

God has gifted the Church with the powerful medium of music. Col 3:16-17 tells us: “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. And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.” Paul speaks of “psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.” Most people, when they arrive at these passages get caught up in trying to discern the difference between these three categories. “What is the difference between a psalm and a hymn?” they ask. “And can modern praise choruses be considered spiritual songs?”

Incidentally, from there the inquiry degrades even further with people debating the differences between hymns and praise choruses. Of course, some may have heard the story of the old farmer who went to the city one weekend and attended one of the larger churches. Upon his arrival home, his wife asked him how the church service went. “Well,” said the farmer, “It was good, but they did something different. They sang praise choruses instead of hymns.”

“Praise choruses,” said his wife, “What are those?”

“Oh, they’re okay,” responded the farmer. “They’re sort of like hymns, only different.”

“Well, what’s the difference?” asked his wife.

The farmer said, “It’s like this: If I said to you, “Myrtle, my beloved. Hast thou seen the cows in the ripened and bounteous corn?” that would be a hymn. On the other hand, if I said to you, ‘Myrtle, Myrtle, Myrtle, O Myrtle, those awesome cows, those black and white cows, the ones I love so much, that give me milk and make me grow, are in the corn, they’re in the corn, those cows are in the corn,’ and then repeated the whole thing two or three times, that would be a praise chorus.”

The debate over music typically ends in personal preference. One person likes praise choruses so he or she will attend a contemporary service somewhere while another, who prefers hymns, attends a traditional service somewhere else. Or, perhaps they each compromise and attend a blended service together while they argue each week over the relative percentages of praise choruses vs. hymns in the service.

At CVP, we believe that two vital points will change our perspective about music and worship. The first is this: we cannot impose modern categories upon first century terms in order to understand Paul. In other words, passages like Colossians 3 and Ephesians 5 are not about distinguishing between hymns and praise choruses at all.

Instead, we should look for the meaning of these words from Scripture. The Greek words for psalm, hymn and spiritual song are *psalmos*, *hymnos*, and *ode pneumatika*. *Psalmos* refers to the striking of a string by the finger. It is related to the fact that the psaltery was a small stringed instrument. In terms of songs, *psalmos* always referred to the Psalms of the Old Testament. For example, in Luke 24:44-45 Jesus says: “These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me.” Here the word *psalmos* is used in its plural form.

What about *hymnos*? *Hymnos* refers to a song which praises God. Where as *psalmos* emphasizes the musical accompaniment, *hymnos* emphasizes the singing. Here’s where it gets interesting. In the uses of *hymnos* in the New Testament and in the Greek Old Testament, *hymnos* usually, if not always, also refers to the Psalms of the Old Testament. For example, in Matt 26:30, after the Last Supper Jesus and the disciples left the upper room to go to the Mount of Olives. The Bible tells us that as they left they “sang a hymn.” What was that hymn? Fanny Crosby’s “To God Be the Glory”? No, the hymn was the song that all Israelites sang during and after the Passover. It was called the “Hallel” and consisted of Psalms 113-118. The reason the word “hymn” is used in Matthew is likely to emphasize that they sang the Psalms without musical accompaniment as they walked to the

Garden of Gethsemane. Additionally it emphasized that the Psalms they sang were some of the ones specifically meant to give praise to God.

What about spiritual song? *Ode* is the most general of the three words and simply means “song.” If the word were by itself, we would have difficulty knowing to what type of song Paul refers. However, the adjective *pneumatika* is very important. You might recognize in the adjective the noun *pneuma* which is one of the Greek terms used to refer to the Holy Spirit or His activity. Used in conjunction with *ode*, Paul is referring to a song that is inspired. You see, when most people read “spiritual song” they simply think of a “Christian song” – something that would be sung in church. But that isn’t strong enough. Spiritual is better rendered “Spirit inspired.”

The long and short of it is this: when Paul says psalms, hymns and inspired songs, he is most likely using closely related, even synonymous terms, to refer to that music regarded as inspired in the Old Testament, specifically the Psalms and any other songs found in the Scriptures such as the song sung by Miriam after the crossing of the Red Sea.

