



■ **What is worship music?** Can it be defined? Does the Bible tell us? Does it exist in one acceptable style, or two, or three? Is any music with Christian words acceptable?

One would be hard-pressed to find definitive answers to these questions by observing practices in the church today. Currently, it seems, each assembly does what is right in its own eyes. Our relativistic, pluralistic society embraces everything, and the church follows closely on its heels. Often we are too inclusive, sometimes too exclusive. Many churches today prefer spontaneity to providing order for the reverent and thoughtful worship of God. One would expect churches that claim to value the authority of Scripture to follow biblical principles for worship—but do they? And is there anything that we can learn about biblical worship from church history? The Reformers gave great attention to liturgy, carefully considering worship elements and their order; so yes, we can.

Worship music is at the center of controversy, being one of the most divisive issues in the church, as it has been for decades. Somehow we have come to define worship services almost exclusively on the basis of musical style. “Contemporary,” “traditional,” “blended,” or “classical” worship services receive their labels from the type of music included and that music’s accoutrements, which can run the gamut from

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liturgical robes and pipe organs to flip-flops and digital drum sets. While legitimate differences exist in the music of various people groups, the postmodern church has tended toward “pop” culture as its pragmatic answer for music, and toward youth pop culture in particular. I fear that this is an enormous mistake. We need to be following biblical principles for worship music, not the world, youth culture, or ideas based on mistaken notions of success.

In some places, biblical worship principles are entirely ignored; in many others, they have not been thoroughly explored. And there is little wonder how this came to be. Protestant seminaries exclude virtually any musical training for pastors, even though churches depend on ministers to set good practices for them. Christian colleges and universities have watered down their music programs to meet the felt needs of their constituents (to stay fiscally viable) rather than training the next generation to lead the church in better directions. The church itself has become increasingly worldly, and we have forgotten the legacy the Reformers left to us.

Consumerism tells us that if we are “paying,” we should get what we want. So congregational factions and individuals wrestle for equal representation or dominance, to ensure that their musical desires are satisfied in the church where they are “customers,” whether or not they are members. Trained church musicians are frequently forced to take liberal church posts to survive because conservative churches, by and large, do not value, hire, or support them. Amateurs end up leading worship music when and where they should not, sometimes by default, sometimes by design.

The result: church music is adrift in a sea of trends, being blown about by the wind of every opinion, regardless of how modestly informed these may be. Many well-meaning people, including musicians and pastors, misuse music in

worship unknowingly. Some individuals and organizations profit through its increasing commercialization, while many churches are shortchanged by the shallowness and man-centeredness that characterize much so-called worship today. Yes, the worship-music seascape is rather bleak. We can navigate through this muddle back to solid ground, however, if we are searching for truth. God's Word provides answers.

Based on biblical evidence, music properly fulfills three roles in the context of worship: *praise*, *prayer*, and *proclamation*. *Praise* is the lauding of God for his acts and attributes, acknowledging his supremacy in all things. *Prayer* is communication addressed to God. *Proclamation* encompasses any activity that proclaims the Word of God—quotation, explanation, teaching, and preaching. Praise, prayer, and proclamation are the roles of psalmody and hymnody, of vocal music and instrumental music. They extend to congregation and choir, to layperson and minister, to organist and guitarist. *And when worship music is properly fulfilling these roles according to biblical principles*, discord dissipates, unity increases, and the Spirit utilizes music for its highest purpose, for man's chief purpose—to glorify the triune God.

For our worship music to be biblical, it must find its themes, principles, and qualities in Scripture. Careful consideration and implementation of what God has revealed will correct aberrations in practice. This short volume seeks to interact with biblical evidence concerning music in order to arrive at biblical principles for the local church.<sup>1</sup> We briefly revisit the thinking of leading Protestant Reformers on the topic of music as well. Our goals are the glory of God and the edification of the church as we reconsider one of the greatest gifts bestowed on us by our beneficent God, and its application to our present and future chief occupation—worshiping him.