

F. THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD AND CHRISTIAN MUSIC

Since the creation of man, music seems to have been of innate interest to him as the most dominant of the arts. As God gave man a capacity to be literate, so it seems He also gave man an ability to be musical. In this regard it is not surprising that Martin Luther should declare, “Next after theology I give to music the highest place and the greatest honor. . . . Experience proves that next to the Word of God only music deserves to be extolled as the mistress and governess of the feelings of the human heart”⁷³ For the Reformer, music was of great importance to him personally, yet he recognized that its ability to stimulate the senses required that it be regulated by the truth of Scripture. So for the child of God, since the invention of the “lyre and pipe” by Jubal in Genesis 4:21, music has been an integral part of life lived under the keeping of His saving grace. While Israel showed little interest in painting, and especially sculpture since it suggested idolatry, yet music appears to have been the chief art in social gatherings (Gen. 31:27), civil celebration (I Sam. 18:6-7), but preeminently religious worship (I Chron. 25:1-8).

However, our concern is with the content emphasis of the music of the Hebrew in the Old Testament and the Christian in the New Testament. What accounts we have in this regard in the Bible, by their very nature of being recorded words, focus chiefly on what was sung rather than the type of melody employed. Thus there stands out in the most obvious relief the priority of the character and activity of God, for while the medium was employed by means of a variety of instruments as well as the individual and choir, yet the singular passion was the worship and praise of the blessed Jehovah. It is this predominant factor that confronts the contemporary world of Christian music with both stark contrast and inevitable judgment.

1. God-centeredness in the music of the Bible.

From the beginning it is maintained that at its foundation, Christian music is concerned with Jehovah/Yahweh according to both stimulation and occupation. He provokes the musical capacity of the child of God (Ps. 40:3) and as a consequence becomes the chief object of devotion in music (Ps. 33:1-3). It is further proposed that participation in Christian music is for every Christian and not simply the accomplished instrumentalist or soloist. While the vocal cords and lips may struggle to keep a tune, nevertheless the heart can. Hence, the highest form of Christian music is congregational or fellowship singing in which every child of God may participate.

a. Old Testament music.

It was predominantly vocal with instrumental or orchestral accompaniment. This included stringed instruments (lyre, psaltery, sackbut), wind instruments (pipe, flute, organ, horn, trumpet), and percussion instruments (bells, cymbals, timbrel).

(1) The songs of Moses.

We should not forget that in his youth, Moses was highly educated in Egypt (Exod. 2:10-11), in which case he would most likely have been instructed in poetic and musical composition as well as the playing of instruments.

⁷³ Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand*, p. 267.

(a) Ex. 15:1-21.

Following the deliverance of Israel from the Egyptians through the Reed Sea, Moses is immediately moved to lead his people in a song that praises God for His salvation and redemption, vs. 2, 13. Note in v. 2 the words, “The LORD is my strength and my song.” Here the attributes of God are to be intrinsic to true hymnody. The distinctive character of God is the dominant emphasis in this passage, including His omnipotence and sovereignty, vs. 2, 6, 13, 16, transcendent majesty, v. 7, anger, v. 7, uniqueness, v. 11, holiness, v. 11, lovingkindness, v. 13, imminence, v. 17, eternity, v. 18.

(b) Deut. 32:1-43.

Just prior to Moses’ ascent of Mt. Nebo where he was to view the promised land and then die, he leads Israel in a farewell song of warning and promise. Again, the character of God dominates, especially in the opening and closing segments of vs. 3-4, 39-43.

(2) The Psalms.

Though it would appear difficult to deny that the pervasive theme of *Psalms* is the praise of God, nevertheless it ought to be considered that while praise is the predominant activity of the psalmist, yet the supremely grand theme and object is the character and consequent activity of that God of praise, that is the Jehovah of Israel. Thus God, His glorious being and doing, under the believer’s appreciative eye, is the theme of *Psalms*. And it is man’s appreciation in this realm, though in Hebrew poetic form, that focuses almost continuously on the attributes of God, as evidenced in the following:

(a) His name.

