# Back to Basics

## Culture, Music, and Worship

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# Introduction

This eBook is an adaption of a series I did over several months on ReligiousAffections.org in which I dealt with the major categories of a biblical philosophy of worship and music in a brief way. My desire was to introduce the basics of these issues to those who hadn't carefully considered them.

My hope is that this will be a similar help to folks who want a brief introduction to these important matters or who would like to introduce others to them.

Once you have been introduced, I would recommend reading other more in-depth articles at ReligiousAffections.org and reading my books, *Worship in Song* and *Sound Worship*.

# People of the Book

Christians are people of the book. Conservative Evangelical Christians, in particular, demand that their beliefs and lives be governed by Scripture. Yet what, exactly, that means is not always clear, particularly when dealing with matters of Christian living.

On the one hand, some Christians believe that the Bible is an exhaustive list of prescriptions and prohibitions that reveal how God wants his children to live. If the Bible doesn't address something explicitly, then God doesn't care about that particular issue, and Christians are free to make their own decisions based on preference. No Christian may speak authoritatively in an area not directly addressed in Scripture.

Other Christians believe that the Bible is sufficient and authoritative for everything in a Christian's life, not only those issues Scripture explicitly addresses. When faced with a decision not found in a chapter and verse, these Christians will insist that God nevertheless cares about that decision, and it is the Christian's responsibility to actively apply biblical principles to contemporary situations in order to do the will of the Lord. Furthermore, they insist that such applications are authoritative to the degree that they are reasonable applications.

The debate centers primarily around what the "sufficiency" of Scripture means, perhaps best rooted in 2 Timothy 3:16-17:

> *All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.*

The question is, what does "complete, equipped for every good work" mean? Does it mean that the Bible explicitly addresses every single issue that is important to God, or does it mean that the

Bible speaks principally to *everything*, even those issues not explicitly addressed?

I believe that the sufficiency of Scripture means the latter, for at least three reasons: First, the Bible itself teaches this view. For example, vice lists in Scripture such as that found in Galatians 5:19–21 are not meant to be exhaustive, but indicate that there are other "things like these" that a Christian will need to deduce for himself. Furthermore, the Bible describes a mature Christian as one who is able to "discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Romans 12:2) even when the Bible doesn't say, and who has his "powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil" (Hebrews 5:14).

Second, theologians have historically taught this view. For example, the historic confessions indicate that God's will for his people is either "expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture."[1]

Finally, common sense necessitates this view. Where in Scripture, for example, does God explicitly address safe driving, healthy living, abortion, or recreational marijuana use? Nowhere. And yet most Christians will recognize that the Bible speaks to these contemporary decisions through broader principles that they are required to actively apply.

God has a moral will for *every* decision we make, and it is our responsibility to study the Scriptures, deduce principles therein, and actively apply them to everything we do.

[1] See Westminster Confession of Faith, the London Baptist Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Belgic Confession.

# Culture and Race

Many Christians are talking about culture these days, but unfortunately few have given any serious thought to what culture is, especially in biblical terms.

The term "culture" is a concept that has developed in the last few hundred years as a way to explain different behaviors between groups of people.[2] British anthropologist Edward Tylor defined culture as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society."[3] This understanding has come to be the standard definition, and evangelicals have adopted the concept as well, as evidenced in Lesslie Newbigin's definition: "the sum total of ways of living built up by a human community and transmitted from one generation to another."[4]

Very simply, culture is the shared behavior of a particular group of people. The question for Christians, then, should be this: what in Scripture best parallels this concept of "culture"?

Most Evangelicals automatically assume that when the Bible talks about a "nation" or "race," it is the same thing as "culture." This is clear because when most Evangelicals defend cultural neutrality or stress the need for multicultural worship, they appeal to passages that talk about race such as Matthew 28:19 or Revelation 5:9. This is also evident by the way Evangelicals insist that it is racist to criticize certain cultural expressions.

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[2] "Culture" originally meant something more along the lines of what we would call "high culture," but now it has come to take on this more broad meaning.

[3] Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom* (London: John Murray, 1871), 1.

