

Sing Praises With Understanding



by
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Psalm 47:6-7 Sing praises to God, sing praises! Sing praises to our King, sing praises! For God is the King of all the earth; Sing praises with understanding. NKJV

Introduction

Just as in all things, it is important to know what the Bible says about singing praises. Music plays a major role in our services at church, and our lives outside church. The Bible tells us that we are to sing praises to our Lord. The word, “sing,” occurs 116 times in the New King James Version of the Bible, used most frequently in the Book of Psalms (*Ps 104:33 I will sing to the LORD as long as I live; I will sing praise to my God while I have my being.* NKJV).

With all the choices in music we have today, what type is appropriate for Christians? Some songs teach, some songs praise, some songs give thanks, some songs encourage. Churches offer different services for people with different musical preferences. Unfortunately, many churches have become divided over disputes about what music should and should not be allowed in the church. The younger generation claims the older generation

just does not understand today's music. They are behind the times and out of touch. The older generation claims the young people just do not appreciate the traditional hymns that mean so much to the older saints who grew up singing those songs. The seeker friendly movement argues that the church needs to make its music "less offensive" to draw people in, that big bands and entertainment are good because they bring people through the church doors and keep people interested and comfortable.

We could debate endlessly about music styles and what type we should use in church. The problem with most of these arguments is the focus. Disputes about music almost always focus on personal preferences. The question we really need to ask is, "What does God like?" To answer this question, we need to see what the Bible says about spiritual songs and hymns that are pleasing to the Lord. If we are focused on self, on what pleases our flesh, then it really does not matter what style of music we use, because it won't be pleasing to the Lord.

Does God's word tell us that once a song is 20 years old, we should discard it? Does He tell us that a song must be 50 years old before we sing it in church? There are some songs in the hymn books today that are not biblically correct, or they at least need several lines corrected. But many of the older songs we sing in the church today have survived

because they contain precious truths that were profitable yesterday, today and forever. Likewise, there are new songs being written today that are biblically correct, lift up Jesus Christ and may stand that same test of time. Sadly there are also many songs proliferating in Christian churches that claim to be spiritual but do not contain any real biblical truth. And even if they did contain truth, the message is overshadowed by loud accompaniment or sung unintelligibly.

While the Bible does not discuss all the types of music available today, the Bible gives us clear guidance about the songs we should sing, what pleases God and what our songs, just like our sermons, should be focused on. That focus is Jesus Christ. Our worship is not about us and what makes us feel good, though hopefully it is pleasing to praise the Lord. Though we all have personal preferences regarding style of music, we should scrutinize the music we sing in the light of God's word. Otherwise, we risk wasting our time in unprofitable debates and disagreements that are focused on what type of music pleases our flesh.

Understanding

Psalm 47:7 tells us we are to sing praises with understanding. According to *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, the meaning of the Hebrew word used here for understanding means, "to be circumspect and hence, intelligent."

To be circumspect means to take heed, to look around at our circumstances and the potential

consequences. As it relates to spiritual songs, we should know why we sing praises to our God and what purpose it serves. We need to realize the impact music has and the role it plays in worshipping the Lord. It should be more than just making a loud noise or sound. “Sing wisely” is another interpretation of the phrase “sing praises with understanding”.

As Christians we should be joyful for our circumstances. We have been delivered from our sin. We have an eternal inheritance in heaven. We have strength and wisdom for every day and for every circumstance because the Lord provides for our needs.

Psalm 105:2 Sing to Him, sing psalms to Him; Talk of all His wondrous works! NKJV

Psalm 98:1 Oh, sing to the LORD a new song! For He has done marvelous things; His right hand and His holy arm have gained Him the victory. NKJV

We are to sing and talk of His wondrous works. Of course to do that, we must know and understand what those works are. When we trust Jesus as our personal Savior, we experience a wondrous work that we can shout and sing about. As we grow in our faith, we have more and more to sing about because we understand more of His wondrous works. A spiritual song reflects that increasing, deeper understanding we gain as we grow in our relationship with Jesus Christ. Our songs should remind us of the understanding we have. As songs bring to remembrance our understanding of God’s

works, they can bring comfort to us when we are discouraged or disheartened.

