

Musical Worship

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[0 : 00] Good morning. I have two texts for you to turn with me today. The first is Colossians chapter 3 and verse 16. So you turn there and mark it with your finger or your handy ribbon marker. And if you're doing this digitally, tough. Still some advantages to the paper version. Colossians 3.16 and Ephesians chapter 5 verses 18 and 19.

Normatively, we preach verse by verse through the Bible and we are presently in John chapter 4. The last time we were there, just this last week, I made some corrective comments from the phrase spirit and truth.

God is seeking those who will worship Him in spirit and truth. And so today we thought it wise to pause for a week to speak positively about the matter.

John, am I not on? Okay. That was an inquisitive look, I thought, so I'm sorry. The last time that we considered musical worship was almost exactly a year ago. Almost to the week exactly a year ago. I want to comfort you if you've been here for quite some time that I do not intend to address the matter yearly, but we thought it wise today. So, occasionally we do these sermons that kind of fall under a category that we call why we do what we do.

[1 : 42] And then we like to add to that why we do what we do and why we do what we do the way we do what we do. When we gather together as a church, why do we engage in musical worship and why do we engage in musical worship the particular way that we engage in musical worship?

I want to begin with an aside concerning our language concerning music. You may already be hearing me use a different phrase, musical worship.

In recent decades, for most of our lives, the music sung in church has been often referred to simply as worship and the individual leading the music as the worship leader.

Music, rightly sung in our church gatherings or otherwise, certainly is worship. It ought to be that. But it is not the totality of worship.

And the individual leading music is certainly leading us in worship, if it's being done properly, but not in the totality of our worship.

[3 : 01] So to call our singing together worship and the individual leading the music as the worship leader suggests that our worship of God is reduced to a bit of time during a service on Sunday morning.

And implies the exclusion of our worship. And our prayer is a prayer of God. And our scripture reading, of our ordinance administering, of our preaching and hearing of preaching, and certainly the rest of our living when we part ways.

Paul stated in Romans chapter 12 in verse 1. I appeal to you, therefore, brothers. Everything he has said, all the doctrinal richness in the first 11 chapters.

He says, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice. Holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

God means for all of ourselves, all of our lives to be committed to his praise.

[4 : 17] Every ounce of it. Not just the songs that we sing, although they're included in that greater reality. So, we will never call the music here worship or the individual leading the music the worship leader because it's just confusing.

I encourage you to join us in this, to toe this line, to be careful with your words. Some will say, well, you know what I mean when being confronted on this matter.

But the problem is, words have meaning. They carry along ideas, and we ought to be careful. We shouldn't be cavalier with our use of words.

If you say something, and I'm corrective, and you say, you know what I mean, I'll say, no, I don't know what you mean. That's why I brought the issue up. So, today, and I hope on into the future,

we will speak in terms of musical worship and whoever is leading us in that, our music leader. The subject of musical worship in churches has been a highly contested subject, especially over these past decades. These conflicts are often called the worship wars.

[5 : 40] As you know, there's actually been a label given to all of this conflict. And they revolve particularly around a debate between contemporary and traditional music.

Lots of heat, very little light. The current solution has seemed to be for small churches to work to serve a particular demographic.

We're going to find the people who like a certain style of music. And for larger churches to cater to every demographic with multiple services.

Different offerings for different preferences. None of this is good for your faith or for the community of faith.

It is not proper for a church to serve preference over purpose. Preference itself isn't a bad thing. We can like particular styles or particular songs.

[6 : 44] We sing some songs here that I don't really care for all that much. But when preference begins to rule over purpose in the way that we gather, we are on a road to trouble.

It is not healthy to meet felt needs at the expense of real needs. To promulgate consumerism in the worship of our God.

We should not say to people, it's totally okay to be a consumer. Rather, how can we come together and serve one another as we sing?