[4] Lesslie Newbigin, *The Other Side of 1984: Questions for the Churches* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1983), 5.

However, what should be evident after careful biblical reflection is that "nation" or "race" is not the same thing as "culture." The first terms describe a group of people with a shared ancestry, but the second describes their behavior. Thus, while it is true that God created all different kinds of people, and he will redeem people from every nation, these biblical statements do not describe their behavior.

In fact, behavior in Scripture is far from neutral; it is always either moral or immoral. Thus while it would be horrendous racism to criticize a person for their physical features (which, by the way, is not even a biblical understanding of race anyway) or ancestry, it is well within biblical practice—indeed, it is a biblical mandate—to criticize a particular behavior, whether or not that behavior is shared by a group of people.

The New Testament often speaks of behavior with these kinds of cultural overtones. For example, in Galatians 1:13 Paul describes a kind of behavior that formerly characterized him as a Pharisee; persecuting Christians was part of his "culture," but that behavior changed on the road to Damascus. Likewise, Peter refers to certain behavior that his readers "inherited from [their] forefathers," but from which they were nevertheless redeemed by the blood of Christ. In other words, part of their inherited culture must be rejected in favor of behavior that is holy (1 Peter 1:13-19).

Culture, understood biblically as behavior, must be evaluated as moral or immoral because behavior is always a reflection of religious values and beliefs. Or, to put it in the words of Henry Van Til, culture is "religion externalized."

It is extremely problematic, in my opinion, to blur this distinction between race and behavior. Instead, Christians need to celebrate ethnic diversity within churches while being carefully critical of culture.

# Christians and Culture

Christians have always wrestled with how they should respond to the cultures around them. On the one hand, we recognize the goodness of God's creation and his common grace upon all people. On the other hand, we recognize that people are sinful and that the world is hostile to God and to Christians. So what are we to do?

There have traditionally been three basic answers to the question of how we should relate as Christians, and more specifically churches, to the culture of the unbelieving world around us.

The first answer was that Christians should completely separate themselves from the unbelieving world. We should avoid doing whatever unbelievers do simply because they are unbelievers. We should automatically and in every case be different than they are.

This view highlights the antithesis that exists between good and evil in our world, and insists that since good should never mix with evil, therefore Christians should have no similarities with unbelievers. Churches in particular should be completely separated from secular governments, and Christians should avoid active participation in those governments. This view characterized many Anabaptists and their descendants, including Mennonites and Amish.

The opposite answer to this question was that Christians and their churches should be active in the world, seeking to transform that world with the gospel. Christ is Lord of all, they argue, and thus it is the mission of churches to assert that lordship in all realms of life. Churches should be active in governmental affairs, in cultural endeavors, and in feeding the poor and pursuing social justice in the world.

This view is built off of the assumption that God's purpose in the world is to redeem all things, and thus the church should be

active even now in pursuing that redemption. It highlights the doctrine of common grace, insisting that nothing in culture is inherently sinful or beyond Christian use. This view is often called Transformationalism, Neo-Calvinism, or Neo-Kyperianism and characterizes many Reformed groups.

A mediating position argues that Christians are members of two kingdoms: As Christians, we are members of the kingdom of God;[5] as humans, we are members of the kingdom of this world. As Christians, we should be active in gospel pursuits, and as humans, we should be active in society pursuing the good of our fellow man.

This view also makes another important distinction: these two kingdoms have their own governments. The kingdom of God is governed by the church and regulated by Scripture; the kingdom of this world is governed by human government and regulated by natural law. These separate governments do not have authority over the other kingdom. In other words, civil governments have no authority over spiritual matters, and likewise churches should not be involved in temporal matters. This view characterized Lutherans and other Reformed groups.

The Separatist view helpfully recognizes the hostility of the world, but it tends to forget that God gives common grace even to unbeliever, that God is at work in the world, and that even unbelievers can do relatively "good" things.

The Transformationalist view recognizes that goodness, but tends to ignore that some culture is inherently sinful. It also erroneously equates God's purposes and Jesus' mission in the world with the church's mission. Nowhere in Scripture are Christians commanded to redeem anything, and the church's mission is explicitly to make disciples rather than "transforming culture."