There is a song in a Hymnal called Grace and Glory Carols titled *Glory to Jesus, I'm free!* It's a praise of understanding. Jesus has freed us from the bondage of sin. If you have not experienced the freedom that Jesus provides from sin, this song is probably meaningless and cannot provide any comfort or edification. For those who have experienced that work personally in their lives, it is a song of joy and comfort.

In the New Testament, Paul also talks about singing with understanding.

1 Cor 14:15 *What is the conclusion then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will also pray with the understanding. I will sing with the spirit, and I will also sing with the understanding.* NKJV

This word for understanding (nous) in the Greek is similar to the Hebrew word for understanding. It means the intellect or mind. We are to sing with our minds the knowledge we have of Jesus. To be intelligent, the words should make sense and the meaning should be clear.

Col 3:16-17 *Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord. And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.* NKJV

This passage tells us much about singing praises with understanding. One thing we see is that

singing praises to the Lord is appropriate when Christians are gathered together. Verse 16 says the word of Christ should dwell in us richly. Our songs, based on understanding that word, are to teach and admonish each other. This may seem obvious, yet I will repeat it multiple times in this writing; to teach Christian truths, the songs should contain clear Christian truths. You can't turn someone to Jesus Christ unless you tell them about Jesus Christ. The meaning of our songs that we sing in the church should not be obscure. Our songs should be based on the word of God that points people to Jesus Christ.

I will use an example from my own personal preferences that may seem a little silly to some, but will hopefully illustrate some of these points. Please note this is not an endorsement of any particular type of music, just an example. I have been known to listen to Randy Travis, a country western singer. He sings some spiritual songs and some that are not spiritual at all. One song that is supposedly spiritual is called, "*Pray for the Fish*". It's about a rough guy that gets saved and is getting ready to be baptized in the river at the edge of town. In the song, people doubted that the water was going to change him, because his soul would never come clean. This guy was so bad and full of sin, he had to be dipped twice. Pray for the fish because they need to know what's coming when the sin starts rolling off him. It was like they were swimming in a lake of fire.

One point the songwriter is presenting is that the Lord can save anybody no matter what he has done or how sinful he has been. This, of course, is true. However, the idea that any sin is contaminating the water or that the water is cleaning his soul is not a correct teaching about baptism. Baptism is a public profession of what the Lord has already accomplished in someone's heart. Now, I happen to believe that the songwriter is just trying to present a "fun" song with some truth and some entertainment. But there are some Christians that are in error about the public profession of faith that is Baptism. Some teach that you must be baptized, that is, dunked in the water by a preacher, in order to be saved. This song might reinforce that erroneous teaching. A new Christian might be confused about what really takes place at a baptism and this song does nothing to help, even though it is marketed as a "Christian" song. At any rate, in my opinion, this song would not qualify as a spiritual song sung with understanding. I would categorize it as entertainment.

Another song that is popular on the radio talks about cartoons getting saved. What a waste of time for a radio station that claims to be reaching souls for Jesus Christ. If you want to call it entertainment, fine, but don't pretend to be spreading the good news of Christ through nonsense.

You may be thinking, “Aren’t you getting a little too nit-picky about song lyrics? Aren’t we allowed to have a little fun?” My point is that we need to be circumspect about what we consider to be a spiritual song. We need to be careful what we consider “dear” or hold close to our hearts. We need to look around and consider the potential consequences of our choices as far as what kind of music we allow to saturate our minds, and especially what we allow in our churches.

***Rom 12:2** And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God. NKJV*

We must allow the Holy Spirit to transform us rather than just do what the world says Christians should do. We don’t have to look like and sound like the rest of the world in order to spread the good news that Jesus saves. Actually, I should say that even stronger in light of **Romans 12:2**: the church SHOULD NOT desire to look and sound like the world. Many churches today modify their church services and ministries based on what the non-saved person thinks church should be. I mention this in this article because quite often music is the first thing a church will change in an effort to attract new members. This passage in Romans is very clear – do not be conformed to this world. It applies in all areas of our lives and certainly to our music. I will not deny that our worship in song has

changed as our society and customs have changed throughout time, but if our sole reason for changing our music is to please the world, our motives are wrong.

If we desire to grow in our relationship with Christ, we will pay close attention to the music we surround ourselves with. A praise of understanding instructs us, builds us up, tells of God's wondrous works and points our affections toward Jesus Christ. Our songs of praise are not just for entertainment. They are not just to take up 15 minutes so we don't have to listen to the preacher for a whole hour. We are instructed in the Bible to sing to the Lord, with understanding.

