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## ***BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES FOR WORSHIP-STYLE CHOICE***

It is a pleasure to be here today to discuss issues that continue profoundly to affect many of us and our colleagues who lead music in worship. This is a day of nearly unprecedented change in worship style and music. The age-old debates of "traditional versus contemporary," "emotional versus rational," and "highest-and-best versus most-popular" are at a peak; and, especially in Protestant worship, there is now more division, with radical restructuring, than at practically any other time in history. Rightly or wrongly, much of the debate revolves around the music used in worship, and we as musicians must help to guide the discussion.

Overwhelmingly, decisions for change have been made based on perceived cultural shifts and tastes, while little if any attention seems to be paid to the guidance found in the scriptures. The purpose of our time together this morning is to explore scriptural principles that demand consideration in worship style debates. The more we can shift the focus off of "your taste versus my taste" and on to biblical truth, the more successful we can be in finding how it is that we are to worship God in this time and place.

### ***BIBLICAL PRINCIPLE NO. 1: song genre***

Our first biblical principle has to do with song genre. What kind of songs should we be singing? Colossians 3:16 gives us some answers:

*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.*

"Psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs"... mentioned not only here in Colossians, but also in Ephesians 5:19. What exactly does this mean? Are these three names for the same thing, or are psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs distinct from one another? Scripture itself does not give many clues. But musicologists confirm that these were indeed three distinct musical genre well known to Paul and the early Christians.

Let's look at some definitions printed on page 2 of the handout (attached). Evidence shows that the early church continued to sing all the music of its Jewish heritage. When Paul said "psalms," he most assuredly was speaking of the Jewish song literature: biblical expressions of every form of prayer, in classic, disciplined poetry. These include not only the entire Book of Psalms, but also the other songs in the Bible that are similar in style. The practice of singing the psalms rightly is being revived in today's church.

What about hymns?

At the time of Paul's writing, the Greek term *hymnos*, which we translate as "hymn," referred to a poem usually sung in praise to a deity. By studying the pagan hymns of the day, we can understand the term as Paul knew it. First-century Greek hymns were carefully polished poetic statements, well-reasoned, and stressing the intellect. They often taught particular facts about the god, or tried to enlist the deity's support, or challenged the listener to action.

As a well-traveled, well-read scholar, Paul was undoubtedly familiar with this poetic form. We can be sure that Paul used the term *hymnos* advisably and knowledgeably when he wrote to the

Colossians and the Ephesians. Paul also penned some of the earliest Christian hymns, including the one in Philippians 2 about Christ's death and exaltation.

Hymns are simple and metrical in form, at once emotional and rational. They are poetic and literary in style, just like the first-century Greek hymns which Paul knew and wrote. Hymns cover a whole range of topics, including the teaching of the Christian faith. This is an element some think is not needed today: just "praise" is necessary. I do not believe that this is true.

Psalms . . . Hymns. . . What, then, are "spiritual songs"? Help comes from musicologists who have found similar forms in other cultures of the Middle East and early Christian churches. It is generally agreed that spiritual songs have an immediacy and improvisatory quality --different than the more poetically-developed psalm and hymn. They are emotional expressions of the Holy Spirit's presence. They may be spontaneous. They may be glossalalic, that is, sung in other tongues. The main component is a great, heart-felt love for God.

Spiritual songs have appeared in many forms throughout the centuries to the present, including gospel songs, carols, praise choruses, Taizé chants, "popular"-style hymns, Contemporary Christian music, biblical ballads, African-American spirituals and other ethnic music, and charismatic "singing in the Spirit."

Why do we need these different types of songs? Aren't hymns enough? Or choruses? Or psalms? Why does the Bible teach us that we need all three?

We need all three because of how God made us. Each of us is at once simple and complex, emotional and rational, needing both comfort and challenge of the heart and of the mind. At times, we need to be able to sing songs that are simple, and memorable, and direct in addressing God. We need to be able to close our eyes or raise our hands to heaven as we sing. In unique ways, spiritual songs can open our emotions and help us engage in warm, heartfelt worship.

But we also need to sing the psalms, as the early Christians did, letting the word of God dwell in us richly as the biblical songs become our own prayers to God.