[5] "Kingdom of God" is used here to broadly refer to God's sovereign rule over all things; it doesn't refer to the rule of Christ as King on earth.

The Two Kingdom view recognizes both the inherent hostility of the world and the common grace of God at work. It also helpfully distinguishes between Christians as individuals and their responsibility to work for the good of their fellow humans and the institutional church that is regulated by explicit biblical mandates regarding its mission. Churches are active in proclaiming the gospel and discipling converts who will then go out into the world and work for the good of the society.

# Beauty

Beauty has been classically defined as that which pleases when apprehended (Thomas Aquinas). Both terms in that definition are worth considering.

First, "apprehended." Beauty can describe things, persons, or ideas–anything that can be apprehended by the mind, and this apprehension may or may not involve the physical senses. Seeing, smelling, hearing, or tasting call all bring pleasure, but so can contemplating something purely abstract, such as a math theorem or a chess game.

Second, "pleases." Aesthetic pleasure is not just any pleasure. In other words, beauty isn't the only thing that produces pleasure. Some pleasures occur as a result of a need being met, such as the pleasure derived from drinking a cool class of water on a hot day.

Aesthetic pleasure is different because it is pleasure that comes regardless if a need is met. This kind of pleasure has traditionally been called "disinterested pleasure." It is pleasure taken in something simple for itself rather than because that thing has met a need.

The other important factor is the nature of the relationship between beauty and pleasure. Another way to put the issue is whether beauty is relative or absolute. In other words, is something beautiful because it brings pleasure, or do things bring pleasure because they are beautiful?

The biblical answer to this question is that absolute standards of beauty exist that produce pleasure for the following reasons:

First, the self-existence of God demands absolute beauty (John 17:5, 24; Rev 4:11). Just as truth and morality find their source in the nature and character of God, so objects may be rightly called

beautiful, not if someone simply delights in them, but if they likewise reflect Supreme Beauty.

Second, Scripture calls God beautiful (2 Chron 20:21; Job 40:9-10; Ps 9:8, 27:4, 45:2-4, 104:1, 145:10-12, Isa 42:14, Zech 9:17), further confirming that God is the ultimate standard of beauty. God's glory is his beauty.

Third, in Scripture God declares particular things beautiful. He called his new creation beautiful (Gen 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, and 25), and he prescribes specific artistic instructions for liturgical adornments so that they would manifest "glory and beauty" (Exod 28:2).

Fourth, in Scripture God commands that Christians delight in what is truly beautiful. For example, Philippians 4:8 commands believers to "think on" things that are "lovely" (literally "towards affection"), "commendable" (admirable), and "worthy of praise." These are terms each closely connected to our conception of beauty, and they imply that there are things both worthy and unworthy of delight.

Thus beauty is absolute. Christians should take pleasure in only those things worthy of pleasure, and what determines that worthiness is conformity to the beauty of God himself.

# What is Worship?

Many of the "worship wars" today are fueled by, I believe, differing views of the nature of worship itself. Clearly differences over what worship is and the function of various worship elements would lead to significant differences over what kind of music we might use in a worship service, for example, and so I believe that a fundamental step toward resolving these debates is to seek to understand how the Bible itself defines worship.

At its most basic level, worship is drawing near to God in fellowship with him and obedience to him such that he is magnified and glorified.

This idea of drawing near to God in worship permeates the storyline of Scripture. It is what Adam and Eve enjoyed as they walked with God in the cool the day (Gen 2:8). It is described in Exodus 19:17 when Moses "brought the people out of the camp to meet God" at the foot of Mt. Sinai. He had told Pharaoh to let the people go so that they might worship their God in the wilderness, and this is exactly what they intended to do at Sinai. It is what Psalm 100 commands of the Hebrews in Temple worship when it says, "Come into his presence with singing and into his courts with praise." It is what Isaiah experienced as he entered the heavenly throne room of God and saw him high and lifted up. To draw near to God is to enter his very presence in fellowship and obedience.