Spiritual Songs

*Col 3:16-17 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in **psalms and hymns and spiritual songs**, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord. And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him. NKJV*

*Eph 5:15-21 See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is. And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit, **speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual***

songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord, giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another in the fear of God. NKJV

Going back to the passage in ***Colossians 3:16-17***, we see a few different terms to describe singing – psalms, hymns and spiritual songs (also in ***Ephesians 5:19***). These terms describe different aspects of songs to teach and admonish (to put in mind) each other.

The Greek word for song (ode) is always used in the NT in praise of God or Christ. Simply, the word used for *songs* refers to the lyrics, the words being sung. If we are to teach and admonish one another in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs (as these passages instruct us to do), it obviously requires lyrics or words to communicate that message. A bunch of loud noise does not “put in mind” anything profitable.

We also see the adjective “spiritual” added to further describe the “ode” or words to be sung. The word spiritual seems to be used very broadly now, unfortunately. The meaning of spiritual in the Bible is very clear, though. *Vine’s Expository Dictionary* defines spiritual this way, “things that have their origin with God, and which, therefore, are in harmony with His character.”

The principal idea or theme of “spiritual” songs is something that originates with God, revealed by the Holy Spirit. We have a collection of words that

originated with God and were revealed by the Holy Spirit – the Bible

Ps 119:54 Your statutes have been my songs In the house of my pilgrimage. NKJV

As we journey in this life, God's word is to be our song.

To illustrate a little further what is meant by spiritual songs, the following words and phrases are associated with spiritual songs in the Bible: cheerful, teaching, admonishing, edification, to the Lord, in spirit and truth, thanksgiving, understanding, shout joyfully, deliverance, statutes, praise. If our songs are to be spiritual, and are to teach and admonish, the words must be in harmony with God's Word. To communicate, which is required to teach or encourage, they must present clear precepts that come from the word of God. The meaning should not be obscure. They should not leave questions, or be so vague that anybody can make them mean anything they want.

The words to our songs in the church should be held to the same standards as our sermons.

1 Cor 1:21-23 For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, NKJV

Rom 10:17 So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God. NKJV

Heb 4:12 *For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a Discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.* NKJV

Notice these phrases in the scriptures above - Christ crucified, hearing by the word of God, word of God is living and powerful. Praises with understanding that teach, admonish and are able to change lives sing of Jesus Christ. If we are to worship, we must worship Him in spirit and truth – the truth contained in the Bible.

John 4:23-24 *But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and **those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.***

The idea that vague lyrics that are non-offensive and simply “positive” are going to “reach out” to the unsaved is false and actually counterproductive.

2 Tim 2:16 *But shun profane and idle babblings, for they will increase to more ungodliness.* NKJV

The Bible teaches very clearly that idle babblings increase to more ungodliness. You can't turn someone to Christ unless you tell them about Christ. Well, this is no fun, you mean there is no artistic liberty in spiritual songs? Not with the words of spiritual songs that communicate spiritual truths as contained in the Bible.

Our preachers are not at liberty to just give great oratory, or do a stand-up comedy routine, or motivational speeches. Some of those things would probably draw people through the doors of our church, but they will not change lives or build up the faith of the hearers. God's word changes lives and is profitable for all things. I believe you can arrange the words in ways that help the song flow and rhyme, as long as it communicates clearly the truths of the Bible without changing the meaning. As we have seen, spiritual songs are another way of communicating spiritual truths to one another, and the arrangement of phrases and words can aid in that process.

Here it is again: To teach Christian truths, the songs should contain clear Christian truths. These are not always popular or politically correct. Songs with clear Christian truths probably are not going to make the top 20 charts or go platinum. They may even offend some people or make them uncomfortable. Are we afraid we are going to convict some people and cause them to look around and consider the choices they are making (i.e. to be circumspect)? Or that we are going to be misunderstood? I am not saying we should be arrogantly out there offending people with our music, but the truths in God's word will be misunderstood and will offend some.