And we need hymns, old and new, to place upon our lips the profound lyrics of God-gifted poets who seek with all they have to point us to him. We need the hymns to teach us the full counsel of God, and to help us recount the story of our faith: from the creation of the world to the return of Christ at the end of time.

Just psalms are not enough. Just hymns are not enough. Just spiritual songs are not enough. Scripture teaches us to have a balance of these song-types in worship.

### **BIBLICAL PRINCIPLE NO. 2: old or new**

The Scriptures offer a second principle that gives guidance to our contemporary worship debates. Shall we sing old songs, or new songs, or both? Does it matter, or can we choose according to generation or taste? Listen to these words from Deuteronomy 31:

*Now, therefore, write this song and teach it to the Israelites. Put it in their mouths in order that this song may be a witness for me against the Israelites. . . . And when many terrible troubles come upon them, this song will confront them as a witness because it will not be lost from the mouths of their descendants.*

We need old songs: songs that are taught to the people and to their descendants, as Deuteronomy 31 says. In the psalms and the classic hymns, we find the memory of the people of God across the centuries, the roots that are essential for us knowing who we are and who God wants us to become. We need the old songs to provide a common base of knowledge and

experience which outlasts the quickly-changing songs of our day: a bridge between the children, parents, and grandparents whom we would like to have worshipping together in our sanctuaries.

We also need new songs: new hymns and spiritual songs reflecting the life of each generation. "Sing to the Lord a new song!" Psalm 98:1 exclaims, and so we must, if we want our faith to be alive and not a museum piece.

But "new song" may have another definition besides "that which is contemporary." A new song can be any song or song-type beyond one's present experience or taste: that is, a song new to you. Many classic hymns are new songs to people who have not grown up with them. Are they immediately comfortable? Of course not. But like the scriptures, they are worth the effort of study and practice.

Or perhaps some of the simpler, more repetitive spiritual songs are not as immediately engaging for other people: but these too may become a "new song," as through them, we learn to worship God with a different part of our heart.

Sure, all of us have our preferences, and they're very much wrapped up in that with which we're comfortable. But the scriptures clearly point us beyond our taste preferences. And WE need to point our people beyond THEIRS. We need to encourage them beyond talk of good taste vs. bad taste, to the exercising of what Professor Frank Burch Brown calls "Christian taste": that is, taste which ventures to hear within someone else's taste, as a form of Christian love. God help each one of us and our people to grow in Christian taste.

### BIBLICAL PRINCIPLE NO. 3 : thinking or feeling

History shows us that the pendulum swings from emphasis on the emotional in one era to emphasis on the rational in the next. Each new generation corrects the excesses of its predecessor. In truth, both thought and feeling are of paramount importance and must be held in delicate balance in our faith.

Through thought, the absolutes of God's truth are apprehended. They are the story into which we place our story. The scripture teaches us to be transformed by the renewal of our minds (Rom. 12:2). Thought forms character: so Paul says "Whatsoever things are true, and noble, and right, and pure, and excellent, and praise-worthy, think on these things ." (Phil 4:8)

Thinking is very important for keeping us out of heresy. All the major, lasting, true movements in church history, like the Reformation, have been accompanied by a major intellectual component.

But feelings are also essential. They enable our response to God on the deepest levels, serving as the key to our hearts and our wills. We need to offer worship that is feelingful.

What then is the answer? It is that we need to engage **both** the mind and the heart in the worship of God. It is not an issue of one or the other. Pastor/poet Thomas Troeger puts it this way:

*If all you want, Lord, is my heart,  
my heart is yours alone--  
providing I may set apart  
my mind to be my own.*

*If all you want, Lord, is my mind,  
my mind belongs to you,  
but let my heart remain inclined  
to do what it would do.*

*If heart and mind would both suffice,  
while I kept strength and soul,  
at least I would not sacrifice  
completely my control.*

*But since, O God, you want them all  
to shape with your own hand,  
I pray for grace to heed your call  
to live your first command.*

(from *Borrowed Light*, Oxford University Press,  
1994, p. 132)

#### **BIBLICAL PRINCIPLE NO. 4 *growing and stretching***

So far this morning we have talked about three biblical principles that are balanced and holistic. But are they easy to achieve? No. Our culture is increasingly self-centered and service-oriented: people want it their way NOW.