In the barely early days of our church, Wes, one of our founding elders and our music leader for the first nine years of our existence, and myself were frustrated with the conflict we saw on this matter. We just thought the church can be better at this. And we wanted to lead our small gathering well. So we're so very grateful for a massive story I could tell you, but how God brought us to believe in the sufficiency of Scripture.

[7 : 56] That the Bible has something to say about how we gather together as a church, and it has something to say about how we should sing when we are together. So, Colossians chapter 3 and verse 16, and Ephesians chapter 5, verse 18 and 19.

We'll take a look at today and draw some implications out of it. Before I read it though, let me pray on our behalf. Our Father and our God, what a good thing it is for us to be together this morning, to be reminded of your grace to us in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And I am glad that we have already been so clearly reminded of this in our reading, and in our prayers, and in our songs. My Father, as we open your word together this morning, we want to rightly understand it.

We know that we need your help to do this. We humbly recognize that it was written ultimately for your glory, and also for our good. Would you help us to believe its promises, and obey its commands, and to have affection for you, its author.

We pray this in Christ's name. Amen. So, Colossians 3.16 says, Paul here writes, 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.

[9 : 36] Now turn to Ephesians chapter 5, verse 18 and 19. There Paul says, We'll make a connection between those two texts here momentarily.

So why do we do what we do? Why do we sing together when we gather? Singing is a significant part of our Lord's Day liturgy.

A big part of the plan for when we come together. Why? The Bible commands it. For God's glory, and for our good. Some examples.

We read already from Colossians 3 and Ephesians chapter 5, but also Psalm 33 and verse 3. Sing to Him a new song. Play skillfully on the strings with loud shouts.

Psalm 47 and verse 6. Sing praises to God. Sing praises. Sing praises to our King. Sing praises. The Bible contains over 400 references to singing and 50 direct commands to sing.

[11 : 00] The longest book of the Bible, by verse count, the Psalms is a book of songs. And we have the example of Jesus in Matthew chapter 26 and verse 30.

There Matthew records, And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. At the Last Supper, they sang together.

And we have the example of heaven in the book of Revelation. Did you know that the book of Revelation has more songs in it than any other book except the Psalms?

There is singing in heaven. And if we are a people who belong there, we should sing. Revelation chapter 15, verse 2 and 3. There John says, And I saw what appeared to be a sea of glass mingled with fire, and also those who had conquered the beast and its image and the number of its name, standing beside the sea of glass with harps of God in their hands.

And 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.

[12:14] Singing in heaven. And the example of Paul and Silas in the Philippian jail, Acts chapter 16 and verse 25. About midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God.

And there's an earthquake and the jail cell is opened. James says in James chapter 5 and verse 13, Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise.

It's all over the place. And perhaps we read past those commands too often. God's people sing. John Calvin once said, Wherever faith is lively, wherever faith is lively, holy rejoicing will follow. So, it's fitting.

We should sing when we are gathered. I don't think this should be a thing that's forced upon us. I think we should want to come together and sing.

[13:19] But what are we to sing when we come together? Psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. Now, I will tell you, you can read a lot of things about these three things.

There's a lot of conjecture out there about them. I think simply we could think in these terms about psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. First, we should sing from God's songbook.

It makes sense that we would pick up the book of psalms. We sing quite a few songs, none this morning. Alex and I did not coordinate this morning.

But that are directly from the psalms. For example, we sing a song that we call Psalm 43. You may or may not be familiar with that. We also sing a lot of songs that are directly adapted from the psalms.

So we lose the rhythm and the rhyming when we go from Hebrew to English. So it can be a little clunky to directly sing a psalm in English. But there's a lot that are really, really, really close.

[14:25] A mighty fortress is our God, for example, is an expression of a psalm. I think it's Psalm 46, if I'm remembering correctly. So we have a songbook and we should sing psalms.

That's probably happening more often than you may even realize. We should also sing hymns. Hymns are songs to or about God and what He has done.

It's kind of the locus, the focus of it. That's often why we want to have a big view of God, the things we sing from, like our hymnal.

This one's called Hymns of Grace. So a broad category, songs to or about God and what He has done.