1 Cor 1:18 For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. NKJV

Rom 1:16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. NKJV

2 Cor 4:2 But we have renounced the hidden things of shame, not walking in craftiness nor handling the word of God deceitfully, but by manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God. NKJV

2 Cor 2:17 For we are not, as so many, peddling the word of God; but as of sincerity, but as from God, we speak in the sight of God in Christ. NKJV

2 Peter 1:16 For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His majesty. NKJV

There are many different ways to communicate in song and there are so many sweet truths in God's word to be communicated. Let's avoid giving any false impressions or teachings of the Lord by our music. We should be honest about who we are and what we are about. Our music in the church can help communicate truth, facilitate praise of our God, place our focus on Jesus, build us up in our faith and express our thanks to God. Or, it can be a hindrance that results in minimizing God's Word in the church. The Bible is clear that God is not

pleased when we use the word of God deceitfully or as a means of financial gain. We certainly see this happening more and more with music today.

Some say the songs we sing at church are boring. Others say, “I don’t understand them, so I can’t sing them from my heart.” Certainly there are songs that are on different levels of understanding, just like our sermons. However, instead of avoiding those songs we don’t understand, we should strive for a deeper understanding of God’s word (*2 Timothy 2:15*). Making all of our songs shallower to conform to our current level of understanding is not the answer and is not profitable to those who desire to go on to a deeper relationship with Christ, something He desires for all Christians.

That’s one way we teach and build each other up with spiritual songs. If we sing a song that is beyond my understanding, it should motivate me to study God’s word so I understand it next time. We need to be careful about watering down the lyrics of our songs. This is a spiral downward that leads us away from God’s truth in other areas of our lives. There is no excuse for not redeeming the time we have to understand God’s will revealed in His word. Music in the church is another opportunity to communicate the truth contained in the Bible.

Musical Accompaniment

I have spent a lot of time talking about song lyrics up to this point. If the words are the main component of spiritual songs, do we need the piano or guitars or other accompaniment? We could just recite words in a monotone voice, right? To teach, to worship, our songs are to communicate. Good public speakers use dynamics and voice fluctuations to help them communicate their message. Tone does make a difference in communication. Most of us probably know what is meant by the phrase, “he has a radio voice”(deep, booming, clear). If I inhaled helium before speaking to you so that I spoke with a funny voice, it would certainly affect how you receive what I have to say.

There is no question that the tone and dynamics of our music have an effect on us. I’m no behavioral psychologist, but I know God made us this way. He put songs in David’s heart as we see plainly in the Book of Psalms. Playing a musical instrument or singing a song can change the focus of our mind. It may even use a part of the brain that some of us don’t often use. Being an engineer type, I use the left side of my brain most of the time according to those who know about how the human brain works. Playing music usually uses the right side of the brain, though I question that in my case because I must have a sheet of music, i.e. a set of plans, to follow!

The word Psalms (psalmos) in Greek (*Col 3:16*) means simply a set piece of music or a sacred ode sung to musical accompaniment.

In psalms we have words accompanied by pleasing sounds and distinctive tone. The music that accompanies a song helps communicate the message of that song. How often have you had a song come to mind when you needed encouragement or needed to be reminded of truth or needed your focus changed from the cares of life to the Lord Jesus? The sound of the song (distinctive tone) aids in recalling the message communicated in the words of the song. Of course, a song that is not spiritual or profitable can have the same effect. Advertisements on TV and radio use music or some other distinctive tone so consumers will remember their “jingle” and how much they need or deserve a certain product.

The music played with the lyrics does have an effect on the listener. This is another reason why we need to pay attention to the kind of music we allow to fill our minds. We see examples in the Bible where musical accompaniment was used by the Lord to the benefit of the listener.

1 Sam 16:23 And so it was, whenever the (distressing) spirit from God was upon Saul, that David would take a harp and play it with his hand. Then Saul would become refreshed and well, and the distressing spirit would depart from him. NKJV

2 Kings 3:15 But now bring me a musician." Then it happened, when the musician played, that the hand of the LORD came upon him. NKJV

We can't ignore musical accompaniment in the church. Some think they can just pick up a guitar and jam however they want and say it is in the name of the Lord. As we have already considered, we need to be more circumspect and look around at the potential consequences. The musical arrangement often evokes some kind of response from the flesh and plays a role in the message that is remembered and taken with the listener.