And so many churches have chosen to accommodate the culture in order meet people where they are: doing things in worship that the people know, like, and feel good doing, and that have obvious and quick application to their daily lives.

But in adopting this strategy, could it be that we are teaching a false Christianity? What about gospel values? Certainly self-centeredness is NOT one. Certainly unity of the body IS one; and sacrificing one's own desires for the good of others; and applying oneself to the disciplines of the faith, many of which take a lifetime of practice. It is said that our instant-gratification culture is all about *microwaving*, while God is all about *marinating*.

And yet we as a church cannot hold people at arm's length until they meet our "standards" and learn our traditions. So what shall we do?

Our fourth biblical principle teaches us to be like Jesus: meeting people where they are, but then taking them where they have not been. Think of the woman at the well or the woman caught in adultery: Jesus met these women at the point of their need, but he did not leave them there. He challenged them to a higher level of faithfulness and understanding. Likewise, the Apostle Paul started new believers on "milk," but then moved them on to the "meat" of Christian discipleship.

We need to offer worship that is balanced, including points of identification with the culture, but also other ingredients that will stretch each worshipper out of his or her comfort zone and encourage growth in faith and experience with God. This approach to worship requires work and a spirit of openness and love on everyone's part.

But what will happen if we do keep our people stretching and growing: singing, and sometimes struggling to sing, the psalms, and hymns, and spiritual songs of the church, with heart soul, mind, and strength, and exercising "Christian taste"? What is the reward?

The reward is that they will grow in Christian maturity. They will more fully know both the truth of God, and God himself. They will be more unified as a body, as they grow in love, and they will be enriched by learning from one another new forms of worship. Of course there will be growing pains, but this is what discipleship is all about.

How the church approaches culture is one of the most important issues facing American Christians. We seek to be in the world, but not of it: the church must be relevant to the culture and be God's channel to it, but the world cannot set our agenda. We must burn with a heart for the unreached, but never cease to proclaim the full counsel of God.

**BIBLICAL PRINCIPLE NO. 5: Unity and love**

Our fifth and final biblical principle brings us to the most important thing I have to share with you today. It may be summarized in these five words from Colossians 3:14: *"Above all, put on love."*

What a travesty are the "worship wars" so prevalent in our day! "How sad," says Scotty Smith, "that the one thing that will unite us all around the throne of God in heaven now serves to be the occasion for so much pain and division among God's sons and daughters. . . This ought not to be!" ("Are We Worshipping Worship More than We Worship God?" *Worship Leader*, Oct/Nov 92)

In the throes of worship controversy in my own church, it was a turning point for me when I came to the realization that my chief opponent and I both cared more about our point of view than we cared about each other. I was deeply convicted by this. Even when we believe passionately that we represent the truth, let us be instructed by these words of Søren Kierkegaard:

*"When truth conquers with the help of 10,000 yelling men--even supposing that that which is victorious is a truth: with the form and manner of the victory a far greater untruth is victorious."*

(Quoted in *Quotations of Wit and Wisdom*, ed. John W. Gardner and Francesca Gardner Reese, W. W. Norton, 1975, p. 209)

The New Testament is notably vague about rules and materials of worship, but it is explicit about love, unity, peace. Indeed, they will know we are Christians by the love we have for one another, not by whether we have traditional, contemporary, blended, seeker-sensitive, contemplative, rock-and-roll, hip-hop, emerging, or organic worship services in our churches!

Do we want to bring joy to the heart of God in our worship? Then let us live these words of the psalmist:

*Behold how good and pleasant it is when brothers and sisters dwell together in unity. . . For there the Lord ordained his blessing, even life evermore.* (from Ps. 133)

As we talk about worship, may we help to deepen the conversation by steering it away from only taste and culture and toward an encounter with God in scripture. And let it be our prayer that God will give us the grace to be loving in the process.

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(Attachments pasted below)

**TRADITIONAL OR CONTEMPORARY WORSHIP STYLE—  
WHICH ONE? BOTH?**  
***Biblical Principles for Worship-Style Choices in the Local Church***

**Principle No. 1:** **Song Genre**

*Colossians 3:16*

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.

