

Worship and Music

Verna B. Green

Assistant Professor

Department of Mass Communications, Creative and Performing Arts and Speech
City University of New York, Medgar Evers College
United States of America

Abstract

This comment contends that worship is important for the strengthening of the relationship between humanity and God. Through worship, the human being gets to rise to a higher level of existence and gets to see the world from the point-of-view of God and God gets to register His pleasure and approval with the presence of His Holy Spirit. Music has always and continues to have a prominent presence in worship. This comment provides a background for worship and its place in the life of humanity, analyzes ways of worshipping, and argues the importance of music in worship.

Keywords: worship, music, contemporary, praise

1. Introduction

Why worship and music? I have been led to examine my responses to the activities in which I am obliged to participate during the divine worship service in my local church. Of all meetings in the church, I look forward to the Divine Service the most but, I find myself losing interest in the part of the service which I should enjoy the most because I am a musician, the Praise and Worship period. The reason, this is the time in the service when I am most uncomfortable: the songs being sung are unfamiliar, but most disturbing is the decibel of the music – vocal and instrumental—at such a level as to make me feel confused with whether I am in church or at a rock concert, and the Praise Team singing as loudly as their lungs will allow with not a hair’s breadth between the lips and the microphone. The Praise Team would begin the session with a familiar hymn or two then go off into their own world. Even when singing the familiar hymn(s), however, they would also be so loud it was unpleasant because they sing as if they are singing *to*, as on the concert stage, rather than *with* the congregation. Throughout the service the singing would be always loud, no meditative moments of soft singing, even before and after prayer, and, coupled with the preacher’s very loud delivery, by the end of the service, I am tired, my nerves are worn. This comment provides a background on worship and its place in the life of humanity, analyzes ways of worshipping, and argues the importance of music in worship.

2. What Is Worship?

Worship is to perceive the loftiness and grandeur of God, the Majesty on High, and, in lowliness of heart, lift up sincere praise, prayer and proclamation, contemplated in love and executed with dignity and beauty. In the words of Greg Scheer, it “is an umbrella term that incorporates praise, lament, confession, and many other acts of worship.”¹ Another writer says “worship is the act of rising to a personal, experimental consciousness of the real presence of God which floods the soul with joy and bathes the whole inward spirit with refreshing streams of life.”² One needs to enter into a personal relationship with God with a willing heart to follow the lead of His Holy Spirit in true worship. Ellen White (1982) posits that, “in order to serve [God] aright, we must be born of the Divine Spirit. This will purify the heart and renew the mind, giving us a new capacity for knowing and loving God. It will give us a willing obedience to all His requirements. This is true worship. It is the fruit of the working of the Holy Spirit.”³

In other words, worship is a way of living, a way of seeing the world in the light of God. To worship is to rise to a higher level of existence, to see the world from the point-of-view of God.”⁴ “For it’s not where we worship that counts, but how we worship –is our worship spiritual and real? [Are we being ourselves before Him or are we putting on a show?]”

Do we have the Holy Spirit's help? ... God is Spirit, and we must have His Help [to enable us to] worship as we should. The Father wants this kind of worship from us (St. John 4: 23, 24, *Living Bible, LB*, para. 1976) -- a worship in which we lift Him up in adoration in a way pleasing to Him.

2.1. Contemporary Worship

“Contemporary Worship” has come to mean a musical style that originated in contemporary popular culture rather than in church culture.⁵ To my mind, the adoption of contemporary popular culture in the worship service is ill-suited to the majesty of the God of the universe and “lacks the dignity that one would hope to see when the Lord of the universe is being [worshipped].”⁶ More often than not, the music presented vocally or instrumentally in the contemporary worship service, rather than helping to shape the congregants into Christlikeness, serves to satisfy romantic, trivial, or therapeutic needs.⁷ The lyrics are often perceived to be more romantic than reverent—as if Jesus were a significant other, not the God of the universe.⁸ Songs chosen should be strongly biblical; should not contain *colloquialism* (e.g. the seldom-used verses of Rich Mullins’s “Our God Is an Awesome God” contain phrases such as “when He rolls up His sleeves He ain’t just putting on the ritz.”⁹); nor *inappropriate imagery* such as, being sung to the Lord, “I just can’t make it one more night without your kiss.”¹⁰ Instead of allowing the choir or praise team to do all the singing with their special arrangements and contemporary songs that people may enjoy but cannot participate in, congregational hymn-singing should be engaged in with enthusiasm. “This spectator worship is not the kind of worship pleasing to God. Congregational singing is in the intensive care unit breathing its last breath. Let’s go back to the hymnal and resurrect those hymns of our faith, and sing them with life, and spirit, and joy...”¹¹ It is the responsibility of the modern song leader to choose “high-quality songs that are appropriate to [the] local context and that may also be left for future generations.”¹²

