

Philosophy of Music in Our Corporate Gathering

Introduction

This philosophy of music in our corporate worship gatherings is based primarily upon a nine-part sermon series delivered by Bret Capranica at Summit Woods Baptist Church in 2011, entitled, Heaven Help Our Worship.¹ This document seeks to distill that series down into a helpful format that communicates to our congregation what we aim to accomplish and emphasize musically in our corporate gatherings. It also serves to help our elders and staff to evaluate our use of music in our gatherings.

The purpose of publicizing this statement is to provide our congregation with a unifying, governing approach that communicates how we approach using music in our church.

We encourage you to listen to the series for a fuller description of the material in this document. We also encourage you to interact with the guiding resources listed in the appendix.

Definition of Worship

Corporate Worship is the external display of God's worth when the church gathers. The focus of all worship (whether private or corporate) is on our internal delight in God's worth rather than any outward forms.

The music in our main Sunday gatherings, therefore, will emphasize the worthiness of God (revealed in the person of Jesus Christ, appreciated through the gospel, displayed through the church). As our congregation sings together we will focus on externally displaying our value of Christ's worth.

Those who lead us in singing at our corporate gatherings will be those who:

Magnify the greatness of God in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit by skillfully combining God's Word with music, thereby motivating the gathered church to proclaim the gospel, to cherish God's presence and to live for God's glory.²

¹ http://www.summitwoodschurch.org/sermons#series_13

² Bob Kauflin, *Worship Matters* (Weaton, IL: Crossway Books), 55.

Why and How We Should Sing as a Congregation

Ephesians 5:19 indicates that a specific demonstration that one is filled with the Spirit is they will be “addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with [their] heart.”

Colossians 3:16 describes the same idea and explains that such singing is a result of the word of Christ dwelling richly within us: “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.”

We Sing for Education: Spirit-filled, word-controlled people will publicly sing songs that biblically instruct each other in our gatherings. We teach theology when we sing. We teach what affections for God should look like and be based upon when we sing.

We Sing for Adoration: Spirit-filled, word-controlled people will publicly sing biblically saturated songs “to God,” and “with thankfulness in your hearts to God.” While the congregation is affected and taught by what we say and sing together, God is the primary audience. When we sing, we are reflecting his value as described by Scripture. When we sing, we do so because of how we have been affected by God – we are responding to him. Such adoration should be expressed with all of our heart’s affection and with a variety of musical means.

Aims in Singing Corporately

It is our aim through our music in our corporate gatherings to echo what Jonathan Edwards said of his aim in preaching. We have adapted his statement:

*We aim to raise the affections of our congregation as high as we possibly can, provided they are affected with nothing but truth, and with affections that are not disagreeable to the nature of what they are affected with.*³

³ Jonathan Edwards, *Some Thoughts Concerning the Revival*

The quote was originally given in relation to preaching. Here is the quote in a fuller context:

“I think an exceeding affectionate way of preaching about the great things of religion, has in itself no tendency to beget false apprehensions of them; but on the contrary a much greater tendency to beget true apprehensions of them, than a moderate, dull, indifferent way of speaking of ’em. An appearance of affection and earnestness in the manner of delivery, if it be very great indeed, yet if it be agreeable to the nature of the subject, and ben’t beyond a proportion to its importance and worthiness of affection, and there be no appearance of its being feigned or forced, has so much the greater tendency to beget true ideas or apprehensions in the minds of the hearers, of the subject spoken of, and so to enlighten the understanding: and that for this reason, that such a way or manner of speaking of these things does in fact more truly represent them, than a more cold and indifferent way of speaking of them. If the subject be in its own nature worthy of very great affection, then a speaking of it with

Based on elements we see in the heavenly throne-room scene in Revelation 4 & 5 (a picture of perfect and ultimate corporate worship), we use the following principles to govern what we choose to sing, how we arrange our services, how we perform the songs, and how we encourage our congregation to engage in the totality of our corporate gatherings. These principles⁴ apply to more than music, but our music should also seek to appropriately exhibit these principles:

- Our corporate worship will be a gathering of intense focused exaltation of God in Jesus Christ.
- Our worship will acknowledge the centrality of God – it will be singularly directional. We will seek to make God the focus, aim, end and sum total of our experience of worship.
- Our worship will exalt the authority of God – it will be thoroughly biblical. Scripture will govern what we do and why we omit some activities in our gatherings.
- Our worship will emit the intensity of God – it will be passionately emotional. While emotionalism is not our aim, we believe intense passion flowing from truth-affected hearts will be displayed and should be encouraged.
- Our worship will produce the severity of God – it will be convincingly fearful. The fear of God, a hatred of sin, and a longing for God to come in justice are highly sought in our gatherings.
- Our worship will display the majesty of God – it will be stunningly regal. Because God is a reigning king, the way we honor him in our gatherings should appropriately acknowledge his sovereign majesty.
- Our worship will describe the transcendence of God – it will be uniquely dissimilar. God is radically different from us; therefore, we will aim to value his uniqueness above what is culturally common.
- Our worship will rehearse the redemption of God – it will be obviously cross-centered. Redemption from sin through the cross of Christ will be a dominating theme throughout each gathering.

While the expression of some of these principles may appear to be subjective, our goal is that every worship gathering can be said to obviously fit within these governing principles.

very great affection is most agreeable to the nature of that subject, or is the truest representation of it, and therefore has most of a tendency to beget true ideas of it in the minds of those to whom the representation is made. And I don't think ministers are to be blamed for raising the affections of their hearers too high, if that which they are affected with be only that which is worthy of affection, and their affections are not raised beyond a proportion to their importance, or worthiness of affection. I should think myself in the way of my duty to raise the affections of my hearers as high as possibly I can, provided that they are affected with nothing but truth, and with affections that are not disagreeable to the nature of what they are affected with. I know it has long been fashionable to despise a very earnest and pathetic way of preaching; and they, and they only have been valued as preachers, that have shown the greatest extent of learning, and strength of reason, and correctness of method and language: but I humbly conceive it has been for want of understanding, or duly considering human nature, that such preaching has been thought to have the greatest tendency to answer the ends of preaching; and the experience of the present and past ages abundantly confirms the same.

⁴ For a fuller description and more specific definition of these principles, please consult the audio series, "Heaven Help Our Worship," noted in footnote 1.

Values That Govern Our Selection, Arrangement, and Production of Our Music

- God's Supremacy
- Scripturally Driven
- Congregational Singing
- Multiple Generations Together
- Unity
- Un-distracting Excellence⁵
- Earnestness and Intensity
- Singing to God in ways that encourages and educates others.
- Appreciation for older and newer songs.
- Allowances for biblically appropriate, heart-driven physical expressiveness
- Affecting both the mind and the emotions – giving intellectual and emotional expression to our Christ-driven heart inclinations.

Implications for The Music We Will Sing

- Those who lead our corporate music will seek to govern the choice of music, arrangement of services, style of performance, and manner of leading in such a way that reflects the values described in this document.
- We will aim to sing the most excellent songs that fit our values and aims. Whether lyrically simple or complex, we aim to sing those songs that are the best expression of what we have stated above.
- We aim to maintain a musical style that is congregationally supportive, generationally inclusive, consistent, appropriate to the song's message, and above all, driven by accurately understood Scripture.
- We will strive for un-distracting excellence
 - In what we sing
 - In how it is played
 - In how it is arranged
 - In how it complements the rest of the service
 - In how we transition between elements in our service
 - In what we say during our gathering

⁵ See the first article in the Appendix by John Piper, "Brothers, Supernatural Does Not Mean Stupid," for a description of this phrase.

“Brothers, Supernatural Does Not Mean Stupid”

John Piper

If somebody reads my last blog, “[Brothers, the Ministry Is Supernatural](#)” (not professional), and says, “So, then, you think it doesn’t matter if we sing off key, preach incompetently, and don’t provide parking?” my answer is, “That’s just stupid.”

It matters whether you think the only alternative to tacky is “professional.” If the only way you have for urging excellence in your church is to urge “professionalism,” I suggest you need a bigger vocabulary.

The baggage attached to the word “professionalism” is not helpful, if you are trying to be a supernatural people of God. And that is what we want to be: Body of Christ, chosen race, royal priesthood, holy nation, people of God’s own possession, temple of the Holy Spirit, household of God, saints, called, Way, bride of Christ, and more. It is not helpful to aim at being a professional bride.

