

♪ Worship Notes ♪

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THEME: Making Musical Choices

WHAT IS APPROPRIATE?

The most consistently asked question of me in my international teaching is about whether a certain type of music is appropriate for use in Christian worship. This is both a difficult and an age-old question.

Several principles seem to have a bearing on this debate:

1. *Music itself is fundamentally neutral morally.* After all, music fundamentally consists of vibrating columns of air, and there is nothing inherently moral or immoral about vibrating columns of air.

2. At the same time, in its effects *music is extremely powerful affectively and emotionally*, and can thus be a force for good or evil.

3. While music may be universal as a special gift of God's common grace, *music is not a "universal language."* That common misunderstanding has been effectively debunked by modern ethnomusicological studies. One vivid example is the recorded example from the Canela tribe of Brazil, with its cacophony of tone clusters and angular tune, which to Western would seem to connote a lament or tragic ode—yet which in reality is a song that proclaims, "God's Word Makes Me

Happy"! (Hear this song [HERE](#); see an approximate notation of the song [HERE](#); and read the fascinating story of how the late missionary ethnomusicologist Tom Avery helped this people to develop their own body of worship songs [HERE](#).)

4. One situation that does give music a moral dimension is *when a text is set to it*. This is of course a completely different situation: in this case the text is the primary carrier of "meaning;" and when a

sung text is used in public worship it must therefore necessarily be examined for biblical faithfulness, literary integrity, understandability and devotional quality.

5. Beyond just the text sung is the question of the *associations* that a particular type of music may have in the minds and hearts of its listeners. This includes the implications of the text, but can go far beyond it (for sometimes texts themselves are changed or "Christianized" in an attempt to make a particular song or style usable in a worship context). If the song (or its style) carries for the hearers unmistakable associations with non-Christian or anti-Christian themes, practices, or lifestyles, than those associations will certainly interfere with people's worship, making that music inappropriate to use. The desire to be culturally relevant or sensitive does not

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trump the priority of being faithful to biblical standards and hence being distinctly *counter-cultural* when necessary.

This issue is faced all the time in the world of missions, especially when a new people group is reached with the gospel for the first time and the newly planted church is seeking to find its own musical identity in worship. In pagan and animistic environments there are often musical styles that have a strong cultural association with the occult, or with ancestor or demon worship; in these cases careful consideration must be given to whether bringing over these styles into Christian worship will carry with it such a strong reminder of the pagan past that it becomes an impediment rather than an aid to worship. The budding fields of ethnomusicology and ethnodoxology in the missionary endeavor (pioneered largely by [Wycliffe Bible Translators](#)) involves placing trained experts in these areas to help the people think through these kinds of decisions as they develop indigenous expressions of Christian worship.

But it is not just in the third world where the issue of musical associations is relevant to making musical choices for worship. A perhaps more subtle version of the same dynamic is at play in Western churches as well. And here too the need is for discerning, prayerful consideration of a musical style's associations in the minds and hearts of the people. On vivid example from my own worship ministry in the

U.S.: as Pastor of Worship at my church, it fell to me to approve all of the music used in wedding ceremonies at the church, in order to ensure that a worship atmosphere was maintained. One young couple requested to use the theme song from a well-known film. It was in and of itself a beautiful love song—but the story of the movie which the song revolved around an adulterous relationship. As

well known as the movie and the song were, it would be impossible for that association to escape many of the people present at the wedding, and therefore be inconsistent with the desire for the ceremony to be a God-honoring worship service.

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Of course, not all songs or styles will carry the same connotations to everyone on our churches, and that's where it can get controversial and divisive.

Musical choice is always an emotional issue! The discussion inevitably circles around back to the local church leadership, who must be faithful students of the Scriptures, of their congregation, and of the surrounding culture, in order to make prudent and wise decisions about what is appropriate or not in their particular church setting. Not an easy task, to be sure—undoubtedly the churches in the New Testament faced similar issues as they brought Jews, Greeks, Romans and “barbarians” under the same roof! Always there is the need for careful and prayerful discernment for the good of the body as a whole.

QUOTABLES

Thoughts on Musical Choices

“Musical style is a ‘disputable matter’: let each be ‘convinced in his own mind’ (Rom. 14: 1, 5). Accept both the front-runners and the traditionalists. Rom 14:1-8). Educate all the people to be strong (Rom. 15:1-2). Do not condemn those who do not embrace what you regard as ‘good style’ or ‘good associations’ (Rom. 14:5-6). If you like a certain melody or rhythm, don’t ask (or don’t tell) where it came from if that information could cause people to stumble (1 Cor. 10:25-29). Performers and listeners can derive different meanings from the same music: ‘For from within, out of men’s hearts, come evil thoughts’ (Mark 7:18, 20-23). Abuse of a form by one person does not disqualify its use by another. Be careful about equating aesthetic judgments with moral judgments. Lyrics are easier to evaluate than musical styles as being anti-Christian. Church music needs to be functional (intelligible): therefore, some styles may be permissible but not appropriate for a given local church.”