Ultimately, this is why God created people. God created the world to put on display the excellencies of his own glory, and he created people therein that they might witness that glory and praise him for it. In Isaiah 43:6–7 God proclaims,

> *Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the end of the earth, everyone who is called by my*

> *name, **whom I created for my glory**, whom I formed and made.*

Likewise, Paul commands in 1 Corinthians 10:31, "Whether you eat, or drink, or whatever you do, ***do all for the glory of God***."

Worship—magnifying God's worth and glory—is the reason God made us.

Adam and Eve's fall into sin—their disobedience of God's commandments—was essentially failure to magnify the worthiness of God to be their master and bring him glory, and thus it was a failure to worship him acceptably. This broke the communion they enjoyed with God and propelled them out from the sanctuary of his presence. After they sinned, and they heard God walking in the garden, "the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God" (Gen 3:8)—they recognized their unworthiness to walk with him. Their sin created a separation between them and their Creator, and they were forced to leave the sanctuary (Gen 3:23–24), never again able to draw near to the presence of God.

All sin is essentially failure to bring God glory (Rom 3:23)—it is failure to worship him. This failure creates barriers from drawing near to God in worship, and it brings with it severe punishment: eternal separation from the presence of God in hell. Sin prevents us from drawing near to God in worship; it prevents us from doing what we were created to do.

However, worship *is* possible through a sacrifice, the vicarious, substitutionary atonement of the Son of God. Sacrifices in the Mosaic system pictured this kind of atonement, but they were unable to "make perfect those who draw near" (Heb 10:1).

But this sacrifice can perfect those who draw near. Jesus is fully man, and thus he can stand as our substitute, and he is fully God, and thus he can pay an eternal punishment to an eternal, holy God that no normal man could. And because of the perfection and eternality of this sacrifice, it need not be offered day after day after

day to atone for sin; it is offered one time and the complete wrath of God is fully appeased.

This is what God pictured when he slew the animal in the garden and covered Adam and Eve's guilt. This is what was pictured when Moses offered a sacrifice at the foot of Mt. Sinai so that the elders of the people could approach God. This is what was pictured each year in Israel on the Day of Atonement when an animal was sacrificed and the high priest entered the holy place to sprinkle blood on the mercy seat. This is what was pictured when the seraph took a burning coal from the altar and placed it on Isaiah's lips, saying, "Your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for."

And this is pictured no more beautifully than with what happened at the moment of Christ's death. The gospel accounts of the crucifixion tell us that Jesus cried out with a loud voice and gave up his spirit, and at that exact moment, the veil of the temple was torn in two, as if that veil was the body of the Son of God himself prohibiting entrance into the presence of a holy God, and that access that had been lost by the fall of man is now restored! There is now a new and living way (Heb 10:20) to draw near to God, and that way is his Son.

Thus those who repent of their sin—their failure to worship—and put their faith and trust in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on their behalf are saved from separation from God and enabled once again to draw near to him in worship.

What should be apparent is that the essence of worship is itself the language of the gospel—a drawing near to God in relationship with him, made impossible because of sin that demands eternal judgment, yet restored through the substitutionary atonement of the God-man for those who place their faith in him. The gospel of Jesus Christ makes worship possible.

# Worship in the Assembly

It is becoming increasingly popular today to assume that since the essence of worship is the language of the gospel, then it follows that worship is all of life, and there is nothing distinct or significant about corporate gatherings of worship.

Several problems with this perspective exist, however, deserving careful consideration. First, the nature of the church must be defined biblically. While it is true that "church" in the New Testament sometimes refers to the universal number of believers in Christ,[6] it most often refers specifically to a local gathering of such believers. For example, Paul addressed letters "to the church of God that is in Corinth (1 Cor 1:2; 2 Cor 1:1), "to the churches of Galatia" (Gal 1:2), and "to the church of the Thessalonians" (1 Thess 1:1).

This raises at least two important points: first, a church is an identifiable group of *believers* in Christ; unbelievers are not part of churches. Second, a church is a *gathering* of believers in Christ; a church does not exist except when it is gathered. This is evident by the underlying Greek term, *ekklēsia*, meaning "assembly." In other words, Christians are not "the church" as described in most New Testament cases when they act outside the regular workings of the local church–a few Christians gathering for dinner or even prayer is not a church. Most of the time, "church" refers to a gathering of a local assembly of Christians to do what such assemblies are called to do.