This has serious implications regarding our modern day controversy, doesn’t it? Rather than debate whether we should sing a hymn written in the eighteenth versus a praise chorus written in the late twentieth century, we need to ask whether we should be singing non-inspired music in the first place. And if there is room for such music, what parameters ought we to use that go beyond mere preference?

To answer that question, let’s move to the second vital principle: Music is intended to exhort believers in sound doctrine. Col. 3:16 says that we are to “teach and admonish one another with psalms hymns and spiritual songs.” By parallel, teaching and admonishing must be what Paul means by “speak to one another” in Ephesians 5:17.

In 2 Chron. 20:1 we read: “It happened after this that the people of Moab with the people of Ammon, and others with them besides the Ammonites, came to battle against Jehoshaphat.” Jehoshaphat was a good king. The son of King Asa, we are told in 2 Chron 17 that Jehoshaphat “walked in the former ways of his father David...and sought the God of his father, and walked in His commandments and not according to the acts of Israel...His heart took delight in the ways of the LORD; moreover he removed the high places and wooden images from Judah. Then some came and told Jehoshaphat, saying, ‘A great multitude is coming against you from beyond the sea, from Syria; and they are in Hazazon Tamar’ (which is En Gedi).”

Being a godly king, however, did not remove crises in his kingdom, for we learn in 2 Chron. 20 that messengers came to King Jehoshaphat one morning and told him that a great multitude of Ammonites, Moabites, and Children of Mt. Seir (descendants of Esau) were already at En Gedi – a town only twenty miles south of Jerusalem. They were marching to lay siege against Jerusalem.

“And Jehoshaphat feared, and set himself to seek the LORD, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah. So Judah gathered together to ask help from the LORD; and from all the cities of Judah they came to seek the LORD. Then Jehoshaphat stood in the assembly of Judah and Jerusalem, in the house of the LORD, before the new court, and said: ‘O LORD God of our fathers, are You not God in heaven, and do You not rule over all the kingdoms of the nations, and in Your hand is there not power and might, so that no one is able to withstand You? Are You not our God, who drove out the inhabitants of this land before Your people Israel, and gave it to the descendants of Abraham Your friend forever? And they dwell in it, and have built You a sanctuary in it for Your name, saying, ‘If disaster comes upon us — sword, judgment, pestilence, or famine — we will stand before this temple and in Your presence (for Your name is in this temple), and cry out to You in our affliction, and You will hear and save.’ And now, here are the people of Ammon, Moab, and Mount Seir — whom You would not let Israel invade when they came out of the land of Egypt, but they turned from them and did not destroy them — here they are, rewarding us by coming to throw us out of Your possession which You have

given us to inherit. O our God, will You not judge them? For we have no power against this great multitude that is coming against us; nor do we know what to do, but our eyes are upon You.”

This is an important moment. How would God answer and deliver his servant, King Jehoshaphat? Verse 13 tells us that all of Judah was gathered before the king. The next verse reads: “Then the Spirit of the LORD came upon Jahaziel the son of Zechariah, the son of Benaiah, the son of Jeiel, the son of Mattaniah, a Levite of the sons of Asaph, in the midst of the assembly.” Why the extensive ancestry? Essentially we’re told that Jahaziel was the great, great, great grandson of Asaph. Why stop at Asaph? All of this will become clear in just a moment.

There were three original chief musicians when the office was established in the time of King David. These were Heman, Ethan, and Asaph. Ethan is also called Jeduthun in Scripture. The office of chief musician was established once the Ark of the Covenant was brought to Jerusalem and these chief musicians were to oversee all of the Levitical musicians of Israel.

We know that the Levitical musicians had two week tours of duty in Jerusalem, just like the priests and the doorkeepers. They were also present en masse during the major feasts. But what did they do during the rest of the time?

Here we are helped by 1 Chron. 6. In that chapter we learn that the Levites received no single block of land. Rather the three sons of Levi, Kohath, Gershon, and Merarir received towns within each tribe. The Levitical families were therefore spread throughout Israel.

