

Lecture #28 – Biblical and Practical Principles for Music

I. Introduction

We have come to the final lesson in our study, a culmination of everything we have covered. We have examined essential music theory, the history and development of sacred music, the appearance and use of music in the Scriptures, and practical application of music in ministry. While we have covered so much ground, we have just looked at the tip of the proverbial iceberg.

In this lecture, we will draw on everything we have seen so far and develop some guiding principles to help carry us forward in practice and further study.

II. General Principles

A. Music is a gift from God.

“Next to the Word of God, music deserves the highest praise. The gift of language combined with the gift of song was given to man that he should proclaim the Word of God through Music.” – Martin Luther¹

It is clear from the multitude of Old and New Testament references that God endorses the use of music in His worship and service. There are so many forms of expression that He could have used, but music enjoys a special place in God’s dealings with mankind.

B. Music is not inherently good or evil.

Too many in the past and present attempt to vilify music as essential sinful. One passage that is often cited as proof in Ezekiel 28:11-19 concerning the “king of Tyrus”. Many see in this description of a historical person² a type or shadow of Satan. This is, at best, at secondary application of the passage. Albert Barnes writes: “The passage is ironical; its main purpose is to depict all the glory, real or assumed, of ‘the prince of Tyrus,’ in order to show how deplorable should be his ruin.”³

Yet, even if we interpret this passage as speaking primarily about Satan, it does not mean that music is evil by its association with him. Instead, it proves that exalted place of music in the perfection of

¹ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/346054-next-to-the-word-of-god-music-deserves-the-highest> - accessed 11-27-23

² “The prince of Tyrus, or, as he is also called, the king, was, according to the Jewish historian Josephus, Ithobalus, known in the Phoenician annals as Ithobaal II.” – A.C. Gaebelein

³ Barnes’ Notes, e-sword module.

Heaven as seen in Satan's role before his fall. The passage could also show us that Satan is very adept at music and so can use it for his ends.

As we studied early on, music is a language or form of communication. Just like any language, it can be used for good or evil.

C. Not all music is acceptable in God's worship and service.

God is very particular in His desired interaction with mankind as revealed time and time again in Scripture. While God demanded blood sacrifices of Israel, they had to be specific animals meeting a specific standard offered in a specific manner. This is not just about rote repetition either: God demanded a proper heart and motivation behind the actions.⁴ Amos 5:23 clearly shows us that God does not accept all worship through music: "Take thou away from me the noise of thy songs; for I will not hear the melody of thy viols."

God's worship is never based on "anything goes" or well-meaning hearts. What God desires is a purity of faith, motive, and practice. There is great need for discernment in these areas because we must construct a framework of Biblical principles to base our philosophy on.

D. Sacred music should be of the best quality we can offer, but high-quality music is not inherently spiritual.

We should strive to do our best in all that we do in our service to God. Sometimes, doing our best becomes the focus and not the important object of what we do – God and His glory.

Judging the quality of music is very subjective. Many would consider classical music to be the highest standard, but that is not entirely true. What we consider as "classical" is a specific genre of Western European music. Many non-European cultures will not necessarily agree that this style is the best quality. There can be high quality music across many different styles and genres, but that does not mean they are good for worship.

⁴ I Samuel 15:22, Psalm 51:16, Proverbs 15:8, Isaiah 1:11-20, Amos 5:21-25, Matthew 9:13, and more.

III. Historic Principles

These principles are drawn from the study and analysis of the history of sacred music. In these we reflect the lessons learned from centuries of experience by our spiritual forebears.

A. Music should not distract from worship.

One of the primary concerns of Jewish and early Christian sacred music is that the worship of God should be primary. Music can be great support or enhancement to our worship, but once it draws attention to itself it is a distraction.

B. Music should be free from worldly associations.

Music is used in almost all forms of pagan and idolatrous worship. Great care was taken early on to create a separation from the style, methods, and character of this corrupted worship. The early church never sought to mimic or embrace the music of the world around it.

C. The primary instrument for worship is the human voice.

Early church music typically limited or forbade the use of instruments as they were deemed a distraction from the worship of individual believers with their own voices.

D. Instruments should support and not overpower singing.

The role of instruments in the Jewish Temple was that of support for the vocalists. It is debated (and find it highly doubtful) that solely instrument music had major use in the Temple. Early church music placed the emphasis on the singing and not instruments. The practical reason for the use of instruments in almost any era was to enhance the singing.