Understanding the church to be a distinct, gathered group of believers in Christ, recognition of the various terms used in the New Testament to describe this gathered church is quite instructive. For example, Paul tells Timothy that he is writing so that "you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is

[6] See, for example, Matthew 16:18, Ephesians 1:22–23, 3:10, 3:21, 4:4, 5:23–27, 1 Corinthians 10:32, 11:22, 12:28, Colossians 1:18, 24, and Hebrews 12:23.

the church of the living God" (1 Tim 3:15). The term "household of God" is used throughout Scripture to refer to a special place of God's presence. For example, Jacob calls the place where he met with God "Bethel, "or "house of God" (Gen 28:10–22). Likewise the tabernacle is often called the "house of God" (Judg 18:30, 1 Chr 9:25–27), as is the temple (2 Chr 3:3, Ps 52:8, Ezra 4:24, Neh 13:11, Matt 12:4, Mark 2:26, and, Luke 6:4). The church is also called specifically the "temple" (1 Cor 3:16–17, 2 Cor 6:16, Eph 2:19–22). Thus when believers gather as the church, they exist in some special way as the dwelling place of God—the sanctuary of worship—so that, as Jesus promised, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them" (Matt 18:20). Although individual believers are also called "a temple of the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor 6:19–20), the context and plural pronouns in each of the aforementioned cases clearly refer to when individual believers gather as the church. So there is a special sense of being the sanctuary of God that exists only when the church is gathered, rather than at other times. This alone should give indication of something sacred and distinct for the gathered church, with strong emphasis upon worship signified by the use of Old Testament worship terminology.

Finally, Paul indicates to Timothy that there is a certain way "to behave in the household of God" (1 Tim 3:15). Something about the assembled church requires particular behavior that is set apart from behavior in the rest of life. So while an individual Christian is the temple of God's spirit and ought to behave in ways that are pleasing to him, the church gathered is, in a special and distinct way, the sanctuary of God's presence, wherein God's people behave in worship differently than in any other circumstances. For this reason, behavior in the church must be regulated by God's clear instructions in a way more explicit than for behavior outside the church.

One of the ways this takes place is that corporate worship is the public acting out of the spiritual realities of worship; it is a weekly dramatic re-creation of drawing near to God through Christ

by faith. This is why most of the historic liturgies of the past have reflected the basic order of Adoration, Confession, Assurance of Pardon, Thanksgiving, Instruction, Dedication, Petition, Communion, Charge and Blessing. This is the shape of the gospel, and by re-enacting this each week, Christians are reminded that corporate worship is not a time to "call down God" or a religious "experience"; rather, it is an invitation by God himself for his people to draw near to him in communion through Christ by faith.

This is why the climax of this gospel-shaped worship is communion around the Lord's Table. Throughout Scripture (and, indeed, history), the ultimate expression of free and open access is being invited to sit at the table. This is illustrated throughout the Old Testament, it is pictured with the Table of Showbread in the Temple, and it is one of the beautiful images depicted by the Lord's Supper. A Christian worship service pictures that believers are accepted through Christ, and now sitting around his table both commemorates the sacrifice that made that possible *and* expresses our unity with him and with other Christians as the body of Christ. It does not accomplish peace with God, as Rome teaches; rather, it is a beautiful expression of peace already achieved through the sacrifice of Christ. This is why the Table is the ultimate climax of any gospel-shaped worship service. In the Table, Christians are enabled to sit in full communion with their Sovereign Lord because of Christ. The Lord's Table is the most beautiful earthly enactment of the complete fellowship made possible by union with Christ.

# The Regulative Principle of Worship

Pastors and parishioners perennially battle over who has authority in matters of church practice, particularly in corporate worship. Should what happens in the corporate gatherings of God's people fall under the control of church leadership, or should these decisions be left to congregational input and direction? If the former, are pastors to be guided by particular traditions and directories, or may they choose whatever they believe to facilitate goals toward which their congregation assembles? If the latter, are these matters to be given over to a vote, or will a representative committee suffice?