Remember the names of the chief musicians? Heman, Ethan, and Asaph. Heman was a descendant of Kohath, Asaph was a descendant of Gershon, and Ethan was a descendant of Merari. In other words, the three leaders and the Levitical musicians they oversaw were in every part of Israel. Since they were only in Jerusalem two weeks during the year, did they just sit on the porch at home fifty weeks a year?

No, but finding out what they did will take us just a bit more work. In 1 Kings 4 we are told that Solomon was the wisest person in the land. So wise, in fact, that he was wiser than even...*Ethan*, and *Heman*, Chalcol, and Darda, the sons of Mahol. I’m not sure who Chalcol and Darda were, other than Heman’s brothers, but Ethan and Heman were two of the three original chief musicians. 1 Kings 4 tells us in so many words that if we had taken Solomon out of the picture, at least two, and possibly four, of the wisest men in the land were musicians. Is that how we view musicians today?

Think about the wisest men living. Do images of musicians come to mind? Or do images of arrogant people trying to establish the cultural norm for “coolness” arise instead? Are most church musicians today teachers or entertainers and performers?

What sorts of tasks do wise people usually perform? They teach. Heman, Ethan, and Asaph were Israel’s teachers, as were the rest of the Levitical musicians. We must not see the Levites as simply priests. They were also teachers. In Nehemiah, when Ezra finished reading God’s Word to the people, who went throughout the crowd of Israelites and taught them what the words meant? Nehemiah tells us that it was Levites. Perhaps now we understand why the Levites did not have a separate territory. God saw to it that the priestly office and the best teaching were available to the people by spreading Levites throughout the land and gifting them with music.

Imagine for a moment that you are a Levitical musician, living out in the plains of Zebulun - you play the psaltery, a small stringed instrument. It’s the middle of the day and hot. You’ve fed your sheep early in the morning and now you’re sitting under the fig tree practicing your psaltery. And, you’re teaching your children the psalter. There will come a day when they will have to replace you.

Your fellow Zebulunite strolls down the path. He is on his way to a neighboring town. You hail him. “Brother Zebulunite, come sit down under the shade of the tree and drink some water and hear of the songs of Zion for a bit. He rests and rejoices. You catechize him in the liturgy so that he may better understand and participate when the Cantor in Jerusalem during Passover sings out: “Now may all Jerusalem say...” After a while the Zebulunite returns to the road, heartily thanks God for your instruction and murmurs to himself “I love the ways of God, I rejoice with those who say to me ‘Let us go to the house of the lord.’”

The faith of the Old Testament was memorized. And one of the best methods of memorization was learning songs. Think again about Colossians 3: “Let the Word of Christ...” let God’s Word dwell in us richly...how? By singing to one another. By teaching one another through song. Have you ever wondered how 3000 people in the streets of Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost were prepared for Peter’s rather short sermon? Peter’s sermon is a very brief summary of the Old Testament. If you read it to most people today, they wouldn’t have a context within which to understand what you were talking about. Not so the Israelites standing in the streets in Jerusalem that morning. They already knew the Scriptures – an effective precondition for the effectiveness of preaching. Real church growth simply cannot happen without the Word of Christ dwelling richly within the congregation, without a deep commonly held memorized tradition, without a common language of faith that has a precise depth of meaning. And Paul tells us that a primary vehicle for all of that is music.

Music is vital to our worship. But not just any music. Rather music that facilitates the memorization of and meditation upon God’s Word and attributes. It isn’t just sappy, repetitious, trite music, but doctrinally dense, solid music.

Think about a Psalm from Asaph, Ps 50:7-20: “Hear, O My people, and I will speak, O Israel, and I will testify against you; I am God, your God! I will not rebuke you for your sacrifices or your burnt offerings, which are continually before Me. I will not take a bull from your house, nor goats out of your folds. For every beast of the forest is Mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills. I know all the birds of the mountains, and the wild beasts of the field are Mine. If I were hungry, I would not tell you; for the world is Mine, and all its fullness. Will I eat the flesh of bulls, or drink the blood of goats? Offer to God thanksgiving, and pay your vows to the Most High. Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify Me.”