Where the Quest Begins

So when I renounce the pursuit of professionalism, does that mean I don’t aspire to excellence? No. But I do start my quest for excellence with the quest for excellent forgiveness. Excellent mercy. Excellent patience. Excellent kindness. Excellent humility. Excellent self-control. Excellent gospel-walking (Galatians 2:14).

That’s what Paul had in mind when he told us to imitate the infinitely excellent God. “Be imitators of God . . . And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us” (Ephesians 5:1–2). I don’t know if Jesus could sing on key, or if his tunic was wrinkle-free, but I do know his capacities for returning good for evil were beautiful beyond words. The radical quest for that excellence is where we begin.

The Quest Broadens

Then Paul broadens the quest: “Whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things” (Philippians 4:8). So, after our hearts undergo a gospel renovation, the next room for refurbishing is our mind: Think on these excellent things. Fill your mind with excellence. Beauty. Justice. Purity. Honor.

Then the next thing out of Paul's mouth is this: "What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me — practice these things" (Philippians 4:9). So the gospel-renovated heart and the excellence-refurbished mind "practice these things." It matters how things are done. At home. At church. Everywhere. We "practice" excellence.

Seasoned with Mission

So do we build magnificent buildings? Maybe. But not many. The priority put on opulence in the Old Testament palace and temple was owing to an era of "come-see-religion." Like the Queen of Sheba who came to Israel and was breathless at Solomon's wealth (1 Kings 10:5). But the New Testament has none of that emphasis on opulence, because it is a "go-tell-religion." The mission impulse dominates the domestic impulse. We are sojourners. We are sent. "Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money; and do not have two tunics" (Luke 9:3). This saying is not normative for all mission, but it does flavor everything.

So the quest for excellence is always seasoned by a mission-oriented mentality with a bent toward simplicity. It's a bent, not an absolute. There may be a place for a cathedral here and there. But the people of God won't lean toward living in palaces. And the vast work of the kingdom will happen mainly in the rugged outposts.

Un-distracting Excellence

But what about the way we do things? What about music, for example? We recall the psalmist saying, "Splendor and majesty are before him; strength and beauty are in his sanctuary" (Psalm 96:6). "Sing to him a new song; play skillfully on the strings" (Psalm 33:3). Beautifully. Skillfully. Does that mean professionally? In all my pastoral ministry, I have never prayed that worship be done professionally.

The category we have found most helpful is "undistracting excellence." The adjective "undistracting" means that the quality of an act must help, rather than hinder, the spiritual aims of the ministry. Lead worshipers aim by the power of God's Spirit (1 Peter 4:11) to awaken the mind's attention and the heart's affections to the truth and beauty of God and the gospel. The kind of singing and playing that helps this happen is not well described as "professional."

Seeking a Miracle

But "undistracting excellence" helps us get at the issue. It reminds us that people are distracted not only by shoddy music, but also by the flare of musical finesse. Corporate worship is not a recital. The sanctuary is no orchestra hall. The shouted "Bravissimo!" for a virtuoso performance (which may be totally appropriate at the concert hall) has the opposite focus from what we are seeking on Sunday morning. We are seeking the miracle of communion with God.

The same applies to preaching. On the one hand, elders are to be “apt to teach” (1 Timothy 3:2). Gifted. Able. Skilled. Effective. On the other hand, there is a kind of smooth, effortless oratory, and a kind of cool, clever, hip, and even studied casualness that can be just as distracting from the presence of God as the self-conscious awkwardness of the nervous beginner.

Spiritual Does Not Mean Shoddy

Undistracting excellence means that content, language, tone, gesture, and demeanor will all serve the spiritual aims of the message: the quickening of the dead and the building up of faith in the saints by the power of God. There is no professional raising of the dead. And no professional building of the temple of the soul.

Therefore, brothers, we are (still) not professionals. Our aims are supernatural. Therefore, our means are stirred and shaped by the Spirit of God. The excellence we seek serves a spiritual communion with God. It is undistracting. But spiritual does not mean shoddy. And supernatural does not mean stupid.

<http://www.desiringgod.org/blog/posts/brothers-supernatural-does-not-mean-stupid--2>