Some examples, How Great Thou Art or Holy, Holy, Holy. Colossians 1, verse 15-20, by many scholars, is understood to be an early hymn.

[15:27] They think there, Paul is actually citing a hymn that the church at Colossae would have been familiar with. It says, Jesus is the image of the invisible in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities, all things were created through Him and for Him.

That feels like a verse, doesn't it? And He is before all things and in Him all things hold together and He is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything He might be preeminent.

For in Him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell and through Him to reconcile to Himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of His cross.

We sing a hymn together called All Things, which is an adaptation of those six verses. We're also to sing spiritual songs.

This is the one that gets the most debate about exactly what is meant by this. But we think kind of the category left are songs to or about us.

[16:39] We sing to one another about us in relation to God and what spiritual songs if defined in this way. Songs like Amazing Grace or It Is Well.

The focus is more on our experience in relation to God. So we're to sing. We're to sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.

We're commanded to do so and I would hope that that would be enough for each and every one of us. But maybe a little more thinking serves us as well.

humans are wired to give and receive through song. People will inevitably sing.

Go to a sporting event and you will find men who in church would fold their arms and not open their mouth singing heartily. heartily.

[17 : 37] I just answered a phone call on my iPad. I hope that sales call got a little bite there. I should have left it on. Just preach to them. We are wired.

Our culture loves musicians for good and bad throughout history. This has always been true. Musicians have been popular. Every movement, every uprising, every cultural expression has its music.

We're musical beings. Everyone will tap their foot or bob their head to something. You may not like the music I tap my foot and bob my head to but you will find music.

You will do that too. I've been sharing some of the classics from my high school years with my boys and it's really amazing to me how every song I listened to in high school now seems really fast.

Like, is this the right tempo? I think they sped this song up in this recording. Nope. Nope. My brain is slowing down and I'm having a hard time processing music at the pace that I once did.

[18 : 50] We're musical people though, right? It's part of who we are designed to be in the church should engage our minds. So hear me, it should engage our minds and I'll make a stronger point to this in a moment but it also connects to our affections.

I think this is why we're so wired up in this way. We are moved along by music. So, when we sing and we are gathered it is our hope that our feelings catch up to the truth that we believe.

We want to sing the truth. We want to accompany the singing of that truth in the hope that our affections and the truth line up with one another.

The two set right on top of one another. We should feel the truth. It's good for us to do this.

Jonathan Edwards in his book Religious Affections said this, quote, the duty of singing praises to God seems to be appointed wholly to excite and express religious affections.

[20 : 08] That our feelings, that we would have these great truths before us and that we would sing them and give us opportunity to emote the wonderful truths of God.

And so we sing. We take up the commands together. Why do we do it the way that we do it? Colossians 3.16 and Ephesians 5.18-19 show us that our singing together is the result of the Spirit of Christ dwelling within us.

There's a striking parallel between much of Colossians 3 and Ephesians 5. They both have Paul as their author, which allows for an incredible connection to be drawn from them.

So once again, you can flip back and forth, look at these two texts. Colossians 3.16, there he says, let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.

And then it follows, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God. So the outflow of letting the word of Christ dwell in you richly is that we will be teaching and admonishing through our singing.

[21 : 32] And then in Ephesians 5, he says, do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit. And then what did you say? Addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart.

And the argument that I want you to see from this parallel text is that to be filled with the Spirit is to let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.

The way that the Spirit works in us, that the word of Christ would dwell, take up residence, that it would inhabit us in abundance richly, which means it's going to come out of us as well.

Let the word of Christ fill you, read, meditate, memorize. If you're in Christ, you will want to be a person of his word.

And it's going to come out of us. It's going to come out of us in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. Now, just in case this connection between Colossians and Ephesians is too vague, I don't think it is, but just in case it is, we can look a couple other places very quickly.

[22 : 48] Romans chapter 8 and verse 5. There Paul says, those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit.

