to the ends of the earth. God's design is every nation, tribe and tongue magnifying His name and glory—that He would be praised in every place in every age!

Every generation adds its voice to God's praise, but none can contain or epitomize His praise. No one generation or style or age can encapsulate all God is and all He has done. No one place or time or culture can fully express the praise and worship of our great God.

The praise of God is a glorious tapestry woven through the ages as His Kingdom advances, conquering hearts, lives, nations and cultures.

As God saves, he rescues and sanctifies—that is true of our souls as well as our emotional expressions through our music.

Let me give you one example. Hip Hop and Rap are often used in the world in demeaning and ungodly ways. But listen how Shai Linne from Capital Hill Baptist Church uses the style.

PLAY EXAMPLE: "Q&A" from "Atonement"  
— use of Hip Hop by Shai Linne to catechize.

Reformed Rap may not be suited well for congregational participation in worship, but it has one big advantage as personal expression and testimony—it is rich with words. If used in a sanctifying, redemptive way—you can pack a lot of truth in a short space of time!

There is ever a new song. And we have not seen the last. God has shown His power and mercy in every age and He intends for His gospel to spread to the ends of the earth.

Music changes because God and His excellent greatness cannot be contained. It cannot be epitomized. And every age and generation is commanded to add its voice to the tapestry of praise throughout history.

There will come a day when music moves on. It will be handed off to an up and coming generation. It will press out beyond our comfort zones and beyond our preferences. But I want to be one that cheers on and coaches the next generation to lift up their voice—to take the art of music and run with it to the glory of God.

May God make it so. ☺

## *The Sounds of Conquering Grace*

All around the world  
Are voices joined in praise,  
All singing of the grace of God,  
Whose voice the dead can raise!

Down through every age  
When God makes known His Word,  
Each generation adds its voice  
And new songs can be heard.

Come and hear the grand design of God,  
The sounds of conquering grace!  
For everywhere His gospel goes,  
His praises fill that place!  
Ev'ry tribe and tongue and voice  
Praising God with joyful noise,  
Filling every place—  
It's the sound of conquering grace!

Hear His masterpiece  
Crescendo age to age;  
Each life He makes anew, a voice  
He adds upon His stage.

Each adds to the sound,  
A glorious tapestry  
Of joyful praise that will resound  
Into eternity!

Come and hear the grand design of God,  
The sounds of conquering grace!  
For everywhere His gospel goes,  
His praises fill that place!  
Ev'ry tribe and tongue and voice  
Praising God with joyful noise,  
Filling every place—  
It's the sound of conquering grace!

No language we can speak  
Can tell of all His grace;  
No favorite music is enough  
To sing in every place.

No style can contain  
The fullness of His praise;  
And no one voice can sing of all  
The wonders He displays.

Come and hear the grand design of God,  
The sounds of conquering grace!  
For everywhere His gospel goes,  
His praises fill that place!  
Ev'ry tribe and tongue and voice  
Praising God with joyful noise,  
Filling every place—  
It's the sound of conquering grace!

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