Most of the one hundred and fifty psalms sing the praise of God by the means of His primary name as LORD revealed exclusively to Israel (Ex. 3:13-15). So Psalm 8 begins and commences, “O LORD [Jehovah], our Lord [Adonai], how majestic is Thy name in all the earth.” The intervening verses expound on aspects of God’s character including His “splendor” v. 1, “wisdom” v. 2, “creative finesse” v. 3, “dominion over man and beast” vs. 4-8. So Isaac Watts encourages us to sing this Psalm as follows:

I sing the almighty power of God,
That made the mountains rise.
That spread the flowing seas abroad,
And built the lofty skies.

I sing the wisdom that ordained
The sun to rule the day;
The moon shines full at His command
And all the stars obey.

I sing the goodness of the Lord,
 That filled the earth with food;
 He formed the creatures with His word,
 And then pronounced them good.

(b) His being.

Merely as representative, Psalm 145 provides a vast panorama of His attributes that are awe-inspiring, including “greatness” vs. 3, 6, “glory,” vs. 11, 12, splendor, majesty” vs. 5, 12, “awesome power” vs. 6, 11, “goodness” vs. 7, 9, righteousness” vs. 7, 17, “grace” v. 8, “mercy” vs. 8, 9, 17, “lovingkindness” v. 8, “eternity” v. 13, “benevolence” vs. 14-16, “immanence” v. 18. Thus Isaac Watts has expressed this glorious panorama of truth as follows:

Long as I live I'll bless Thy Name,
 My King, my God of love;
 My work and joy shall be the same
 In the bright world above.

Great is the Lord, His power unknown,
 And let His praise be great:
 I'll sing the honors of Thy throne,
 Thy works of grace repeat.

Thy grace shall dwell upon my tongue,
 And while my lips rejoice,
 The men that hear my sacred song
 Shall join their cheerful voice.

Fathers to sons shall teach Thy Name,
 And children learn Thy ways;
 Ages to come Thy truth proclaim,
 And nations sound Thy praise.

Thy glorious deeds of ancient date
 Shall through the world be known;
 Thine arm of power, Thy heavenly state,
 With public splendor shown.

The world is managed by Thy hands,
 Thy saints are ruled by love;
 And Thine eternal kingdom stands,
 Though rocks and hills remove.

From another perspective, some psalms concentrate more upon one aspect of God's character, such as His holiness (Ps. 99:3, 5, 9), or righteousness (Ps. 71:2, 15, 16, 19, 24). Further consider the declaration of God's great being in Psalm 147, and particularly verse 5, “Great is our LORD, and abundant in strength; His understanding is infinite.” Thus Watts' provides an expanded hymnic version, found on page 128, that especially focuses upon God's attribute of infinity.

(c) His doing.

According to the being of God, so is His resultant doing. Because He is righteous, so He responds with justice; because He is good, so he responds with lovingkindness in a multitude of ways. Thus in Psalm 136, David was moved to compose an antiphonal or two-part type of psalm that would suit the choral praise of God, particularly His exploits. In other words, one part of the choir would lead with a proposition about thanksgiving and praise for God's activity, such as in v. 5, "[Give thanks] to Him who made the heavens with skill;" the second part of the choir would respond twenty-six times to each distinctive item, "For His lovingkindness is everlasting." Especially note in this psalm that vs. 1-3, 26 first deal with God's essential attributes, then in vs. 4-25 the thanksgiving focuses on His active attributes. So Isaac Watts leads us to sing this psalm in a "Chrisianized" form.

Give to our God immortal praise;
 Mercy and truth are all His ways:
 Wonders of grace to God belong,
 Repeat His mercies in your son.
 He built the earth, He spread the sky,
 And fixed the starry lights on high:
 Wonders of grace to God belong,
 Repeat His mercies in your song.
 He sent His Son with power to save
 From guilt and darkness and the grave:
 Wonders of grace to God belong,
 Repeat His mercies in your song.

b. New Testament music.