E. Music should be sung in "one voice" – united participation.

Every believer, regardless of age or skill, should be able to join their voices in God's praise.

F. Church music is a spiritual endeavor and requires spiritual people to produce it.

The foremost requirement of sacred music is not musical skill but faithfulness to God. Non-believers may enjoy the music of worship, but they cannot truly participate because they do not know the God we worship. It is better to have low quality music with higher spirituality than high quality music with low spirituality. This cannot be used as an excuse to improve our music knowledge and skill.

G. Church music must present and support sound doctrine.

Everything done in church should align with God, His character, and His truth. The songs in each believer's heart should reflect the truth of God. Songs with no, little, or faulty doctrine must be discarded.

H. Church music is a communal activity.

Church music is at its root communal and not performance. The entire body of believers should add their voices to the praise of God, not just a select few. The congregation should participate and not just spectate.

I. Music is secondary to the Word.

Will singing is commanded and commended in Scripture, its role is always secondary to the Divine Revelation of the Scriptures. Though there are Psalms such as 149 and 150 that burst forth with music, the crown jewel of the Psalms is 119, which continually testifies to the supremacy of God's Word.

J. Leadership in church music should be united in the general leadership of the church.

A tendency has developed over time to give music its own leadership with a great degree of independence. The music director does whatever he wants, the pastor does what he wants, etc. However, the leadership and direction of the music ministry must be part of the overall direction of the church. For Baptists, this means the music ministry is under the head of the executive leadership of the pastor. This ensures that the music program reflects the church and its direction.

K. The music should not distract from the message (words).

Of the four principal parts of music (melody, harmony, rhythm, lyrics), the emphasis should be on the lyrics. This is not to say that these other parts are unimportant, but in the balance that is necessary in sacred music the words should be primary.

L. The congregation should participate in music, not just observe it.

Sacred music is not a spectator sport, nor is a church service a concert. The congregation should have an active role in the music service. A music program that does not encourage and facilitate congregational singing is foreign to the most fundamental concepts of church worship services.

M. The music should not be so complicated as to require professional training.

The music of a church should be so that children and adults alike can join their voices to the music of each service. It should be accessible to the nonprofessional and the untrained.

N. Our use of music and singing should be built on a robust theological base.

This is not just *what* is sung but *why* and *how* it is sung. Pastoral of musical leadership should have a well-established theology and practical philosophy of worship.

IV. Practical Principles for Church Music Ministry

A. Special music can be more advanced than congregational music.

Specials by soloists, groups, or choirs can be, and generally are, more advanced musically than that of the congregational singing. There are many practical reasons for this, including the higher skill level of the singers and musicians. I attended a church once that encouraged people to sing songs from the hymnal for specials. This is not wrong to do, but many of these are designed for congregational singing.

B. Work with what you have and work it into something better.

Start training children in children's choirs to read music. Teach people how to sing parts. Work so that the music program is better in five years from what it is now. Not all will be drawn to this training, but some will. Practically speaking, as even portions of a music program advance others will advance behind them.

Do not press the music program into something it cannot attain yet. Stay within the skill level of your musicians and singers but strive to improve it.

C. Teach about Music Philosophy and Standards.

You cannot teach what you do not understand. You need to be well grounded so you can articulate your position to the church.

D. Put it in writing.

Any standards or requirements in church music need to be in writing. The best time to make these types of decisions is beforehand. This ensures that your decisions are impersonal and consistent.

V. Personal Principles for Music

A. There is greater liberty in our music choices outside of church.

There is greater liberty in the music we consume outside of the church, yet we should hold ourselves to a high standard. This is from a very practical viewpoint but not a theological one. There are many types of music that are not congruent to corporate worship that are not at all sinful or even worldly.

B. There are limits to liberty.

What I am trying to say is that not every song we listen to has to be out of a hymnal, BUT there are limits to our liberty. Basic principles should guide us. Consider the following questions when interacting with music (content, style, performer, etc.):

- Does it promote anything sinful or unholy?
- Does it have worldly associations?
- Does it incite emotions that are not peaceful or pleasant?
- Does it cause the mind to dwell on good things? (Philippians 4:8)
- Does associating myself with this music bring glory to Christ?

C. Strive for consistency and excellency.

Among the qualifications for pastor in I Timothy 3 are concepts like “blameless” and “sober”. These and the others speak of a life of consistent faithfulness and maintaining a high moral standard. Be “blameless” in your personal music. Do not give Satan room to attach through it. Do not let it be a stumbling block to others. Be “sober” in your choices: logical and serious.