(Barry Liesch, *The New Worship: Straight Talk on Music and the Church*, 205)

“The church has for centuries waged one brush war after another over . . . what it means to borrow styles, forms, processes, tunes, techniques, textures, shapes, gestures, and instruments from secular sources. . . . Despite the numberless instances and their seeming diversity, one common thread runs throughout. At the time of the borrowing, the war rages, often quite bitter and divisively. Then as time passes, the war dies down. The previously condemned becomes merely questionable, if not outrightly sacred.”

(Harold Best, *Music through the Eyes of Faith*, 41)

“In my worship study I came across an example of a young man who was converted from a cult that made extensive use of J. S. Bach’s music in its worship. When the young man went to his first Christian worship service the organ prelude was a piece by Bach and it was so traumatic the young man had to leave the worship service. Now how should this new believer be treated? Well – probably nobody would suggest that Bach should never again be played in that church. Rather—the young man should be taught and shown that Bach is not evil but rather the false teaching associated with Bach’s music was the problem. While it would be pastorally wise to not select Bach for a season while the teaching was going on—the goal should be the disassociation of the false teaching from the good Bach music.”

(Mark Dalbey)

“In Luther’s generation, it was fairly easy for musicians to move from the world to the church, for the gap between the sacred and the secular in their art was not as great as it later became. The secular melodies to which Luther set sacred poetry did not evoke carnal associations that overwhelmed the spiritual messages conveyed by his texts. Sacred and secular styles were so similar that today it is sometimes impossible for musicologists to determine whether a given Lutheran hymn was inspired by medieval plainsong or a folk melody or if it was an original composition. It mattered little to Luther where a tune came from, so long as the text to which it was set remained in control.

(Daniel Frankforter, *Stones for Bread*, 112)

“Even though Christians are potentially the most free to understand the subtle differences between absolutes and relativities, content and context, some still find themselves unable to use certain kinds of music for reasons of conscience. Although they may theologically or intellectually understand that music is incapable of moral causality, they still cannot break free of the hold it may have over them. Powers of association are especially hard to overcome, especially if they have developed over a long period of time and/or have grown out of especially intense experiences and personal commitments. Sensitive Christians may find themselves in exactly the same position as their earlier brothers and sisters who considered meat offered to idols unfit to eat. So we go back to Paul’s instructions (Romans 14; I Corinthians 8) and apply them to musical practice.

“These principles are simple yet far-reaching. Their importance lies not only in the separation of relativities through discernment and obedience to absolutes by commandment. Here’s how the principles work. First, obedience through discernment does not apply to absolutes. I would be foolish to ask the Lord to give me discernment as to whether to lust or not. When it comes to matters of morality, I must directly obey. And if I pray, it is for the strength to obey. On the other hand, if I am to make a choice between two good things—whether to become a doctor or a mechanic—or among things that are morally relative—rock or Bach—I pray for discernment. I must then take one of two actions. I use the music through a new strength and freedom of conscience, or I abstain out of conscience until I find release. If release does not come, my abstinence continues. In either case, I experience true freedom.

“The next point is crucial. Decisions like this must always be personal, not corporate. They must be based on what the individual believer is personally free to do or not do,

not on what the group is about to do. If it is wrong for me to listen to reggae, Bach, New Age, Tibetan chant, or rock, then I must, in complete freedom, abstain even while others freely engage. And it would be just as wrong for me to say that any of these musics are wrong for anybody else.

“How do I discern? This timeworn adage is still useful: If I have real doubt, I must abstain. This parallels Paul’s statement that whatsoever is not of faith is sin. The reverse is just as true: Whatsoever is of faith is righteousness. Taken together, these two statements form the Christian’s personal creed for living among, and using, relativities. If faith is the only thing the just can live by—a perfectly legitimate rewording of Habakkuk 2:4—and if one’s life is to be an uninterrupted flow of acts of worship, then all musical choice and action must be by faith—personal faith, not someone else’s. Otherwise, I must avoid whatever offends me until I can freely offer it up. In the meantime I have three responsibilities: (1) I must continue to make offerings out of the remainder of the thousand tongues with which I do have freedom; (2) I must continue to pray for the freedom to break old associations and erroneous teaching; (3) I must trust the Spirit of Christ in others are free to enjoy what I am not yet able to.”
(Harold Best, *Music Through the Eyes of Faith*, 58-59)

“Even if the Reformation sometimes excessively insisted on this liberty of “ceremonies”, and in a way which sometimes threw doubt on the inextricable bond between form and content, it is absolutely right that the preoccupations, tastes, culture of a place and a period should find expression in the cult [public worship].”
(J.-J. von Allmen, *Worship Its Theology and Practice*, 105)

“John Newton refused to have Handel’s Messiah performed in his church because he thought the music too worldly.”
(Kevin Twit)

“In large measure, the reason many churches today are splitting over forms of communal worship may be found in the relative paucity of direct guidance that the New Testament provides. We want to be New Testament churches. The only trouble is . . . the New Testament doesn’t give us much specific instruction on how to do church, that is, the cultic gathering. Nowhere does the New Testament tell us to build churches, to meet on Sundays, to have morning worship services, to open with a song and a prayer, to have a long sermon, and then to close with a benediction. . . . About the only custom which it prescribes as a regular occurrence is participation in the Lord’s Supper. . . . Remarkably . . . this is the one liturgical worship rite that the New Testament describes, but we treat as optional or occasional or random. We squabble over everything else and neglect the weightier matters of the gospel.