It goes on, but perhaps you see our point. Psalm 50 is not what we would normally consider “singable.” It’s wordy and dense. It’s *teacherly*.

Or consider a psalm from Heman, Psalm 88. It ends with the statement: “Loved one and friend You have put far from me, and my acquaintances into darkness.” That’s the last verse of the psalm. It is hands down the bleakest of all psalms. It is certainly not very joyous, not very worshipful by modern standards. But then, perhaps, there is something wrong with our standards.

Psalm 89 by Ethan is 52 verses long and it covers all kinds of teaching material. It is no praise and worship chorus, although it is an average sized Psalm. If our modern praise and worship writers attempted to even write a song so long they would never be published. Why? Because we don’t really believe that music is a partner in the ministry of the Word; that music in church has a significant teaching function. The fact is, the Psalms are not there to make us feel good prior to the “real worship;” they are not there as meat tenderizers before the sermon. They are full-orbed teaching vehicles, and by their very example they demand that we approach *our* singing this way.

That was the heritage of Jehaziel. Going back to 2 Chron. 20, verse 15, Jehaziel said: “Listen, all you of Judah and you inhabitants of Jerusalem, and you, King Jehoshaphat! Thus says the LORD to you: 'Do not be afraid nor dismayed because of this great multitude, for the battle is not yours, but God's. Tomorrow go down against them. They will surely come up by the Ascent of Ziz, and you will find them at the end of the brook before the Wilderness of Jeruel. You will not need to fight in this battle. Position yourselves, stand still and see the

salvation of the LORD, who is with you, O Judah and Jerusalem!' Do not fear or be dismayed; tomorrow go out against them, for the LORD is with you."

Jehoshaphat got up that day as Jehaziel commanded. The Bible tells us that as they entered the wilderness of Tekoa, Jehoshaphat brought the company to a halt. We don't know where they stopped. Tekoa is about nine miles south of Jerusalem and the pass of Ziz 3-4 miles east of Tekoa. We can fairly assume that they had already walked a few miles and that they had a few miles left to go.

At any rate, Jehoshaphat stopped the army and exhorted the people: "Hear me, O Judah and you inhabitants of Jerusalem: Believe in the LORD your God, and you shall be established; believe His prophets, and you shall prosper." Jehoshaphat likely did this because there was mounting anxiety as they approached the enemy. But then look at the next verses: "And when he had consulted with the people, he appointed those who should sing to the LORD, and who should praise the beauty of holiness, as they went out before the army and were saying: 'Praise the LORD, for His mercy endures forever.'"

How did the people worship in the midst of crisis? They sang. And what they sang were songs that we have recorded in our Bible. When it says that Jehoshaphat appointed someone to praise the Lord in the beauty of His holiness, that is a shorthand way of saying: "Here is the type of song to sing." You see, the phrases "worship the Lord in the beauty of His holiness" and "give thanks to the Lord, for He is good, His mercy endures forever," are contained in several of the psalms. 1 Chron 16:28-34, for example, tells us that King David, when the Ark of the Covenant was brought into Israel, gave a song to the musicians to sing. Here are a few key sections: "Give to the LORD, O families of the peoples, give to the LORD glory and strength. Give to the LORD the glory due His name; bring an offering, and come before Him. Oh, worship the *LORD in the beauty of holiness!*...Let the heavens rejoice, and let the earth be glad; And let them say among the nations, 'The LORD reigns.' Let the sea roar, and all its fullness; Let the field rejoice, and all that is in it. Then the trees of the woods shall rejoice before the LORD, for He is coming to judge the earth. *Oh, give thanks to the LORD, for He is good! For His mercy endures forever.*"

The last two phrases were part of the mid-portion of a much larger song. The day that the Ark was brought into Jerusalem was a glorious day and it must have encouraged the Israelites as they approached battle. Other Psalms contain the phrases as well, Psalms like 29, 106, 107, and 118. Did the people have hymn books? No. They had a short canon of memorized, doctrinally solid, inspired songs such that when the King would say, "Musicians, lead the people in singing about the Lord's beauty of holiness," they knew they would be singing David's psalm about the return of the Ark and God's victory. What better song to sing as you march into battle?