2.2. Praise and Worship

“To join two words such as ‘praise and worship’ makes no more sense than joining ‘lament and worship’ or ‘armadillos and animals.’”¹³ However, it is the term used to represent a particular genre of music engaged in at a particular time during the worship service. Praise and worship originated “in the Jesus movement of the [19]60s, black gospel, Pentecostalism, and popular music styles.... It has become the dominant music style of the evangelical church. Essentially, it is an easy-listening music played by a pop band in a church.”¹⁴ For years, Christian rock – a hybrid genre that emerged in the 60s and 70s-- has married rock’s sounds and forms to Christian praise and worship themes, with dismal results.¹⁵ If this is all the music being sung in the praise and worship period means to the congregants, if biblical truths are not being reinforced with spiritual fervor, if the sound being emitted by the praise team is of such increased decibels that the congregation is dwarfed and robbed of the desire to sing, thus rendering them spectators rather than congregants in prayer/praise, then the exercise labeled as “praise and worship” is no longer “appropriate, admirable, and pleasing to God.”¹⁶ The congregation needs to be afforded the opportunity to participate in this aspect of worship. God is dishonored and the congregation experiences vexation of spirit and the inability to enter with joy into the worship of God.

3. Why Worship?

The purpose of worship is to enable frail battered, scarred and scared human beings to draw closer to God, throw off the burdens of daily life, and, with reverence, shift focus from the dark pit of sin to the all-encompassing, illuminating power of the Creator of the universe and the unselfish love of Redeemer, Jesus Christ. It gives the created the opportunity to pour forth adoration and praise to the Creator with calm assurance of Him being present to bless. In the words of David, the Psalmist, wherever worship occurs,

“Enter with the password: ‘Thank you!’

Make yourselves at home, talking praise.

Thank Him. Worship Him.

For God is sheer beauty,

All-generous in love,

Loyal always and ever.” (Psa. 100: 4, 5, *Message*, 2006)

Wherever a soul reaches out after God, there the Spirit's working is manifested, and God will reveal Himself to that soul. For such worshippers He is seeking. He wants to receive them, and make them His sons and daughters.¹⁷ Worship is necessary in every age and especially today, the time in which the enemy of souls has increased his effort to take humanity's attention away from God. Most importantly, as created beings, we must worship, and for our worship to be accepted by God, we must adhere to His expressed command, "For you must worship no other gods, but only Jehovah, for He is a God who claims absolute loyalty and exclusive devotion." (Ex. 34: 14, *LB*, 1976)

Worship ... nurtures our relationship with God..., takes the focus off ourselves and directs it to God, acknowledging that He is the Sovereign Lord of the universe and our lives. The practice of worship provides us the opportunity to look at all of life through the lenses of worship. As we take the focus off of ourselves and our circumstances and place it on God and His Word, we will begin to see the rest of life as God sees it – as it really is. The more we worship God, the more clearly we are able to view our lives from His perspective.¹⁸

4. How Do We Worship?

Our goals in worship are to glorify God and edify the church as we ponder one of the greatest gifts bestowed on us by our kind ever-loving Father, the eternal opportunity to worship Him. What does it mean to glorify God? Glorify God signifies that what is being done portrays God in a good light to the worshipers and is pleasing to God. According to Scripture, Genesis 4: 3-7, God registers His pleasure for an acceptable worship/sacrifice and His displeasure at an unacceptable one, as was the case with Cain and Abel:

Cain brought an offering to God from the produce of his farm. Abel also brought an offering, but from the firstborn animals of his herd, choice cuts of meat. God liked Abel and his offering [because he brought exactly what God required him to bring], but Cain and his offering didn't get His approval. Cain lost his temper and went into a sulk.