Each of these potential solutions falls short since the Word of God itself provides all that is necessary for the regulation of corporate worship. This regulative principle of worship very simply states that churches may include in their worship only that which Scripture explicitly prescribes or what may be reasonably deduced from Scriptural principles and examples. Conversely, churches may not include in their worship anything that the Bible does not command. Put simply, whatever is not prescribed is forbidden. Thus is it not left to either church leadership *or* church members to decide how they will worship; biblical worship must finds its justification in Scripture alone.

This is based on three key biblical principles:

First, God alone has the prerogative to determine how he is to be worshiped. The purpose of corporate worship is not primarily evangelism, edification, or entertainment. Although, with the exception of entertainment, these things do take place in corporate gatherings of the church, their primary purpose is to draw near to God through Christ by faith on his terms. Thus how that looks should be firmly rooted in what God has commanded.

Second, Scripture is full of examples of God rejecting worship that includes elements that he has not prescribed, even if the worshipers have right motivation. Whether with the golden calf (Deut 9:16), Nadab and Abihu (Lev 10:1-3), or the Pharisees (Matt 15:8-9), God does not approve of worship practices that he himself has not sanctioned.

Third, Scripture is clear that Christians have liberty of conscience in spiritual matters. In other words, no Christian may be expected to participate in a spiritual practice that he is not "convinced in his own mind" is necessary (Rom 14:5-6). This limits even pastoral authority. No pastor or other church leader has the authority to impose upon another a spiritual practice–no matter how it has "an appearance of wisdom" (Col 2:20-23)–that does not have explicit biblical warrant.

This principle, far from being restrictive, is actually quite liberating. Pastors do not need to worry about chasing after the latest popular worship fads or conducting preference polls of their people. Likewise, church members need not fear the next worship novelty, nor will they need to deliberate over what best worship practices they should adopt. The church simply follows the clear instructions of Scripture.

On might object that Scripture really doesn't prescribe all that much for corporate worship, and therefore a church cannot be expected to limit its practice only to what God has commanded in his Word. Yet this objection begs the question. Perhaps the very simplicity of biblical commands regarding corporate worship demands simple, un-adorned corporate worship characterized by Scripture, song, prayer, preaching, giving, baptism, and the Lord's Table.

# Children and Worship

Any concerned, Christian parent is committed to training his or her child to be obedient to the Lord and His Word. From the earliest of ages we inundate our children with Bible verses, we make sure that they faithfully attend church, and we seek to instill in them Bible truths that they can carry with them for the rest of their lives.

I wonder, however, whether Christian parents are really training their children *fully*. Do we realize how, exactly, our children are influenced and what is influencing them? It is my fear that most Christian parents do not recognize that before a child can even comprehend *facts*, his *affections* and *imagination* are already being shaped. In fact, I would suggest that most Christian parents never really even consider the moral imaginations of their children. Sure, we say we are targeting their hearts, and by teaching them biblical truth their hearts are certainly influenced.

But do we realize that a child's heart is shaped far before he or she has the capacity to comprehend truth? In other words, far before a child can comprehend his need to love the one true and living God, far before he or she can comprehend the concept of a god at all, the child learns *how* to love. Far before a child can comprehend his need to fear and reverence God, the child learns *how* to fear and reverence. Far before a child can comprehend his purpose to worship God, the child learns *how* to worship.

What happens with most parents, though, who see only the need to teach their child's *head*, is that in order to teach such truths, they are willing to use almost whatever means necessary to do so. So they use puppets to teach Bible stories, never realizing that their children are learning to view biblical truth as something light and trivial. Or they use cartoons to teach moral lessons, never realizing that their children are learning to view morality as something silly or "adventurous."

This problem is seen most acutely with children's music. Christian parents, educators, and publishers have the noble goal of teaching their children about God, his Word, and how to obey him rightly, but they set such truth to irreverent, trivial, or even downright banal music, forgetting that far before their children learn these truths, they must learn *how* to express themselves rightly toward those truths. I do not question the noble motives of these people for an instant. But I do question their understanding of how children are taught to worship.