(Daniel Block, “The Joy of Worship: The Mosaic Invitation to the Presence of God (Deut. 12:1-14)” [audio message])

“Our study of the hymns which have been preserved for us from the New Testament period has revealed further facets of the diversity of first-century Christianity—in particular, the diversity which arises when worship reflects the moods and background of each particular group of worshippers or which reflects their concern to use the language and thought forms of their contemporaries and environment, to worship in ways that speak most meaningfully to their time.”

(James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, 140)

“[In this particular congregation] pastor and musician look at each piece of music with interest in its text, the theology represented in

its text, and the integrity of its music. They like to use pieces that the congregation can learn to sing without too much struggle, but they are suspicious of music that sounds like a TV commercial or elevator music or that evokes associations with secular culture strong enough to drown out the religious texts. It needs to stand up under repetition be ‘simple enough to be sung relatively well on first hearing and...nevertheless substantial enough to continue to inspire the sung prayer’ [from the Report from the Milwaukee Symposia for Church Composers].”

(Ronald P. Byars, *The Future of Protestant Worship*, 121)

“There is one art form that contains no words, no deeds, no gestures and virtually no exterior referential devices. Music alone falls into this category and consequently is the most abstract of all the art forms, the least capable of ‘saying’ anything outside itself, therefore the most open to associational meaning.”

(Harold Best, *Unceasing Worship*, 157)

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GLOBAL WORSHIP

Let All the Nations Worship by Sarah Bowen

When I first read our bulletin announcement promoting Southeastern Seminary's recent Ethnodoxology workshop, I couldn't understand why they would need an intimidating six-syllable word and eight full days of classes just to talk about a handful of songs from different places around the world. Because I'd been personally invited, was interested in music and in missions, and thought my interest in hymn-writing might connect somehow, I decided to attend a day (or maybe two) to check it out, then check it off my list.

By the time Day One ended, I was excited to be headed home— so I could cancel all my engagements for the next week and a half, spend the entire evening pouring out tidal waves of excitement on family and friends, and stay up late into the night studying the follow-up materials online before rising early to head back over to SEBTS for more.

That first day solidly rooted “the study of worship among the nations” (aka ethnodoxology) in a Biblical theology of worship as a whole. All that followed grew out of that single focus; God's glory is both foundation and goal, and no one people group can adequately display or praise His glory on its own. We all have offerings to bring before His Throne, and it is pride or ignorance, if not both, that keep us isolated in our own worship styles, cut off from the wider context of the body of Christ. Growth in cultural unity for the sake of the gospel is not an area we as believers can afford to neglect, but neither is it one to plunge into without much prayer and study.

During the next seven days, we were equipped to evaluate and encourage right cultural expressions of worship at home and abroad, and energized for that task with firsthand accounts of ethnodoxology's varied applications in places as diverse as Siberia and South America, China and Africa, and Bethlehem Baptist Church in downtown Minneapolis. It's not about any kind of music for its own sake; the music is about God, and for God. It's not about ethnicity or diversity for their own sake; we celebrate those as a beautiful expression of who God is and what He cares about. It's not about knowledge for its own sake; we study so that our humility and love may increase and our worship be enlarged and enriched.

Now, looking back over this whirlwind experience, I am overwhelmed with joy and gratitude. For me, the class was not so much about new information as it was about putting together pieces of the puzzle that is my life and beginning to see a picture emerge; I discovered that I have a passion for ethnodoxology. The word is big; our God is so much bigger. Eight days is not nearly time enough; neither is eight lifetimes. What joy to know (and be reminded) that all of God's people, from all the ends of His world, will have all of eternity to worship Him with all that we are and have. And it starts with you and me, right here, today.



This is a student's report on the recent course [“Ethnodoxology in Christian Ministry.”](#) offered by a teaching team of six from the [International Council of Ethnodoxologists](#) at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, North Carolina. The course was first offered last summer at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, and is being made available to other seminaries as well. Please direct inquiries to Robin Harris at Robin.Harris@usa.om.org.

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- free lead sheets, audio files, overhead masters, chord charts, notation files

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 - free downloads of materials

[Resound Worship](#)

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- free mp3s, accompaniment racks, lead sheets,

[Sovereign Grace Ministries](#)

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