Look at what happened when they sang: "Now when they began to sing and to praise, the LORD set ambushes against the people of Ammon, Moab, and Mount Seir, who had come against Judah; and they were defeated. For the people of Ammon and Moab stood up against the inhabitants of Mount Seir to utterly kill and destroy them. And when they had made an end of the inhabitants of Seir, they helped to destroy one another. So when Judah came to a place overlooking the wilderness, they looked toward the multitude; and there were their dead bodies, fallen on the earth. No one had escaped."

As the Judahites crested the hill, prepared to do battle against the enemy, all they saw was a sea of dead bodies. God had already worked the victory, and He did it while they were singing. We, too, are engaged in a battle, and this one is not against physical forces, but against spiritual forces of wickedness. Ought we not to make sure that the songs we sing are ones that will lead us to victory?

An obedient church is one whose people are well-disciplined troops preparing themselves for battle. The worship of the Church accomplishes work in the world. Battles are won or lost as a result of how our churches worship God. Too often we act as though our differences over liturgy and music are simply differences over decoration, instead of differences over effective strategy in the midst of a fearful war. And, as we've read in 2 Chronicles, when the choir of saints in militant joy goes out, God's name is glorified and mighty things happen.

Memorized, inspired music with rich doctrinal content. Does that describe our music heritage today? And if it doesn't, what can we do to bring our music more into conformity with these standards?

We know from Scripture that God does not allow man to design his own forms of worship. Cain learned this truth. Nadab and Abihu, the priest sons of Aaron, discovered this truth when they attempted to conduct offerings in their own style and method. God struck them dead. The book of Leviticus has very detailed explanations of the ceremonies of worship. In John 4:23-24 Jesus says that the Father seeks worshipers to worship Him in specific ways, namely in spirit and in truth.

When Paul tells us to admonish and teach one another through song; he doesn't offer that up as a medium of self-expression. Rather, it is completely the opposite. Singing among other believers is the way we submit to one another and edify one another in Body of Christ. For example, in the Col 3 passage, Paul begins in verse 12 by saying: "Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do." Now these attributes Paul lists are the fruits of the Spirit, and we expect them to be displayed in the lives of mature believers. But look at what Paul says in verse 14: "But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection... *And* let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; *and* be thankful. *And*, let the Word of Christ richly dwell within you, admonishing and teaching one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs..." In other words, we demonstrate our maturity as Christians when we are bound together by love, ruled by peace and the Word of Christ richly dwells within us, leading us to admonish and teach one another through song. Here's the point: Singing is not an option; it is the product of a mature, God-oriented life; whether you have a good voice or not.

Think of it like this: singing and preaching are the right and left hands of God's chosen means of life transformation. When a minister preaches, if he speaks more of his own philosophy than of God's Word, his sermon is vacuous; empty of any life-changing effect. It might revolutionize the management of your bank account or give you some great ideas for dates out with your spouse; it might even make you feel better about yourself. But to have true importance and true power, a sermon must be based upon, filled with, and supported by the Word of God.

The same is true of music. If it is superficial, sentimental and sappy, it will be void of any life-changing power. It cannot teach; it can only entertain. Preaching is the spoken Word; singing is the sung Word. It must be, for that is what God desires. When we realize that and then examine our music today, perhaps you're concerned along with us with what we find.

In Dec. 1933, an article written by J. Gresham Machen caused quite an uproar. He wrote to criticize the new Presbyterian hymnal published earlier that year. Machen wrote: "The first thing that needs to be said about the new hymnal is that it is really *new*. It is one of the chief evidences of change taking place, not only in the worship, but in Protestantism generally. If you want to know trends of religion, listen to the way religion sings. About 400 old hymns have been dropped. In place of doctrine...brotherhood, fellowship and service are stressed. In addition to this change, the new hymns instead of stressing outward ecclesiastical conformity, sound the mystical note." What Machen referred to were hymns like "In the Garden," which spoke of romanticized, idealized, individualized experiences – *I*, not the Body of Christ, come to the Garden alone, while the dew is still on the roses and the voice I hear...you know the song.