What are the things of the Spirit? Oh, well, most certainly the word that he inspired. Galatians 5.16, walk by the Spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.

Proper worship of God is Spirit-filled worship of God, which is mindful worship of God. If you're seeking experiences to get your religious affections going all the time, I would suggest to you that that's going to be a dry well to drink from.

It needs to be truth-driven, mindful all the time. Our singing together should be mindful and it should be affectionate.

Our feelings should accompany it, whether or not, that's very expressive. Our emotions should catch up to the very things that we're singing.

[24 : 09] We sing things together that are wholeheartedly amen, yes and amen to every one of them, but I don't know that my heart is always caught up to the things that I'm singing and it's good for me to see it and to hear it coming from you.

I need my heart tuned to come together and worship in music. Colossians 3.16 again, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, addressing one another.

We come together to remind one another and teach one another of deeply important things. John Owen once said, quote, we must not allow ourselves to be satisfied with vague ideas of the love of Christ, which present nothing of his glory to our minds.

Vague ideas, right? We need deep truth, mindful truth, stuff that makes us wrestle, stuff that makes us go, oh, this is vast and difficult to understand.

We want to mine the depths of God's goodness to us in Christ and we can do that in song. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 14 and verse 15, I will sing praise with my spirit, but I will sing with my mind also.

[25 : 39] And then back to our text from last week, John 4 and verse 23, Jesus says, but the hour is coming, it is now here when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth.

For the Father is seeking such people to worship Him. So why do we do what we do the way we do what we do? We're not trying to create for you a high religious moment.

We don't want you to be moved by a particular crescendo. We want you to be moved by the truth. Music helps us do that.

We don't want to mitigate that reality. But we want to present to you true things when we come together and we sing. So we use parameters in considering the songs that we sing together.

We think about this kind of thing. I don't know that we always nail it. I'm saying we because I'm part of that process. I suggest things and it doesn't always go the way we hope that it will go.

[26 : 44] But we've got some guiding principles for how it is we take up the music that we take up. But before I get into those principles I want you to know even the way that we're doing this with a hymnal and a bulletin is a thoughtful thing.

Why? Why do this? It's clunky. I get it. It's a lot to hold. And some of you are also holding babies. And there's a lot of stuff going on in our hands.

Wouldn't it be nice if each verse was fed to you on a screen? We used to do that. There's a screen over my left shoulder. Why? Why do we do this? Because we think you should take it home. I need this.

I muse over this throughout the week. This lives here and here. This is my personal copy that I bought. It's got all my post-it notes in it. I go through this thing devotionally.

I read songs. Complete in me, I've had marked for months. And I thought I had passed it along as a song that we should sing. And apparently I hadn't, but I'm so thankful we sang it this morning.

[27 : 50] I've had it marked here. And I need to go through this again and again to be reminded of these wonderful truths put to poetry. Right? I sing sometimes by myself.

You don't want to hear it. It's good for my heart to do this very thing. So, we have a hymnal, a hymnal that we have said, true, right?

There's good, good songs for us to explore and understand in this book. I'm not saying it's an inspired work. Don't hear me, right? But it speaks to us, the truth of the Bible.

And we don't want to limit ourselves to a single book, so we add a bulletin in there. We pick up other wonderful and beautiful songs. So, we use three parameters in considering the songs that we sing together.

Number one, this should come as no surprise, I've been leading you to this place the entire time, truth. I know that that's probably a given, but, beloved, you could go to many, many churches, many churches this morning, and they are not singing songs that are true.

[28 : 55] is the song true? Does it clearly express what the Bible teaches? Does it contain within it any error?

It's a very important question to ask. It's a kind of wildly popular song. I don't know how often it's being sung these days, but there was a half a decade ago, it was everywhere.

You couldn't avoid the song, Reckless Love by Corey Asbury. It's a beautiful song. This is how it goes, the verse of it.

Oh, the overwhelming, never-ending, reckless love of God. Oh, it chases me down, fights till I'm found, leaves the 99. I couldn't earn it, and I don't deserve it.

