

Two Kinds of Worship Music¹

Most of us are probably aware that churches use various styles of music. Some, like us, are traditional and conservative in our selection and use of music. We use music that is often hundreds of years old and that is quite robust in its doctrinal content. This style of traditional hymnody does *not* imitate modern styles of music.

The other option that many churches use might be called contemporary Christian music. This music is usually relatively new; it has been composed recently. CCM imitates what is popular in the culture. It sounds pretty much like top-40s hit radio. It uses the musical forms, styles, and methods that are popular in the culture and inserts biblical or Christian lyrics. If you didn't hear the lyrics, you would have no idea that it was Christian music.

These two kinds of music reflect far more than mere taste or preference. These two musical options reflect two different approaches to the worship of God in the context of the church.

Quote: Music is not simply a neutral container for lyrical ideas—music embodies an interpretation of those ideas. So with worship songs, the music embodies both an interpretation of the particular words of the song *and* an interpretation of what is actually happening in the worship service.²

I.e., the kind of music we use reflects our purposes in the worship service—what are we trying to accomplish? What we expect from the service dictates the kind of music we use.

Today I want to compare and contrast two different kinds of music that churches use, and I want to emphasize how these different styles have two different purposes.

¹ Much of this is taken from an article of the same name by Scott Aniol. Most of the quotations here are from his article. <https://g3min.org/two-kinds-of-worship-music/>

² Aniol.

I. Some worship music is designed to help us know God.

Col 3:16 *Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.*

A. This verse reflects the main purposes for worship music:

1. To *hear from* God—the psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs convey God’s word to us, either directly from the Bible, in a paraphrase of the Bible, or in biblical terms. The words of Christ dwell within us through the music we sing. Music teaches us about God and admonishes us to obey God. As we sing, we teach and admonish one another regarding the Word of God. The point of the music is to hear the Word of God.
2. To *respond to* God—the psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs are a response to God; we are singing with grace in our hearts “to the Lord.” The music expresses our thoughts and feelings to God. Hymns give us the words to express our worship, praise, and thanks to God. They give us a way to convey what we are feeling or what we’ve learned. We worship the Lord through music.

B. Since we are either *hearing from* God or *responding to* God, this kind of music must be thoroughly biblical. It must be in keeping with sound doctrine. It’s not shallow or superficial music; it is doctrinally robust.

Titus 2:1 ... *speaking the things which are in accord with sound doctrine:*

This kind of music is governed by passages like Phil 4:6 and 1 Cor 10:31. This kind of music is seeking to reflect what is good, beautiful, and true.

C. Since this kind of music is either a reflection of God’s word or a response to God’s word, it is in keeping with the character of God. The quality of this kind of music will be modest, reverent, sober, and dignified. The worship of God must correspond to the character of God.

D. This kind of music may be deeply moving emotionally, but emotional experience is not the main goal. We are *not* seeking an internal feeling through the music; we are seeking to know God and respond to God.

Quote: The music is not intended to stimulate or arouse emotion; rather, deep affections of the soul are stirred by the Holy Spirit through his Word, and music simply gives language to appropriate responses to the Word.³

The emotional response is not from the music itself; we are moved by the truth of God’s word as apprehended in the mind. We perceive God through his Word, not through the music. So the focus of this music is the mind, not the belly; the noble affections, not the bodily passions.

Previous generations used to make a distinction between the noble and virtuous feelings—the “affections”—and the base or lower appetites—the “passions.” The affections were spiritual—the higher, noble aspirations of the soul; the passions were visceral—the lower appetites of the body. There is a distinction between these two.

Christian worship should stir our higher virtues, not excite our lower passions. As humans, we have both noble virtues and ignoble passions. When we are worshipping God, we must appeal to our higher nature, not our lower appetites. We must appeal primarily to the mind, not the gut.

- E. The purpose of music of this kind is to cultivate the mind, the higher, noble affections, not the physical passions. Thus, music should be temperate, moderate, calm, peaceful, and reverent.

One writer from the 1600s (Johann Konrad Dannhauer) asserted that church music must be “sacred, glowing with love, humble, dignified, the praise of God sung by the voice of men and instruments with [fitting] grace and majesty.” He contrasted such expressions with “profane music, which is unspiritual, frivolous, proud, irreverent.”⁴

- F. In fact, various writers have cautioned against using music that stimulates or excites an audience.
 - 1. Clement of Alexandria (150-215), for example, insisted,

³ Aniol.