Machen goes on in the article to discuss how the new hymnal changed the words of many songs. The line from one hymn, "O come to my heart Lord Jesus, thy cross is my only plea," was changed to "O come to my heart Lord Jesus there is room in my heart for thee." What happens when we change the phrase "thy cross is my only plea," to "there is room in my heart for thee?" Do we not replace a stanza that sets forth the death of Christ as a

sacrifice to satisfy divine justice and reconcile us, with a stanza that, like “In the Garden,” is romanticized? Do we not also remove the emphasis from Christ’s work on the cross to our work of accepting Him?

Machen noted the same things, not just with this hymn, but with many, many others. Another example was a hymn written by Horatio Bonar. The last stanza, which was the climax of the hymn and formed a conclusion to all the rest, was omitted. This is what was omitted: “Mine is the sin, but Thine the righteousness; mine is the guilt, but Thine the cleansing blood; Here is my robe, my righteousness, my peace – Thy blood, Thy righteousness, O God.” Omitted entirely.

Machen concluded: “What characterizes the new hymns above everything else is their deadly vagueness.” Machen’s words were prophetic, not only of the hymn revisions of the early 1900s but particularly of nearly all twentieth century Christian music. Deadly vagueness.

Which shall it be? Faith in humanity, or faith in Christ crucified? Shall we regard the cross of Christ merely as an example for us to imitate? Or shall we regard the atonement as a sacrifice alone which can satisfy God’s wrath against sin?

So many songs, particularly praise choruses, are happy go-lucky, clap your hands songs – music that some now have titled “happy-clappy music.” Michael Horton writes: “It is the cotton candy of what has become in many churches the big top circus event.” More dangerous are some of the revivalist hymns of the late nineteenth century – many of which we all like because we grew up with them. For example, think about some of the words of a very popular hymn, “Trust and Obey.” “When we walk with the Lord in the light of His Word, what a glory He sheds on our way. While we do His good will, He abides with us still, and with all who will trust and obey.” Does God really abide with us only when we are doing His good will or walking in the light of His Word? If that is so, how does this notion square with the discipline of God, which the Bible says comes precisely because we fail to do His good will or walk in disobedience to His Word?

Another stanza reads: “Not a shadow can rise, not a cloud in the skies, but His smile quickly drives it away.” It does? With God’s chastening in mind, is it really true that Jesus’ smile drives away every shadow, cloud, doubt, or fear? Those very disturbances may be our heavenly Father’s providential agents of chastening, and we must remember with resolute joy that discipline is the precious mark of adoption as sons and daughters of God. Only the non-believer has any reasonable hope of floating through this life devoid of difficulty. But who could possibly desire the non-believer’s ultimate fate?

All that we’ve learned so far provides the first of several principles that have become the filter by which we evaluate the music that we sing at CVP. This first is this: Every song we add to our worship rotation must faithfully teach God’s precepts. In times of war, we need bedrock, not sentimentalism. We don’t want to be lulled to sleep by romanticized hymns and choruses, we want the Word of Christ to dwell richly within us. We may enter the house of God distressed by the persecution of the wicked, we may enter His house a quivering heap of doubt and indecision, but we can leave with the very armor of God because our brothers and sisters have taught and admonished us as they sang the great redemptive works of God.

Faithfulness to God’s Word is more than just theological accuracy in a sermon. There are some choruses and hymns that are based upon one or two verses divorced entirely from the context of the very verses they employ. For example, Psalm 103 has been used as the basis for the chorus “Bless His Holy Name.” “Bless the Lord, O my soul and all that is within me, bless His holy name.” Repeat that. Then, “He has done great things, He has done great things, He has done great things, bless His holy name.”