God spoke to Cain: "Why this tantrum? Why the sulking? If you do well, won't you be accepted? And if you don't do well, sin is lying in wait for you, ready to pounce; it's out to get you, you've got to master it." (Gen. 4: 3-7, *Message*, 2006)

Elijah on Mount Carmel was also an outstanding example of God registering His acceptance of a pleasing offering: The priests of Baal, the idol god, spent the greater part of the day praying, hollering, and cutting themselves with the hope of getting a response to their sacrifice to no avail. Toward evening, Elijah rebuilt the altar to God's honor, dug a fairly wide trench around it, laid firewood on it, cut up the ox, put it on the wood, drenched the ox, the firewood and the altar with water enough to overflow filling the trench around the altar. Elijah then prayed:

"O God, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, make it known right now that you are God in Israel, that I am your servant, and that I'm doing what I'm doing under your orders. Answer me, God, O answer me and reveal to this people that you are God, the true God, and that you are giving these people another chance at repentance." Immediately the fire of God fell and burned up the offering, the wood, the stones, the dirt, and even the water in the trench. (1 Kings 18: 36-38, *Message*, 2006)

2 Chronicles 5:14 also records God exhibiting His pleasure for the acceptable worship of the people by filling Solomon's Temple with the bright cloud of His glory. In modern times, God is present in the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is present to bless and to fill the hearts of the true worshipers. The true worshipers are, in the words of Jesus in John 4: 23, those who worship God "out of their very being, their spirits, their true selves, in adoration." (2 Chron. 5:14, *Message*, 2006)

To be accepted, we first have to do what God requires of us: we must draw near with a true heart (Heb. 10: 22, *Authorized King James Version*) full of belief, confident that we are presentable inside and out. (Heb. 10: 22, *Message*, 2006) We must be born of the Divine, Holy Spirit who will purify the heart, renew the mind and give us a new capacity for knowing and loving God. The Divine Holy Spirit will give us a willing obedience to all God's requirements, the [actualization] of true worship.¹⁹

God's requirements of us include taking care of the physical body which is His temple. "You realize, don't you, that you are the temple of God, and God Himself is present in you? No one will get by with vandalizing God's temple, you can be sure of that. God's temple is sacred – and you, remember, are the temple." (1Cor. 3: 16, 17, *Message*, 2006) As mentioned in my introduction, the extreme loudness of the singing and instrumental accompaniment during the praise and worship period is uncomfortable to me.

I have seen children stopping their ears to ease the pain and some adults, especially seniors, leave the sanctuary due to the disturbance of their heart rhythm from the heavy instrumental vibration. If I do not leave the sanctuary, I sit there and tune out the noise because I know it won't be for a long time. The fact, however, that this phenomenon is physically painful to worshipers is going against God's requirement of taking care of the body temple. Hence, it is displeasing to God.

4.1. Worship through Praise

Praise is the lauding of God for His acts and attributes, acknowledging His supremacy in all things.²⁰ The praise of God is a leading role of music in worship, and the majority of biblical songs contain elements of praise even if praise is not their primary theme. We should note that because these biblical songs are the very Word of God, they are part of our spiritual birthright, and need to have a significant place in our collective repertoire, starting with the Psalms.²¹

“Paul instructs us to use ‘psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.’ (Eph. 5: 19, *Gideon International version*, 1985) ‘Psalms’ and ‘hymns are spiritual odes or melodies, essentially one in the same. These are songs with texts based on Scripture passages, doctrinal truths, or biblical principles. They are songs about God, to God, and because of God.... The context of Ephesians 5 is Paul’s admonition to the church to be ‘filled with the Spirit’ (Eph. 5: 18, *Gideon*, 1985). Thus, ‘spiritual songs’ refer to songs sung under the control of the Holy Spirit as well as songs which meet spiritual needs within the congregation. A strong implication is that believers should make a conscious effort to avoid performing music that speaks only to the flesh, our non-spiritual natures.”²²

“Psalms were understood as praise when first used in Israel’s worship. Later, the two chief occasions on which Psalms were sung in Solomon’s temple were upon entering and at the [offering of the sacrificial animal]. In the synagogue, the Psalms became spiritual sacrifices (1 Peter 2:5), since the system of animal sacrifices was no longer in place.²³ Today, the sacrifice we bring to God is our praise. The Divine Worship is for us to minister to God, not to cater to ourselves. “While we may often communicate to one another, our first responsibility is to sing to God. As we minister to God through our music, He will in turn minister to us, [He is there to bless]. Thus, our primary focus in worship should not be on what we can get out of the experience but rather what we can give to God through the experience.... [We worship] to glorify God, not to earn the approval of others.... Many a well-intended minister of music, music group, [praise team], soloist, or instrumentalist has been fooled by Satan into thinking that God is impressed with abilities, talents, technology, and ego and that He will bless us according to the level of the compliments we receive on our *performance* (emphasis supplied). While God certainly can use our abilities for His glory, He does not have to have them. Our abilities in music are gifts God has loaned us to use for the purpose of glorifying Him.”²⁴ To glorify Him, we must please Him, and to please Him we must not destroy our body which is His temple, hence the extremely high decibels of sound threatening to the auditory threshold, and singing in a way deleterious to the vocal cords have no place in worship, and turning congregants into “spectator-worshippers” is not pleasing to God.