Children learn to worship God primarily through participating in rightly ordered worship. Children learn to love God by first learning how to love. Children learn to reverence God by first learning how to reverence. Children learn to fear God by first learning how to fear.

# Affections and Passions

Perhaps one of the most important ideas to grasp in any discussion of music and worship is the difference between affections and passions.

Premodern thought understood a distinction between kinds of emotion. At the time of the writing of the New Testament, common Greek thought articulated a distinction between the *splankna*—the chest—and the *koilia*—the belly. The *splankna* was the seat of the affections, things like love, joy, courage, and compassion. The *koilia* was the seat of the passions, things like appetite, sexuality, fear, and rage. The affections were to be nurtured, developed, and encouraged, and the passions were to be held under control. The passions were not evil — they were simply part of man's physical makeup, but in any contest between the passions and the intellect, the passions always won unless the intellect was supported by the affections.

This was the common way of articulating things in Greek culture, and therefore NT authors wrote with such distinctions in mind. For instance, Paul says in Philippians 3 that enemies of Christ worship their *koilia*—their "belly," their passions. In Colossians 3 Paul tells Christians to put on *splankna*—the "chest," affections—of mercy, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, and longsuffering. In other words, this distinction is not explicitly defined in the New Testament because the original readers would have already understood it, but the distinction is clearly evident. Enemies of Christ serve their passions while God-pleasing Christians nurture noble affections. This distinction has been lost in our day, largely because of the influence of secularism and especially evolutionism, but premoderns understood it.

This kind of distinction was maintained for thousands of years. In more recent times, Jonathan Edwards best articulated this

distinction in *The Religious Affections*. Edwards defined affection as the "inclination of the will." It is what moves us to do what we know is right. Edwards defined the affections as part of the mind, the immaterial part of man. On the other hand, he defined passion as the agent which immediately affected the "animal spirits," the physical feelings and impulses we share with animals in terms of physical composition.

> *The affections and passions are frequently spoken of as the same, and yet in the more common use of speech, there is in some respect a difference. Affection is a word that in the ordinary signification, seems to be something more extensive than passion, being used for all vigorous lively actings of the will or inclination, but passion for those that are more sudden, and whose effects on the animal spirits are more violent, and the mind more over powered, and less in its own command.*[7]

Both affections and passions can drive a person to action. The affections are the inclination of the will (the moral component of the spirit), while the passions drive physical impulses.

What is important to remember is that a Christian must never be governed by his passions. The Bible calls this part of man his "belly"—his "gut," and reveals an unbeliever to be a slave to it (Philippians 3:19). A Christian should never allow his gut to control him. These passions and feelings are not evil; they are simply part of the physical makeup of mankind. To assign morality to them would be like assigning morality to hunger. Jesus Himself experienced the passion of anger, and yet without sin.

The physical passions are not evil in themselves, but they must always be kept under control. Left unchecked by the spirit,

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[7] Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2001), 26–27.

passions always lead to sin. This is why the Bible must warn, "Be angry, and yet do not sin" (Ephesians 4:26). Anger is not wrong, but it will lead to sin if not controlled. Likewise, appetite is a good thing, but left unchecked it results in gluttony. Sexuality is a wonderful gift from God, but uncontrolled it turns to lust. Fear is a necessary part of the survival instinct of man, but if it controls a person, he cannot operate properly. You can distinguish between affections and passions because you can never have too much affection, but it is possible to have too much passion.

The problem is that when the passions are set in conflict with the mind, the passions will always win. A man may know that it is wrong to hit another man, but if he is angry, that knowledge alone will not stop him from reacting wrongly. It is only when his knowledge is supported by noble affections that he can overcome his passions. As C. S. Lewis says, "The head rules the belly through the chest."[8] This is true for faith. Faith is not mere belief in facts. That alone would not move a person to a righteous life. Faith is belief combined with the affection of trust. When belief is supported by trust, a person will be able to overcome his sinful urges. Christians, therefore, should strive to gain more right knowledge and nurture more right affections so that they act rightly. They must also beat their bodies and make them their slaves (1 Corinthians 9.27).