Now, there is nothing theologically inaccurate in those words. In fact, they are good words as they come from Psalm 103. We *should* praise or bless the Lord with all that is within us. And, God *has* done great things indeed. But in looking at the rest of Psalm 103, we should grow concerned. “Bless the LORD, O my soul; and all that is within me, bless His holy name! Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits: who forgives all

your iniquities, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from destruction, who crowns you with lovingkindness and tender mercies, who satisfies your mouth with good things, so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's."

There's more. "The LORD executes righteousness and justice for all who are oppressed. He made known His ways to Moses, His acts to the children of Israel. The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in mercy. He will not always strive with us, nor will He keep His anger forever. He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor punished us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is His mercy toward those who fear Him; As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us. As a father pities his children, so the LORD pities those who fear Him. For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust.

"As for man, his days are like grass; as a flower of the field, so he flourishes. For the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more. But the mercy of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear Him, and His righteousness to children's children, To such as keep His covenant, and to those who remember His commandments to do them. The LORD has established His throne in heaven, and His kingdom rules over all. Bless the LORD, you His angels, who excel in strength, who do His word, heeding the voice of His word. Bless the LORD, all you His hosts, you ministers of His, who do His pleasure. Bless the LORD, all His works, in all places of His dominion. Bless the LORD, O my soul!"

Psalm 103 is great! We are moved to bless the Lord, together with all of creation, why? Because of God's redemptive mercies. He has removed our sins from us and our days are like grass, but the Lord's mercy is from everlasting. When we read the whole of Psalm 103, we depart with a right perspective of ourselves and a right perspective of God. In contrast, the praise chorus, by leaving out the context of Ps. 103, creates that "deadly vagueness" that Machen warned about, allowing us to make the "great things God has done" mean anything we want. It also utterly fails to impart the grand perspectives from the rest of Ps. 103. If objective facts of redemption are not overtly stated, the singing becomes mere sentimentality, praising and blessing without knowing why we praise and bless, we are doing nothing more than singing Hallmark cards - good moral sayings which any good Mormon or Jehovah's Witness could embrace. Indeed, if we fail to sing of these deep truths, we fail to edify fully our congregation.

Our music must faithfully represent the Scriptures. That is the only hope that our music will be "spiritual" or inspired music. Not that we have penned the words, but because God through inspired and inerrant writers of Scripture, penned the words and principles and we put them into our songs, preserving the context.

Now some may wonder, do we have to include all 22 verses of Psalm 103? What about all 176 verses of Psalm 119? Can we ever have songs that incorporate only portions of a passage? Think about what we just did. We saw how rich it was to examine Psalm 103 in its totality. Which teaches better? Which admonishes better? Aren't we, at least in this particular comparison, forced to say the whole Psalm or at least most of it?

We're not suggesting that there is some magic number of lines of Scripture text that we have to put in a song for it to be a spiritual song. However, to the extent that we leave things out from the original passage, especially where we ignore the original context, we will always have to be vigilant about asking if we are effectively teaching one another in our music.

Could there *ever* be a time in which we sing a song like "Bless His Holy Name"? Could we sing it in private at home? Think of it this way. If the primary byproduct of our singing is the teaching and admonishment of one another, do we not, when we sing privately, teach and admonish ourselves? There might be room, of course, for individuals singing "Bless His Holy Name" and when they come to the line "He has done great things," because they're familiar with Scripture, encompass in their minds the great redemptive works of God. They might even have Psalm 103 in mind as they sing. It's possible, but we wonder how realistic that is.



We have a greater degree of responsibility when it comes to singing in corporate worship with others. Remember, music among others is not about preference and self-expression; it is about teaching and admonishing those around us. We don't know for sure what our brothers or sisters think when they sing, "He has done great things." However, if we incorporate more of Psalm 103 we can be sure that they're thinking accurately about the great things that God has done. Perhaps if we were thinking through these kinds of issues, we would be even more careful about what we sing to ourselves privately too.