The events that surround the annunciation and birth of Jesus Christ are described in a hymnic form, especially in Luke, that draws heavily upon the Old Testament. In Matthew 26:26-30, at the conclusion of the Upper Room gathering of passion week we are told, "And after singing a hymn, they [Jesus and his disciples] went out to the Mount of Olives." Undoubtedly this singing would have been based upon a Psalm. In all of these instances, the specific character of God is a dominant feature, and thus so it is to be in the exhortations of Ephesians 5:15-21; Colossians 3:15-17. The singing of Jesus Christ in Hebrews 2:12 is a direct reference to the Son of God singing the praises of his Father, and the human mind surely cannot fathom the depth of regard for the Father's character that consumes His Son in this regard.

(1) The songs of Luke.

The fact that the Gospel of Luke is so distinctively hymnic is reflective of the significant role of music, not only with regard to heavenly beings, but also in the Christian Church from its very inception.

(a) The *Ave Maria*, Luke 1:26-38.

The conversation between Gabriel and Mary speaks of “the Lord [Jehovah]” v. 28, “the Lord God [Jehovah Elohim]” v. 32, “God’s favor” v. 30, “the Most High” vs. 32, 35, God’s sovereignty, since nothing is beyond His power, v. 37.

(b) The *Magnificat*, Luke 1:46-55.

For Mary, God is “Lord [Jehovah]” v. 46, “Savior” v. 47, “the Mighty One” v. 49, “holy” v. 49, “merciful” v. 50, omnipotent being “strong armed,” vs. 51-52, benevolent in “filling the hungry,” v. 53-54.

(c) The *Benedictus*, Luke 1:68-79.,

For Zacharias, God is “Lord God [Jehovah Elohim],” vs. 68, 76, “Savior, Redeemer” vs. 68-69, 77, “merciful” v. 72, 78, “faithful” vs. 72-73, “holy [implicit]” v. 75, “righteous [implicit]” v. 75, “the Most High” v. 76, “pardoning” v. 77, “providential,” vs. 78-79.

(d) The *Gloria In Excelsis*, Luke 2:8-20.

The encounter between an angel of the Lord and the shepherds speaks of “the glory of the Lord,” v. 9, “God in the highest,” v. 14, “the Lord [Jehovah],” v. 15, God’s “praise” v. 13, 20.

(e) The *Nunc Dimitus*, Luke 2:29-32.

For Simeon, God is “Lord [Jehovah]” v. 29, “peace giver” v. 29, “faithful,” v. 29, “Savior” v. 30, “light giver,” vs. 31-32.

(2) The songs of the church.

In Ephesians 5:15-20, Christians are to “be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms [ψαλμός, psalmos] and hymns [ὕμνος, humnos] and spiritual songs [ὠδή, ōdē], singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord.” At the same time they are to be, “always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father.” In Colossians 3: 16-17, Christians are to “let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God.” What is to be the substance of this singing? It is to be “to the Lord,” even “to God,” that is in praise of the Lord, after the manner of the Psalms, and this means in praise of the glories of His being and doing. Thomas Manton comments, “Surely, if there be anything pleasant in the world to a gracious heart, it is the praises of God that flow from a believing and loving soul, that is full of the sense of the mercy and goodness and excellencies of the Lord.”⁷⁴

⁷⁴ Manton, *Works*, XIX, p. 414.

(3) The songs of Revelation.

The hymnic emphasis here, as with the Gospel of Luke, is likewise significant in that it describes the domain of heaven as being occupied with God-centered music, even as are the saints upon earth.

(a) The elders' new song, Revelation 5:8-14.

Here the Lord Jesus Christ is the object of "a new song," a song that is transcendentally superior and different from singing in general (cf. Ps. 33:3; 40:3; 98:1), for it declares the glory that is his due. Christ in the midst of the throne of God is exalted by a great multitude as Lamb and God, yet the focus is on his humiliation and exaltation to be judge at the end of the age. Isaac Watts describes part of this scene as follows:

Come, let us join our cheerful songs
 With angels round the throne;
 Ten thousand thousand are their tongues,
 But all their joys are one.
 "Worthy the Lamb that died!" they cry,
 "To be exalted thus";
 "Worthy the Lamb!" our lips reply,
 "For He was slain for us."
 Jesus is worthy to receive
 Honor and power divine;
 And blessings more than we can give
 Be, Lord, for ever Thine.

(b) The song of Moses and the Lamb, Revelation 15:2-4.