In summary, when people today talk about emotion, they are speaking of a category that may include the affections, passions, or the resultant feelings. This is why we must be more specific when discussing these things—"emotion" is just too broad a term. Most people are thinking of "feelings" when they say "emotion," but not always. Joy, fear, and "butterflies" are all "emotions," but they are

[8] C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man, or, Reflections on Education with Special Reference to the Teaching of English in the Upper Forms of Schools* (San Francisco: Harper, 2001), 24.

very different from one another. Therefore, the emotional experiences created by various uses of art are consequently very different from one another.

# Meaning in Music

Meaning in music is a tricky thing.

Most people think it's tricky because music is so abstract and lacks specificity such that describing its meaning with words is nearly impossible. On the contrary, meaning in music is tricky for exactly the opposite reason. As Felix Mendelssohn once noted, "What music expresses is not too *in*definite to put into words; on the contrary, it is too definite." In other words, we often have difficulty describing what music means with words because *words* lack the specificity that music has. Let me explain further.

Most people acknowledge that music, at its most basic level, expresses emotional content. However, articulating what that emotional content is can often be a challenge, yet as Mendelssohn correctly observed, this is due to the fact that words often lack the nuance to accurately identify a particular emotion. We often use single words to describe very different kinds of emotions. Let's use "joy" as an example. We use that one word to describe what a sports fan feels when his team wins the game, what a father experiences while playing with his children, and what a cancer patient feels when he learns that his cancer is gone. Yet these "feelings" are each quite different from each other internally, and they express themselves externally in often very different ways as well. A sport's fan's "joy" usually expresses itself with exuberance, wild gestures, and yelling. A father's "joy" is warm and peaceful. The cancer patient's "joy" often results in tears. Each of these may rightly be called "joy," but that word doesn't quite capture the nuance of difference between them. Music doesn't have that problem.

Unlike words, music is able to express nuanced emotional content. We think music is abstract because we can't put it into words, but that's not the fault of the music; it's the words that are lacking. This is why music is often called the language of emotion.

Music mimics what emotions feel like and how they express themselves, and in this way music is able to express what words alone cannot.

This is also why music is so powerful both as a tool for expressing what cannot be put into words and for teaching and shaping the heart. I can *say* "I have joy in God," but unless I go on to more thoroughly elaborate what kind of joy I mean, the term alone is inadequate. Music allows me to specific *what kind* of joy I mean. Likewise, I can *tell* someone to "Rejoice in the Lord," but using music allows me to further specify what that feels like and helps to shape the person's heart toward an appropriate expression of joy.

There are two additional implications from this understanding: first, meaning in music is discernible. Contrary to what many evangelicals believe today, we *can* determine what music means. We may find difficulty in putting that into words, but that doesn't mean it is not possible. Discerning meaning in music is just as possible as discerning what another person is feeling by observing his behavior. We can tell when another person is sad or happy, elated or depressed, by watching their posture, facial expressions, and bearing or by listening to their tone of voice. We can also tell the difference between a sports fan kind of joy and a cancer patient kind of joy in the same way, though we might not be able to express it perfectly in words.

Second, musical meaning on this level is universal. There are all kinds of other meanings in music that are not universal but limited to particular people, times, cultures, and experiences. But to acknowledge non-universal meaning on an association level does not deny universal meaning as well. Meaning on the level I've been describing is universal because all people—regardless of gender, ethnicity, culture, or time—are part of the "culture of humanity." We all share similar physiological, biological, and emotional characteristics such that when music expresses emotion on that level, its meaning is universal.

Christians must not fall into the trap of ignoring or even denying universal meaning in music because, as I've already pointed out, there are many different kinds of emotion, and not all of them are appropriate for expressing biblical truth or worshiping God. Some kinds of joy, love, grief, fear, and delight are fitting for God and his truth; others are not. Thus not every example of "happy" music is appropriate for expressing the words "Rejoice in the Lord," nor is every kind of "love" music appropriate for expressing love to God.