

“Music in Corporate Worship”

“May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Thy sight, O God, my strength and my Redeemer.”

Thesis – There is far too much to cover in 1 setting, and, of course, this type of sermon is, by definition, topical (vice exegetical). As a result, I’m going to move *very fast across a number of subjects that pertain to the topic. My hope is to stimulate your personal (and, of course, ‘our’ corporate) interest in the subject. There are quite a few resources available easily online (to include research findings, etc.) that will take you further into the topic than I can hope to accomplish today!

By vocation, I’m a Naval Aviator, by education, a philosopher. As a result, I tend to want a clear “goal” or “mission statement” as a guide when doing just about anything. In philosophical argument (indeed, in most theoretical research writing), this goal is codified in a ‘thesis statement’.

The thesis of the sermon today, therefore, is this: Music (especially singing) is integral to worship, both corporately and personally. God created us, as a species, to respond to music in profound ways, and Scripture is replete with confirmations of this claim. As such, the ‘why’ and ‘what’ questions are fairly straightforward in this case. What remains are questions about ‘how’ music is to be integrated into corporate worship. I will attempt here to canvass the ways in which that question has been debated throughout the millennia following the establishment of the early church, touching on a number of themes very briefly. My hope, again, is that your curiosity will be stimulated in way that encourages *engagement* with the topic and the actual subject – namely corporate worship as expressed through music. All of this will be offered under the rubric of being ‘*intentional*’ in what we do here at The River.

Let’s talk a bit about intentionality throughout this sermon series. We’re discussing topics like preparing our hearts through things like the Collect for Purity, Preaching, Confession, Prayers of the People, (and eventually) Communion. Note that there was a purpose to the development of the Sacraments and the Liturgy. As a teaser, I encourage you to lookup N.T. Wright’s interpretation of the sacraments as ‘thin spaces’ between the natural world and the divine. Note also that “liturgy” comes from root words indicating a method of teaching. Ritual, on the other hand, can be cast as a devolution of liturgy (including the sacraments). And let’s not be too judgmental in this context – we tend to create rituals out of almost everything we do. It is EASY to lose the purpose (or telos) much like the metaphor of missing the forest for the trees.

Note that all of the topics in this series have to do with corporate worship (as well as personal, of course). Let me offer something a former pastor of mine said frequently – “Worship is not a spectator sport. We should be in the habit of putting on our crash helmets when we come to worship the Almighty!”

I. Science and Experiential evidence.

I'm going to grant myself the first part of my thesis (for the sake of time and clarity). This is, of course, the claim that we were created to respond profoundly to music. This much is, I think, uncontroversial, both empirically and anecdotally. I will mention just a few examples quickly and move on....

(see other sheet)

II. Music in Scripture

(Scriptural verses from other sheet)

Note that musical leadership was chosen from the Levites – the priestly tribe of Israel. This tribe, as a whole, was 'set apart' for God's service. There is a fascinating thread to "pull" here about the role of musical leadership and its relationship to a clerical calling. The root meaning of 'set apart' in both Greek and Hebrew fall squarely into the church practice of 'ordination'. While very interesting, I'll leave this aside for hopefully further contemplation.

The bigger theme I want to see emerging here is that of a connection with the past in the context of the here and now. This squarely focuses on modernity in worship (to include musical expressions of that worship) while remaining engaged with a heritage of faith.

III. Music in Church History

(Use highlighted handout and punctuate with videos). I'm going to be incredibly fast here – so hang on!!!

Let's try to be clearer with what we mean by "Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs" as referenced just above in our scripture passages.

Literally a *psalm* is a poem written to be sung to the accompaniment of stringed instruments. It was a term that would have been especially familiar to the Jews. Psalms were the established music of God's people, sung since the days of the Old Testament in the tabernacle and Temple. By the time of the New Testament the word *psalm* referred especially, though not exclusively, to the 150 psalms of the Psalter. Paul points us to psalms first, exhorting us to sing the words of Scripture and take them as our pattern. The psalms anticipated the coming of Christ and set a precedent for praising God through music. Jesus said that the psalms spoke of Him (Luke 24:44). We must value the psalms and not neglect this wellspring of praise in our day.

Hymn was a term that would have been especially familiar to the Gentiles. In the Greek and Roman empires leading up to the time of the New Testament, hymns were sung in praise of heroes and gods. People would celebrate the military victories of great generals and exalt the

false gods of mythology in hymns. But as the gospel swept across the known world, the church transformed the hymn into a song in praise to the one true God. Its transformation astounded the Romans. In 112 when Pliny, a governor in Bythnia, wrote to Emperor Trajan, asking for advice on how to handle the rising number of Christians in the realm, he commented that the Christians were observed singing “a hymn to Christ as to a god.” In his mind hymns were songs for heroes and champions, not for one shamefully crucified on a cross!