⁴ Johann Konrad, quoted in Aniol

“We must [detest] extravagant music, which [weakens] men’s souls, and leads to changefulness—now mournful, and then licentious and voluptuous, and then frenzied and frantic.”

2. Our forefathers believed that Christian music should cultivate noble affections and calm bodily passions. Worship music should *not* stir us up physically; it should calm and strengthen the soul. It should appeal more to the soul than to the body.
- G. This kind of worship music has a high regard for the glory of God. The primary concern is God, not man; worship is God-centered, not man-centered. We are here to give worship to God. God is the center of attention, not ourselves.

Trans: The first option for worship music is a form that is modest, reverent, calm, doctrinally rich, and dignified, even majestic. This kind of music actually restrains human passions and appeals primarily to the mind and to the soul. You might say that this kind of music is more *objective*—it focuses on the truth, not the self. The goal is not a personal feeling; the goal is to bring glory to God.

And in case you are wondering, we advocate this kind of music—modest, reverent, richly meaningful, dignified music that is appropriate for the worship of God. I believe this is the proper and fitting style of music for the church. In other contexts, different forms of music may be suitable. But in the church, for the worship of God, we use reverent, spiritual music.

So that’s one option, the one we advocate. As for the other option ...

- II. Some worship music is oriented toward experiencing God.
 - A. The first kind of music focuses on *knowing* God through his word, primarily through our minds. But in this second style of music, the focus is on *experiencing* God’s presence in worship. This kind of music is more *subjective*—it focuses on the individual personal experience. The purpose of such music is personal and experiential. “How do I feel? What am I experiencing?” The focus is the self.

- B. If the Bible contained verses supporting the idea that music facilitates an experience with God, we would look them up. But I am not aware of any verses to consider for this option because there are no verses in the Bible that tell us that church worship music is the means for having an experience with God. That's just not a biblical concept for the NT church.
- C. Still, according to those who promote this style of music, they claim that the intent and purpose of contemporary worship music is a personal experience with God. The goal for worship music is to feel God's presence.

The music is intended to convey feelings of intensity, passion, enthusiasm, exhilaration or euphoria. The goal is to have a feeling, an experience—to sense the presence of God, to have an encounter with the divine, to have a feeling that God is present in power.

Quote: One writer (Matthew Sigler) notes that “contemporary” worship was [closely] linked to the Charismatic Movement of the 1960's and 70's. This connection forged a musical style that was rooted in a particular understanding of the [Holy] Spirit in worship. Specifically, the singing of praise and worship songs was understood sacramentally. *God was uniquely encountered, by the Spirit, in congregational singing.*

Some churches believe that God is present in the sacraments or that we connect with God in the sacraments. So under this understanding, music is the way we experience God.

That's the goal—an experiential, passionate, intense encounter with God, the feeling of God's presence. And that is facilitated through intense, exhilarating, passionate music.

You've probably seen people singing worship music as if they are in some kind of ecstatic trance or dream. Or others are very animated, jumping around, twirling, dancing, etc.

- D. In a worship service, music is a major part of arousing these feelings of God's presence. Many churches begin the worship service with 30-45 minutes of non-stop, intense, emotionally rousing music. The music is of a highly passionate, exhilarating, exciting character. The music creates an atmosphere or mood among the people designed to help them have a spiritual experience. The emotional experience of the music is the evidence of God's presence among them.
- E. As I mentioned earlier, this style of music is largely influenced by Pentecostalism. The goal for Pentecostal worship is having an experience with God; they expect God to "show up" powerfully in their services. They want to experience God in tangible, observable ways. If the worshipper does not feel something intense or deeply moving, then something is wrong; God did not show up. When God is present, people have intense personal experiences.
- F. So the purpose of this music is to stir up the emotions, to excite the passions, to energize the feelings. The focus is on the gut, not the mind; the passions, not the affections. What you feel is important, not so much what you think. Many of the songs they use are very simple and easy to repeat. The lyrics are often quite shallow, and they repeat them over and over again. These songs often don't communicate deep, profound truths. That style of music is really not suitable to carry profound truths.
- G. Someone might ask, "Should we not experience God at church? What's wrong with intense, passionate, exhilarating spiritual feelings?"
1. I don't think trying to achieve those experiences *through music* fits the biblical pattern.