5. The Importance of Music in Worship

One of the last things Kings David accomplished before his death was to organize the men of the tribe of Levi who were thirty years or older into divisions for the purpose of ensuring the efficient operation of God’s Temple. To show the important place of music in God’s work, one whole division, four thousand strong, was appointed to “praise the Lord with the musical instruments...” (1Chron. 23: 5, *LB*, 1976) Musical instruments were used to accompany prophesying and singers “trained in singing praises to the Lord...” (1Chron. 25: 7, *LB*, 1976) The music ministry in the Temple included an orchestra consisting of instruments such as cymbals, harps, and zithers. Each singer and instrumentalist “was a master musician.” (1Chron. 25: 7b, *LB*, 1976)

Take note of the scene at the dedication of God’s Temple which was built by Solomon:

The priests then left the Holy Place. All the priests there were consecrated, regardless of rank or assignment, and all the Levites who were musicians were there – Asaph, Heman, Jeduthun, and their families, dressed in their worship robes, the choir and orchestra assembled on the east side of the Altar and were joined by 120 priests blowing trumpets. The choir and trumpets made one voice of praise and thanks to God – orchestra and choir in perfect harmony singing and playing praise to God:

Yes! God is good!

His loyal love goes on forever!

Then a billowing cloud filled the Temple of God. The priests couldn't even carry out their duties because of the cloud – the glory of God! – That filled the Temple of God. (2Chron. 5: 11-14, *Message*, 2006)

When the worship is pleasing to God, He mingles with the worshippers – His glory will fill the temple. (2Chron. 5: 14, *Message*, 2006)

After Solomon's death, subsequent kings of Israel caused the Temple to be closed. King Hezekiah, the 13th king after Solomon, reopened its doors and planned a consecration ceremony:

The king ordered the Levites to take their places in the Temple of God with their musical instruments – cymbals, harps, zithers – following the original instructions of David, Gad the king's seer, and Nathan the prophet; this was God's command conveyed by his prophets. The Levites formed the orchestra of David, while the priests took up the trumpets. Then Hezekiah gave the signal to begin: The Whole-Burnt-Offering was offered on the Altar, at the same time the sacred choir began singing, backed up by the trumpets and the David orchestra while the entire congregation worshiped. The singers sang and the trumpeters played all during the sacrifice of the Whole-Burnt-Offering. When the offering of the sacrifice was completed, the king and everyone there knelt to the ground and worshiped. Then Hezekiah the king and the leaders told the Levites to finish things off with anthems of praise to God using lyrics by David and Asaph the seer. They sang their praises with joy and reverence, kneeling in worship. Hezekiah then made this response: "The dedication is complete – you're consecrated to God. Now you're ready. Come forward and bring your sacrifices and Thank-Offerings to The Temple of God." And come they did. (2Chron. 29: 25-31, *Message*, 2006)

King Hezekiah also reinstated the Passover during which "the Levites and priests praised the Lord, [filling the air with praise sounds of percussion and brass] (2Chron. 30: 21, *Message*, 2006). He did not let their service go unnoticed. He spoke very appreciatively to the Levites of their excellent music. (2Chron. 30: 21, 22, *LB*, 1976)

In every instance, music had a leading role in the worship of God, always praising and thanking Him for His goodness. "They sang rounds of praise and thanks to God, singing this song: 'He is good, and His love and mercy toward Israel will last forever.' Then all the people gave a great shout, praising God because the foundation of the Temple had been laid." (Ezra 3: 11, *LB*, 1976)

Throughout the pages of Scripture, God's people have worshiped through music. The morning stars of heaven sang together in Job 38, the first record of the Hebrew people joining together in songs of praise is found in Exodus 15: 1 and we find Paul in Colossians 3: 16, 17 (*New American Standard Bible*, 1975) admonishing the worshippers at Colossae 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. And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.