Our first filter mentioned earlier was that our music must be faithful to the Scriptures, both in theological accuracy and in content. The second filter is that our music must follow the pattern of the music found in Scripture, particularly the Psalms. Solomon, praised for his wisdom, is said to have written more than 1000 psalms. Why were only 150 Psalms, some of Solomon, some of David, some of Asaph and others, regarded as inspired and incorporated into the OT? The reason is that these 150 Psalms, individually, and as a totality, together with other inspired music of the Old and New Testaments, represent the fullness of what our own music must possess. In the 150 Psalms, for example, we find all the great Biblical themes presented poetically: themes such as our depravity, the atonement, our redemption, creation, God's providence, God's wrath, His mercy, etc. They are all there. What's more, they contain, stylistically, patterns for us upon which to construct our own music.

The Psalms contain laments. The Psalms contain imprecatory songs – songs that encourage God to rise up and judge His enemies. Like the seeker sensitive sermon whose topic is nearly always God's love and self-esteem, seeker sensitive contemporary Christian music is nearly always God's love and self-esteem, delivered in short, easily apprehended packages that rarely convict or require us to think. You won't hear laments or imprecations.

Must we only sing Psalms? The Psalms are a model songbook. But, they are the songbook of ancient Israel. While the Psalms anticipate Christ, and should be sung today, they are consummated in Christ. Think about Revelation 4, for example, where the saints and elders sing a new song. It is new because the song has an object found only implicitly in the Psalms – namely the Lamb upon the throne. While the Psalms anticipate Christ, they do not speak directly of Him. We would lose the fullness of God's works if we didn't incorporate the NT.

For example, Psalm 103 talks about God's forgiveness. Would it not be appropriate to incorporate reference to the cross? One of the reasons Isaac Watts wrote many of his hymns was that he realized that the exclusive psalmnodists of the Reformation never sang explicitly about Jesus. What's more, there are songs in the NT – aren't these inspired as well, and don't they suggest that the Psalms are not, by themselves, God's exclusive songbook?

Must we only sing songs that quote Scripture? We don't believe so, but our songs must conform to Scripture and its models. And, we would argue, they are most likely to transform lives when they do contain Scripture. But let's not minimize the fact that the Holy Spirit now dwells within us, just as He once anointed the Psalmists. We shouldn't think that we can pen inerrant music, but godly, wise musicians can write worthy compositions that honor God. Just as Scripture says that in Christ we are prophet, priest, and king, so are some of us musicians. Again, all music must pass through the filter of faithfulness to God's Word.

Our third filter at CVP is this: We must use prudence and musical skill in determining appropriate instrumentation and style for our singing. We no longer have the original musical scores for Israel's songs. Some churches have abandoned musical instruments all together, but as we read in Psalm 150, and as is clear from a multitude of passages, we are to praise God with everything we have – trumpet, cymbal, psalter, zither, lyre, flute, and so on. If we think about these instruments in terms of modern classifications, they would span the entire realm of brass, percussion, strings, and woodwinds.

Of course, that isn't the end of the issue. Instruments are meant to aid God's best instrument, the human voice. Thus, neither the instruments nor the style in which they are played should be the focus of the music. Is the piano God's divinely ordained instrument for our era? No. Can we use other instruments? Yes, as long as the

accompaniment is subordinate to and reflects the same excellence as the content. We *can* get so caught up in the sing-songy, merry-go-round structure of a poorly written chorus or hymn, that we miss the content.

There are so many variations; songs that might be a little sing-songy, or might be a bit ambiguous or vague. At this point we go back to what Martin Luther once said: “We need Elders in the church who are also musicians – individuals who can make discerning judgments on what we will sing or not sing, how we will accompany that music, and so on.”

And that brings us at last to our conclusion to this whole matter. Armed with the criteria we’ve discussed in this FAQ, that our music must faithfully adhere to the Scriptures both in theological accuracy and content, that our music must follow the patterns of music in Scripture, and that godly musicians must use prudence and musical skill in determining appropriate instrumentation and style for our singing, we want to commit to you as the leadership that we desire to continuously evaluate the music at CVP. We want it to be God-glorifying by being true to His Word and edifying to His people. We want it to be excellent and not vacuous or deathly vague. It is our hope to always have a small canon of songs that we will in time memorize and come to love dearly as the music of our faith; music that will enable us to internalize the great truths of Scripture.