The pattern we find in the Bible is that believers gathered regularly to pray, sing, fellowship, and hear God's word proclaimed. Acts 2:41-47

There's no evidence that the early believers used music to produce a feeling of God's presence. That was never the practice. Find me chapter and verse where Christians use music to create a feeling of God's presence.

2. We should also keep in mind that, whenever the church assembles, Christ is present with us. We might not sense his presence, but we believe by faith that he is present. How we feel about that does not matter. Our feelings are not the standard.

Further, unusual events and extreme emotions do not necessarily prove that God is present. God's presence with us is not signified by high emotions or unusual experiences.

3. The point of the worship service is to bring glory to God through the preaching of His word. The primary emphasis in a worship service is on "preach the word" (2 Tim 4:2). The Bible tells us that all things ought to be done "decently and in order" (1 Cor 14:40). The Bible tells us how to behave ourselves in the house of God (1 Tim 3:15).
4. The worship experience we expect is that the HSp helps us to understand and apply the Word of God to our lives. The truth of God appeals primarily to our minds. Our emotions are stirred by the Word of God, by the content of what is preached or sung, not by an exuberant style of music.
5. Further, we know that the feelings we get from music are not necessarily an indication of God's presence. It's fairly easy to manipulate human emotions. What might *seem* like the presence of God may be musical manipulation.

Illus.: One person I heard about was very impressed by the feelings she got at church—until she went to a rock n roll concert, where she got the same feelings. She had the same experience at a secular concert that she got at church. The music manipulated her emotions; the feelings came through the music itself, not through the communication of God's word.

Music is the language of the emotions. In some contexts, it's fine to listen to music that stimulates our emotions. It's not wrong to have your passions stirred, to feel exhilarated, to feel excitement or sorrow through music. That's one of the reasons we listen to music—to have an emotional experience, to feel a certain way.

But is that the goal of *church* worship music? No. We might want that exhilarating experience at the concert hall, at home, or in our car, but that feeling is not the goal of church music. The goal is to learn from God or draw near to God, to respond to God in faith and obedience.

The goal in worship is to bring glory to God, not to stimulate our inner feelings. The goal is *not* to have an exciting, passionate, exhilarating experience; the goal is to bring glory to God and to learn of him.

If we are going to have an experience of God's presence, it should be generated by the HSp using God's Word. Music may be part of that experience because the music can convey or reflect God's word. But the focus is on the truth, not on the music.

If you take away the music, is the experience still going to happen? If you unplug the instruments and put down the drum sticks, what remains? Without the frantic, frenetic, frenzied music, do you have the experience? If people don't get stirred by the truth of God's word, then it is questionable why they are getting stirred up. If the HSp is creating a spiritual experience, he does it through the proclamation of truth.

Can you combine the two types of music? Can you have exhilarating, passionate, emotional music that stirs the passions but also appeals to the higher affections? Some churches try to do that—they use emotionally intense music and combine it with lyrics that are deeply meaningful and biblical. But it usually does not work out well because you are trying to appeal to two opposite aspects of the human nature—the gut/passions and the mind/soul; the higher affections and the lower passions. It's hard to appeal to both at the same time.

It's best to use musical styles in the church that appeal to the higher nature—the affections/mind/soul rather than the passions/gut/body. The goal of the music is not to create a personal experience. The goal is to hear God's word and to respond to it in worship—Col 3:16. In church, we want to respond to truth, not to a musical influence or style. Even if we set God's word to music, it's still the truth that's most important, not the musical setting.

We have these two options: music that helps us *know* God through his Word, and music that helps us have an *experience* where we feel God's presence. The first option has good biblical support. The second option has little if any biblical support.

The desire to have an experience with God is good, but it's highly questionable whether it is appropriate to seek that experience through music that appeals primarily to the passions instead of to the affections.

Our commitment as a church is to use music that uplifts the soul but that also brings glory to God. We are singing with grace in our hearts “to the Lord.” God is the primary audience of our music. The purpose of music is not to provide an overwhelming personal experience for us; the goal is to teach and admonish one another and to respond appropriately to the Word of God as it is proclaimed. The goal is to know God and to proclaim him, not to achieve a personal feeling for ourselves. The focus always has to be on God and not on ourselves.

We want to use music that is reverent, biblically accurate, modest, good, beautiful and true. The music that we use to convey the truth should appeal to our higher nature, our spiritual affections. Other styles of music may be perfectly appropriate in other contexts; but in the worship of God at church, we want to use music that is most likely to bring glory to God and to convey his word to us.