Paul concludes his list with *spiritual songs*. The term *song* is a generic term in Greek meaning *all kinds of songs*. Paul added the descriptive adjective *spiritual* to narrow its meaning. Not all music is composed for worship or should be used for worship. We are to sing music that is the result of the Spirit God working in hearts and cultures and peoples—music that is sanctified for (set apart for and intended for) God’s glory in corporate praise—music that helps us speak truth to one another, teaching, exhorting and encouraging one another. (Pulls)

Just an aside, this last statement really tugs at me with respect to being ‘modern’ in our worship...notes on modern here.

Continuing: From the beginning of recorded church history, there has been controversy within the church as to “how” music should “look” in the service (or Mass...which means service/as well as ‘meal’). It was clearly *never controversial that music was integral to worship in and of itself (it was *not “window dressing” alone). This was apparent very early in church history and was in accord with Scripture.

The controversies tended to be about “styles”, “modes”, “instrumentation” or congruence with contemporary musical expression and art forms. Does this sound familiar?!?!

We are *not unique with our current controversies about musical styles, instrumentation and appropriateness to service constructs.

Note example of Handel’s Messiah.

Again, throughout controversy and unity, there has remained a constant (and, I think, correct) emphasis on a connection with the past – especially as pertains to the use of the Psaltery for a vast majority of the lyrical content of Christian (and Judaic) worship music.

This highlights once more the importance of intentionality in both selection and composition. We are an ‘ancient/modern’ church – what a beautiful expression – it elocutes our commitment to both 1) a heritage and tradition of faith and 2) being modern and right ‘here and now’ with our worship. This is a balance that has been a crucial focus and objective throughout church history. The fact that we struggle with it should not surprise us...

Sea story – Iraq...

III. Bodily Positions in Musical (and other forms of) Worship

- Review Scripture readings

- Review especially David's celebration
- Read intro to Facedown

Ask yourself (at least) these two questions:

1. When is the last time you abandoned yourself to worship? Remember the crash helmet anecdote. Put differently, when was it all about the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and pointedly NOT about you, what others around you might be thinking, and whether or not the band transitioned from the second chorus to the bridge smoothly or not?
2. Have you judged others (internally) for their reactions/actions during and through worship – especially musical worship? This includes bodily postures, etc....

IV. Tensions in Musical Worship

This is going to be a very vulnerable final section. As a musician myself, I feel these tensions keenly when both leading music, participating as a musician, or participating together with the congregation (all of which are equally 'engaged' roles, by the way).

- Ancient/Modern mix – song selection and narrative (Give Grace!)
- Excellence and perfection (or exuberance and polish) (Give Mercy and Patience)
- Remaining accessible and offering our best (or, invitational vs. performative) (Challenge your preconceptions about what music *should* look like in church).
- Note about awkwardness and space....very akin to silence...no time to delve into that more deeply here.

Hold this last point “in tension” for a moment.

In closing, I want to challenge each of you to confront your own intentionality (or lack thereof) with regard to musical expression and engagement within corporate worship. Music is clearly meant to be a dialogue – vice a monologue. We play and sing for the Almighty, but we are also told to teach and admonish one another with Psalms, Hymns, and spiritual songs. There are both horizontal and vertical axes of musical worship – and we shouldn't approach these ambivalently or without clear purpose. Additionally, we need (as a church) to give grace to both musician and lay people in this regard. The Church has struggled, from its beginning, to navigate often competing convictions and demands. If we are to be known as Christians by our love, we should certainly attempt to demonstrate that love in this regime as well. Music is one of the most profound and kinetic forms of corporate worship that we have available to us...this can be shown empirically and is, I think, accepted by pretty much everyone experientially. Music moves us – we were designed to respond to it. Offering our worship (ascribing worth) to God in this form is

both a privilege and an honor for his church. I encourage all of us to be as intentional and engaged as possible with it – especially as we sing and make music together at The River.

I asked you to hold the last “tension” point in your minds. After the prayers of the people and the confession, we will play a video for offertory. It is not just to be watched – the words of the song will be visible and easy to follow. I ask you, though, to consider the artistry of the worship leader and lead guitarist – Lincoln Brewster. He does not “hold back” his ability in this song. Some may consider this ‘performance’ in a negative sense – but after being led in worship by him several years ago, I can assure you this is not the case. He is offering his best on the altar – and playing with everything he has for the glory of his King. I’ll ask you to reflect on that as you sing along with him and the church that he is leading during this recording.

“In the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit – Amen”