The song of Moses in Exodus 15:1-21 now becomes adapted as the basis of the song of the Lamb, with other Old Testament passages being incorporated (Ps. 86:9; 111:2; 145:17; Isa. 2:2-4; 66:23). All of these references are saturated with regard for the character of God. William Hammond writes concerning this scene:

Awake, and sing the song
 Of Moses and the Lamb;
 Wake every heart and every tongue,
 To praise the Savior's name.
 Sing of His dying love;
 Sing of His rising power;
 Sing how He intercedes above
 For those whose sins He bore.

2. God-centeredness in the music of church history.

a. The Early and Medieval era.

Ambrose, Bishop of Milan and mentor of Augustine (340-397), is usually regarded as being the father of hymnody within the Western church. He writes:

Splendor [Christ] of God's glory bright,
 Thou that bringest light from light,
 Light of light, light's living spring,
 Day, all days illumining.
 The Father, too, our prayers implore,
 Father of glory evermore;
 The Father of all grace and might,
 To banish sin from our delight.

However, on through the medieval period, and whatever great deficiencies accumulated during that time, yet such writers as Bernard of Clairvaux (1091-1153) and Francis of Assisi (1182-1226) are all characterized in their writings with high and exalted views of God.

b. The Reformation era.

Under the stimulus of Luther, hymnody takes on new significance especially as the gospel of free grace, in conjunction with the priesthood of all believers, loosens the tongues of the laity. However, the resultant musical awakening was reflective of not only life in the justified, but also the praise of God's mercy that at the same time was reverently adored. So the theme hymn coming from the pen of that volcanic Reformer well represents the regained vitality of God-centeredness.

A mighty Fortress is our God,
 A Bulwark never failing;
 A Helper he amid the flood
 Of mortal ills prevailing.
 For still our ancient foe
 Doth seek to work us woe;
 His craft and pow'r are great;
 And armed with cruel hate,
 On earth is not his equal.

c. The Great Awakening era.

Surely this eighteenth century period remains the golden age of church hymnody since such a galaxy of luminaries shone forth as never before. And it should be noted that this flood of God-centered praise and worship was a consequence rather than a cause of true revival that so profoundly affected Great Britain, Europe, and the United States. Consider the influence of Watts, Wesley, Doddridge, Cowper, Toplady, Rothe, Zinzendorf, followed into the next century by Bonar, Faber, Monsell, Montgomery, Rossetti, etc. However it was, above all else, the preaching of this time and onward that so stimulated the outburst of gospel truth in song. The regained message of the evangel led to hearts singing a

new song of saving grace and, as with Scripture, that new song was about the glorious character of a righteous and redeeming God. Representative of this theocentric priority, Charles Wesley writes:

Thee will I praise with all my heart,
And tell mankind how good Thou art,
How marvellous Thy works of grace;
Thy name I will in songs record,
And joy and glory in my Lord,
Extolled above all thanks and praise.

In another of his over 6,500 hymns he declares:

Praise the Lord who reigns above,
And keeps His court below;
Praise the holy God of love,
And all His greatness show;
Praise Him for His noble deeds,
Praise Him for His matchless power:
Him from whom all good proceeds
Let earth and heaven adore.

3. God-centeredness lacking in twentieth century music.

That change has come to Christian music, especially during the latter part of the twentieth century is undeniable. The reason for this, broadly speaking, is based upon one of two options. Either the change is a result of degeneration from certain fixed standards that are inherent in music, or it is merely a reflection of cultural differences, of fluctuation of style and change of taste. The latter view might be designated as musical relativism, which denies that there is really universal and innate appreciation of harmony and discord since music is essentially neutral. Thus John Blanchard responds to this proposition:

[I]f music is neutral, if it can say whatever the hearers want it to say, then why are certain kinds chosen as background music played on aeroplanes, in supermarkets, or in places likely to be stressful? If music is neutral, why would we consider the theme music from Alfred Hitchcock's film *Psycho* unsuitable to be played in a dentist's waiting room? The obvious reason is that the music is chosen *to do something*; and the reason it can do something is that it is not neutral.⁷⁵

We might further enquire if, merely through conditioning, the hitting of several random notes on a piano might be acknowledged as harmonious to the ear while acknowledged chords would be objected to as discordant? Certainly John Cage has attempted this with his "chance music." But as Francis Schaeffer explains, "in Cage's universe nothing comes through in the music except noise and confusion or total silence."⁷⁶ Further, could it ever be said that repetitive screeching, resulting from fingernails being rapidly scraped across a blackboard, would eventually be regarded as the production of pleasant sound?