But still, you give yourself away. Oh, the overwhelming, never-ending, reckless love of God. Unless I be called out for copyright infringement, yeah, is at the end of that.

[29 : 59] Well, here's the problem. So much of that is good. Oh, so much of that is beautiful. But the word reckless means something.

It means something. I think what he's aiming at, I guess I want to hope he's aiming at is a bounding, overwhelming, oh, he says overwhelming, some other synonym for big, huge, you can fill a lot of words into that.

But recklessness is without purpose. And Christ's love is not reckless. It had a very specific purpose to come and accomplish on behalf of his people.

people. This is misleading. We need to be very clear about the love of God and how it works in the world. The very gospel is getting on an unfirm foundation if we're not careful with our words.

So we wouldn't sing this song. This would not be a song that we would want to sing. It's a song as precise as it should be. There's a song called How Deep the Father's Love for Us.

[31 : 16] It is in our hymnal and we have sung it from the hymnal. There's a line in it that we're not crazy about though. And I think that the author doesn't mean to be confusing but he says, I think it's in the second verse, it was my sin that held him there.

So on the cross, it was my sin. And the idea is that he's atoning for our sin. So he's paying the price for our sin. But we just didn't love the idea of our sin seeming to have a power to hold Jesus on the cross.

He says in John 10 verse 18, no one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. And so, most regularly, we put it in the bulletin and we replace that line with, it was his love that held him there.

Right? Purposeful. not reckless, purposeful love, while he paid for the sins of all who had placed their faith in him. Thirdly, is the song tied to any false teaching movements?

There are some beautiful songs that express the truth. They don't contain within them any error, but they're so tied to a particular church or teaching.

[32 : 38] They're part and parcel with, connected to a particular movement, particular teaching, particular church, that we don't sing them because we don't want to give tacit approval to false teachers.

We don't want somebody to come here, hear a song, and go, oh, that's so great, who sings that? Oh, that's so great, what church do they sing that in? Oh, I must listen to this pastor when he's a false teacher.

So, examples. This is controversial, and I don't think it should be. We don't sing songs from Elevation Worship, or Hillsong United, or Bethel Music. Can you enjoy some songs from them?

Sure, but oh, don't think that we approve of the teaching that's part of those movements. The songs we sing together should be true, and they should support truth.

Second parameter is the parameter of depth. Does a song merely skip a stone off the surface of the truth, or does it sink deep into it?

[33 : 47] Does a song teach us something about God and His work? Is it content rich? I had at a conference one time at a mixed bag of traditions.

I had an older pastor asking me about our church, and I was telling him a little bit about us and the demographic and that we have a lot of young people. And he said, what is the style of your music? And as you can probably tell, I didn't like the question at the outset. And so I just shot back, content rich. And he went, oh, that's a great answer. I said, thank you.

Yeah, and then he was just astounded that young people wanted to come together and sing songs that were content rich. And I encouraged him that God has people in the city.

Wordy songs. Wordy songs. I want to contemplate songs. Sometimes at the risk of singing right over things that are so good, but take it home. You can buy copies of this hymnal.

[34 : 49] You can take the bulletin. Look it over. Think it through. We have a limited time together. We're going to sing this morning six songs.

I think Alex is going to tack on the doxology, so we can call it seven songs. It's a very limited amount of time together, so let's just not waste a moment of it.

It's not against some repetition from time to time. That's okay. It drives a point. But let's not sing songs that just repeat one thing over and over and over again until we're all lulled into a trance. Let's keep our minds engaged because we have such precious moments together. Thirdly, last parameter is singability.

Is a song congregational? There are some songs that are great songs meant to be performed, listened to.

[35 : 48] The songs we sing together, we should be able to sing together. The primary instrument when we come together is your heart tuned by the grace of God overflowing in song.

You're the primary, right? Not what's happening on stage. That's accompaniment. That's the leadership, right? We all need some help with our tempo. We need to know when to start singing the next verse, right?