Paul makes four important points in his admonition. First, the music must be based on God's Word. Musicians, being filled with an understanding of the Word of God, should communicate a biblically-based text through their music. For the Christian musician, the Word of God is to serve as a regulator. Second, in "teaching and admonishing one another" (Col. 3: 16b), he is asking us to focus on the fact that music directed to God should be for more than entertainment or personal enjoyment.... It is to be used as a tool for biblical instruction and training."²⁵ Third, the admonition to sing "Psalms and hymns and spiritual songs" (Col. 3: 16c) is asking Christians to let the focus in the musical presentation be on God rather than on humanity. Lastly, "singing with thankfulness in our hearts to God" (Col. 3: 16c) is exhorting us to worship with a sense of gratitude to God for all He has done for us and with the desire to bring glory to Him through every aspect of our lives – including music. When our worship pleases God, He may not register His pleasure, today, with the Shekinah Glory as He did in Solomon's temple but does so with the presence of His Holy Spirit.

References

- Abington, James (2009), *Let the Church sing On! Reflections on Black Sacred Music*, GIA Productions, Inc., Chicago.
- Emmert, Kevin P. (2015), Jesus has always been our boyfriend: the biggest difference between old and new hymns, *Christianity Today*, 59.5 (June 2015), <http://www.christianitytoday.com/>

- Jones, Paul S. (2010), a *What is Worship Music?* Publishing, P. O. Box 817, Phillipsburg, NJ 08865-0817
- Mapson, J.Wendell, Jr (1996), *Strange Fire: A Study of Worship Liturgy in the African American Church*, St. Louis, MO, Hodale Press.
- McGarvey, Bill (2013), Post-Christian Rock, *America* 208.15 (May 6, 2013), America Press, Inc. <http://americamagazine.org/>
- Nelson, Thomas, Inc., (1985), *Holy Bible*, Ephesians 5: 19, Gideons International, National Publishing Company.
- New American Standard Bible*, Lockman Foundation 1975.
- Peterson, Eugene H. (2006) *The Message//Remix 2.0, The Bible in Contemporary Language*, Navpress, Published in association with the literary agency of Alive Communications, Inc., 7680 Goddard St., Suite 200, Colorado Springs, CO 80920.
- Scheer, Greg, (2006) *The Art of Worship: A Musician's Guide to Leading Modern Worship*, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, Michigan
- The Living Bible (LB) Paraphrased* (1976), Tyndale House Publishers, Wheaton, Illinois
- Whaley, Vernon M., (1995) a *Understanding Music & Worship in the Local Church*, Evangelical Training Association, Illinois.
- White, Ellen G. (9th printing 1982) *The Desire of the Ages*, Pacific Press Publishing Association, California.

Endnotes

- ¹ Scheer, Greg, (2006) *The Art of Worship: A Musician's Guide to Leading Modern Worship*, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, Michigan, p.13.
- ² Whaley, Vernon M., (1995) a *Understanding Music & Worship in the Local Church*, Evangelical Training Association, Illinois, p. 15.
- ³ White, Ellen G. (9th printing 1982) *The Desire of the Ages*, Pacific Press Publishing Association, California, p. 156.
- ⁴ Whaley (1995) b.
- ⁵ Scheer, (2006) b p. 12.
- ⁶ Scheer, (2006) c p. 69.
- ⁷ Scheer, (2006) d p. 70.
- ⁸ Emmert, Kevin P. (2015), Jesus has always been our boyfriend: the biggest difference between old and new hymns, *Christianity Today*, 59.5 (June 2015), p. 19, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/>
- ⁹ Scheer (2006) e p. 69.
- ¹⁰ Scheer (2006) f p. 70.
- ¹¹ Mapson, J.Wendell, Jr (1996), *Strange Fire: A Study of Worship Liturgy in the African American Church*, St. Louis, MO, Hodale Press, p. 85.
- ¹² Scheer (2006) g p. 73.
- ¹³ Scheer (2006) h p. 13.
- ¹⁴ Scheer (2006) i.
- ¹⁵ McGarvey, Bill (2013), Post-Christian Rock, *America* 208.15 (May 6, 2013), America Press, Inc., p. 23 <http://americamagazine.org/>
- ¹⁶ Abbington, James (2009), *Let the Church sing On! Reflections on Black Sacred Music*, GIA Productions, Inc., Chicago.
- ¹⁷ White (1982) b.
- ¹⁸ Whaley (1995) c.
- ¹⁹ White (1982) c.
- ²⁰ Jones, Paul S. (2010), a *What is Worship Music?* Publishing, P. O. Box 817, Phillipsburg, NJ 08865-0817, p. 7.
- ²¹ Jones (2010) b p. 8.
- ²² Whaley (1995) d.
- ²³ Jones (2010) c p. 9.
- ²⁴ Whaley (1995) e p. 42.
- ²⁵ Whaley (1995) f p. 40.