⁷⁵ John Blanchard, *Pop Goes The Gospel*, pp. 102-6.

⁷⁶ Francis A. Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There*, p. 73.

The former view, while not denying a variety in musical style, yet maintains that there are certain fixed elements, related to human nature, that establish inviolate standards for primitive and mature music. In support of this perspective, in terms of secular music, reference should be made to *Dionysus Rising* by E. Michael Jones subtitled, “The Birth of Cultural Revolution out of the Spirit of Music” in which he details the descent from harmony to dissonance via Wagner, then Nietzsche to Schönberg to Mick Jagger.⁷⁷ Francis Schaeffer has also written in a similar vein.⁷⁸ Concerning the fixity of the effects of rock music, whether it be secular or religious, John Blanchard refers to a university study in which it was concluded: “There is simply no such thing as Christian rock that is substantively different in its impact [from secular rock].”⁷⁹

a. Man-centeredness invades the church.

With regard to current standards of music in the Christian church, it is obvious that the new styles are a result of influence from the world in its downgrade course concerning the arts in general. The church has not, with the originality of the new song that it is to sing, introduced music that is compatible with redeemed souls. Rather it has imported style from secular man, arguing that such a method finds justification from Martin Luther who borrowed tunes from the barroom and adapted them to church hymn singing. But this is simply not true as David W. Music explains in his article, “Getting Luther out of the Barroom.” This myth arose from a misunderstanding over musical terminology. Many of Luther’s tunes were composed according to a “Bar form,” which described a certain musical phraseology that had nothing at all to do with places of entertainment.

Luther’s hymns were designed for popular use, but were not radically different in style from the sacred art music of the time. . . . He [Luther] even advocated the continued use of Latin in church music, a point that is often overlooked by those who view Luther as the ‘patron saint’ of contemporary Christian Music.⁸⁰

b. Truth yields priority to sensuality.

It is significant that so much of modern Christian music is cacophonous, and consistently so. The rationale is that of using “praise songs” according to certain Psalms that exhort, “O clap your hands, all people; shout to God with the voice of joy” (Ps. 47:1), and “Praise Him with loud cymbals; praise Him with resounding cymbals” (Ps. 150:5). But at the same time there is little music of a contemplative nature, and this leads us to suggest that once again, it is the clamor for high decibel music in the world that has led many in the church into being seduced with the same priority. Therefore, as the world, because of the noise and the sensual satisfaction that is produced, is not overly concerned about the meaning of words, so modern Christian music likewise pays less attention to truth while majoring on sensational effect. Certainly contemporary Christian music has words, but the point is that the truth content is at best childish, and at worst

⁷⁷ E. Michael Jones, *Dionysus Rising*, 204 pp.

⁷⁸ Francis A. Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There*, pp. 37-43, 70-4.

⁷⁹ Blanchard, *Pop Goes The Gospel*, p. 191.

⁸⁰ David W. Music, “Getting Luther out of the Barroom,” *The Hymn - A Journal Of Congregational Song*, July 1994, p. 51.

vague, man-centered sentimentality. Most obvious is the fact that while God is mentioned, yet the perspective of the composer is spiritually bland and shriveled. The issue is not simply one of a new mode of expression, but a pale appreciation of the glory of God according to a writer that pens his spiritual poverty.

John Blanchard writes:

Two very competent musicians, very much a part of the Christian pop scene, put it to us like this: “The major problem of rock music is the noise level. The words are often inaudible and even if they were audible the degree of truth in them would be negligible.” . . . But in evangelism *the words are vitally important*. The Bible speaks of “the *word* of truth, the gospel of your salvation” (Eph. 1:13). . . . How then can the work of evangelism be helped by something which makes the message more difficult to hear?⁸¹

Thus biblical music starts with truth, and in the realm of Christianity, that truth is grounded upon the knowledge of God. Therefore biblical music will always be God-centered.