**Principle No. 2:** **Old or New**

*Deuteronomy 31:19-21a:*

Now therefore write this song, and teach it to the Israelites; put it in their mouths, in order that this song may be a witness for me against the Israelites. For when I have brought them into the land flowing with milk and honey, which I promised on oath to their ancestors, and they have eaten their fill and grown fat, they will turn to other gods and serve them, despising me and breaking my covenant. And when many terrible troubles come upon them, this song will confront them as a witness, because it will not be lost from the mouths of their descendants

*Psalms 98:1*

O sing to the LORD a new song, for he has done marvelous things. His right hand and his holy arm have gotten him victory.

**Principle No. 3:** **Thinking or Feeling**

*Romans 12:2*

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God —what is good and acceptable and perfect.

*Philippians 4:8*

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

*Deuteronomy 6:5-6*

You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart.

**Principle No. 4:** **Growing and Stretching**

*1 Corinthians 3:1-2*

And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready,

**Principle No. 5:** **Unity and Love**

*Colossians 3:14*

Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

*1 Peter 4:8*

Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins.

*Psalms 133*

How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!

It is like the precious oil on the head, running down upon the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down over the collar of his robes. It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion. For there the LORD ordained his blessing, life forevermore.

## ***Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs: Three Distinct Musical Genre of the New Testament***

### **Sources:**

**1. Biblical:** Colossians 3:16 (*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs to God.*) and Ephesians 5:19 (parallel passage).

### **2. Contemporary:**

Johansson, Calvin. *Discipling Music Ministry: Twenty-first Century Directions*. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1992, pp. 119-142.

Hustad, Donald P. *Jubilate II: Church Music In Worship and Renewal*. Carol Stream, IL: Hope Publishing Co., 1993, pp. 447-487.

Mitchell, Robert H. *I Don't Like That Music: Why Don't We Sing the Good Old Hymns Anymore? Why Don't We Sing the New Songs to the Lord?* Carol Stream, IL: Hope Publishing Co., 1993, pp. 85-107.

### **Definitions**

**Psalms.** Biblical expressions of every form of prayer, in classic, disciplined poetry. These include not only the entire Book of Psalms, but also the other songs in the Bible (known as *canticles*) that are similar in style to the Psalms.

(Examples: Exodus 15:1-18,21; Deuteronomy 32:1-43; Judges 5:1-31; 1 Samuel 2:1-10; 2 Samuel 23:1-7; Isaiah 26; Isaiah 55; Jonah 2:2-9; Habakkuk 3; Luke 1:46-55; Luke 1:67-79; Luke 2:27-32; Revelation 15:3-4)

Evidence shows that the early Christian Church continued to sing all the music of its Jewish heritage.

**Hymns.** Lyric poems of devotion which are designed to be sung and express the worshipper's attitude toward God or God's purposes in human life. Hymns are simple and metrical in form, genuinely emotional as well as rational, poetic and literary in style, spiritual in quality, and by their meaning unify the singing congregation. (*Hymn Society of America*)

At the time of Paul's writing, the Greek term *hymnos* (hymn) referred to a poem usually sung in praise of a deity. First-century Greek hymns were carefully polished poetic statements, well reasoned, and stressing the intellect. They often taught particular facts about the god, tried to enlist the deity's support, or challenged the listener to action.

(New Testament hymn fragment examples: Ephesians 5:14; Philippians 2:5-11; 1 Timothy 3:16; 2 Timothy 2:11-13)

Hymns have been written throughout the history of the church, including the Anglo--American "Hymn Explosion" of the past 50 years.

**Spiritual Songs.** Informal emotional expressions of the Holy Spirit's presence. May be spontaneous. May be glossalalic (in tongues). Alleluia and other chants of a jubilant or ecstatic nature, richly ornamented. Spiritual songs have an immediacy and improvisatory quality different than the more poetically developed psalm and hymn. (*Spiritual song definition based on evidence of Jewish music and later notated Christian chant.*)

Spiritual songs have appeared in many forms throughout the centuries to the present, including gospel songs, carols, praise choruses, Taize chants, "popular"-style hymns, Contemporary Christian music, biblical ballads, African-American spirituals and other ethnic music, and charismatic "singing in the Spirit."

**Paul advocates the singing of all three of these musical genre,  
the balance of which is necessary for Christian maturity.**

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