That's what these people are here for, and they understand that to be true. What they're mostly trying to do is not be distracting to what we do together. That's why we have the lights on in here, and the volume.

It depends on where you're sitting in this room sometimes, but we want you to be able to hear the people in these rooms. We want you to be able to sing to each other. remember, this is not a concert time.

This is congregational gathering, and we're working at trying to obey this command to teach and admonish one another in all wisdom, addressing one another.

[36 : 59] Psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. So we should ask the question, this is probably the point at which we may fail most often. Does the song have a recognizable rhythm?

Sometimes we try a song and it just doesn't work great. We thought it would and it doesn't always pan out. Does the song have a range designed for the average human?

There's some beautiful songs that the average person just shouldn't sing. Oh, holy night. Every year at Christmas we sure give it a try and a couple of people pull it off.

There's like a handful of people that can actually go from the bottom end of that to the top end of that. So does it have a range? Is it in a key that's singable? Right? Are we actually in this spot?

I'm so thankful for the sacrifice. I mean, you should know this, the sacrifice of the women in our church because we are often singing in a key that's difficult for them.

[37 : 57] They have to pick an octave low that's hard for them, a register that's difficult for them, or be really, really high. And you know why? Because we're trying to sing so that the men can sing. Early in the life of our church, as we're picking out keys, the question was, do we want men to sing?

And the answer was yes. We want men to give leadership in singing. We're going to have to pick keys that work. If you're not feeling this, ladies, I'm thankful. Maybe we found the magic in between place.

But we really labor to do this. We want the men to lead out in song. I think a lot of women are being very kind to us so that we can sing.

Can a song be played well by our musicians? Style not the question here, but can they actually accompany us well and not be distracting?

So we want to come together and we want to sing. And we have instructed one another already this morning. We've done this work already. Again, Alex and I did not coordinate this together.

[39 : 02] He did what he would have done on any other Sunday. Alex and Jordan and Ben do a good job and all the people that have come alongside them and help and serve in this way.

We are so blessed to be led to sing well. So for the sake of time, you don't have to look at it, but just the five songs that we've sung here together.

First, turn your eyes upon Jesus. We administered comfort for the troubled, trialed soul by reminding one another to trust in God's promises, and then we turn one another toward evangelism, to not be self-absorbed, but then to take this good news to the world.

All creatures of our God and King, we exhort one another to the befitting praise of created beings for their creator. Complete in thee, we were reminded that we are justified, set free from the power of sin, and helped by the finished work of Christ.

Yet not I, but through Christ in me, I had a really hard time writing a single sentence for this song. It's got a lot in it. We spoke to one another of the hope and power and pardon and security that is ours in Jesus Christ.

[40 : 25] Whatever my God ordains is right. We encourage one another to be faithful as God's providence reigns in our lives.

I don't know about you, but I needed to hear every bit of that this morning. Not every song that we sing contains within it the entirety of the gospel or unpacks all the implications of the gospel, but a lot of it does.

A year ago I went on a sabbatical and I took my family as a learning experience to a local popular large attractational church.

And in our time there lots of songs were sung, prayers were offered, they even took the Lord's Supper, put my quotation fingers, they took the Lord's Supper, there was a sermon of sorts, and afterwards I asked my boys, I said, boys, how many times did you hear the gospel this morning? And my oldest, Cade, who's now 15, 14 at the time, he said, once, sort of, and we got to unpack what that meant, once, sort of, gospel people ought to gather and proliferate the gospel.

[41 : 50] You've heard the gospel, there's more of guests at it, but in reading and praying and in singing, five, six times, it's been laid out before you.

This ought to change us. We come, we engage, we expect God to work through his truth in our lives as we come together.

It ought to cause us to grow in Christ and leave here one degree of glory to another degree of glory for the praise of his name. Truth, depth, and singability singability all for the glory of God and for the good of his people.

Let us be a people who sing to one another and who know why we sing to one another and who know why or what and how we should sing to one another.

Let's pray. five