2. God-centeredness the requisite for twentieth century music.

Take the examples of men like Isaac Watts, Charles Wesley, and Horatius Bonar. First and foremost these were profound men of God. The well of their souls was deep with the experiential knowledge of God; it was from this fullness that they drew and as a result composed hymns which the redeemed soul loves to sing. These men were thoroughly taught in the Bible, even the original languages, as well as systematic theology. But all of this truth, centering on the grace of God in the gospel, had been ignited in their souls through the Holy Spirit.

a. The well of good music composition is a consecrated soul.

A Christian gives first priority to a saving and sanctifying knowledge of God; then he discovers the Spiritual gift(s) that God has freely bestowed upon him. He does not first opt for being a musician, rather he discovers his area of giftedness which may or may not involve musical ability. However, even with an acknowledged talent for music, it is vital that the child of God give priority to Christian graces or fruit that best regulate Spiritual gifts, for when this fruit is well cultivated, then the music will indeed be nourishing to hungry souls. But giftedness in music with an obvious lack in spiritual graces will result is music that lacks glory and sweetness; it will tend to be more man-centered rather than God-centered. Psalm 87:7 well describes the Christian singer or instrumentalist: “Then those who sing as well as those who play the flute shall say, ‘All my springs of joy are in you [God].’

b. The components of good music should direct us toward God.

Good music depends upon the mix of certain elements just as good cooking depends on the right balance of ingredients. Just as we need a variety of food, whether bread or cake, so also the Christian will be blessed with a variety of music, yet a mix of certain basics will remain necessary. Some cooking, with an

⁸¹ Blanchard, *Pop Goes The Gospel*, pp. 26-7.

imbalance of ingredients ends up as stodge, even as does some modern music which is mainly comprised of beat and primitive melody that is usually *fortissimo* (very loud), with the vocalist slipping and sliding around in a manner that is not new; it is simply crooning as the world has so effectively taught. The first ingredient in good Christian music is that of truth that focuses on God, His being and doing, and establishes the parameters of the tune rather than contrariwise. Second, the tune must have a melody that is appropriate to the truth since it provides a musical story-line; integral to this are the elements of mood, timing, rhythm, color, etc. Third, the accompanying instrument must be suitable to singing by a congregation. In 1761, John Wesley published a tune book titled *Sacred Melody* which, he said, “contains all the tunes which are in common use amongst us.” He further included directions for the use of this volume by Methodist singers. They are certainly intended to promote the priority of God-centeredness in congregational singing.

- I. Learn these *Tunes* before you learn any others; afterwards learn as many as you please.
- II. Sing them exactly as they are printed here, without altering or mending them at all; and if you have learned to sing them otherwise, unlearn it as soon as you can.
- III. Sing *all*. See that you join with the congregation as frequently as you can. Let not a slight degree of weakness or weariness hinder you. If it is a cross to you, take it up, and you will find it a blessing.
- IV. Sing *lustily* and with a good courage. Beware of singing as if you were half dead, or half asleep; but lift up your voice with strength. Be no more afraid of your voice now, nor more ashamed of its being heard, than when you sung the songs of *Satan*.
- V. Sing *modestly*. Do not bawl, so as to be heard above or distinct from the rest of the congregation, that you may not destroy the harmony; but strive to unite your voices, so as to make one clear melodious sound.
- VI. Sing *in time*. Whatever time is sung, be sure to keep with it. Do not run before nor stay behind it; but attend close to the leading voices, and move therewith as exactly as you can; and take care not to sing *too slow*. This drawling way naturally steals on all who are lazy; and it is high time to drive it out from amongst us, and sing all our tunes just as quick as we did at first.
- VII. Above all sing *spiritually*. Have an eye to God in every word you sing. Aim at pleasing *Him* more than yourself, or any other creature. In order to do this attend strictly to the sense of what you sing and see that your *heart* is not carried away with the sound, but offered to God continually; so shall your singing be such as the *Lord* will approve of here, and reward you when He cometh in the clouds of heaven.⁸²

⁸² James T. Lightwood, *The Music of The Methodist Hymn-Book*, pp. xix-xx.