I will give an example from my younger days. Before high school football games, we listened to music, if you could call it that, in the locker room before the game – usually heavy metal or hard rock. That music certainly did not calm us down or create an atmosphere of worship. We hoped it would get us all riled up so we were ready to go to “battle” physically on the football field. It evoked a temporary response from the flesh, but really did not communicate anything intelligent. In fact, I fortunately do not remember the words to most of those songs, probably because you could not even understand the words. It was just noise and unfortunately did not help us remember how to execute our plays and win any more games!

The arrangement of the notes in our music should compliment and aid in communicating the message. The message could be one of edification

(building up in the Lord Jesus Christ) or praising the Lord, or declaring the Lord's faithfulness, goodness, righteousness. Without the truth of the word of God, the effects of the music, no matter how soothing or calming or exciting or joyful or otherwise emotional, are temporary. Worship in song should be an expression of what is in our heart. It is not to evoke a purely emotional response by stimulating our senses and allowing us to simply have a good time.

God has done some remarkable things where musical instruments are noted in the Bible. The Walls of Jericho fell when the people shouted praises at the sound of a trumpet. Gideon's band of 300 men, with trumpets in hand conquered the Midianites. Of course God was not dependent on a trumpet to defeat the Midianites, but in Gideon's battle the Lord made sure that the small army knew it was the Lord that supplied the victory, not man's strength or musical ability. He wanted Israel to fully depend on Him to supply the victory.

Psalm 98:4-6 Shout joyfully to the LORD, all the earth; Break forth in song, rejoice, and sing praises. Sing to the LORD with the harp, With the harp and the sound of a psalm, With trumpets and the sound of a horn ; Shout joyfully before the LORD, the King. NKJV

David used musical instruments, but even with those in hand, they were to shout joyfully to the Lord, again showing us the focus is to be on the

Lord. The focus is not on who can play the loudest or the best or the coolest. God does not need fancy music or smoke machines or laser light shows. He wants our hearts. He lets us use music as an expression of what is in our hearts. Why? We are created in His image, it must be pleasing to Him.

Coming back to our original question concerning our music & worship - What does God like? He wants hearts yielded to Jesus. *Ephesians 5:19* speaks of singing and making melody in our hearts to the Lord.

1 Sam 16:7 But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not look at his appearance or at his physical stature, because I have refused him. For the LORD does not see as man sees; *for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.*" NKJV

Luke 16:15 And He said to them, "You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For *what is highly esteemed among men is an abomination in the sight of God.*

If we are trying to please our flesh, or someone else's flesh with our music, our heart is not focused on the Lord.

Conclusion

Music can be a difficult subject in the church because music appeals to our natural senses, emotions and personal preferences. Our emotions are expressed often as we worship Him in song.

Music is a way for us to express our joy and thanks for what Jesus has done.

But we are also warned that false teachers will appeal to our sinful flesh, that sinful nature we were born with. A lot of music being peddled as Christian music does just that – it appeals to our flesh.

2 Peter 2:18 *For when they speak great swelling words of emptiness, they **allure through the lusts of the flesh** , through lewdness, the ones who have actually escaped from those who live in error.*
NKJV

1 John 2:16 *For all that is in the world -- the lust of the flesh , the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life -- is not of the Father but is of the world.*
NKJV

We must be on guard concerning preaching, and we need to be on guard when it comes to music. Is it only pleasing our flesh, or is it pleasing God? Our worship in song should be an expression of what is in our heart, of our understanding of the Lord's work. The purpose of singing praises to the Lord is not necessarily to please our natural senses, though it may often do just that.

Another difficulty in teaching about music is that it is easy to become legalistic and put a strict set of rules around it. While I have attempted to avoid legalism in this writing, I hope the point is clear that we must consider the character and content of music before embracing it and approving

it in the church. Many different types of music are pleasing and help communicate God's message, and help turn our affections to Jesus. Some songs have accompaniment that is beautiful, but a message that is shallow or inaccurate. Some kinds of music are pleasing to the flesh, but overshadow any message being communicated, promote wrong attitudes or defiant behavior, and turn our attention to entertaining ourselves and the world. Much so-called Christian music today mimics the world's attitudes in tone and musical arrangement. Defiance and rebellion are attitudes that are being imitated by "Christian" bands today. This behavior is contrary to the word of God. When Jesus came to earth, it was not to start a fad or social club. He came to set us free from our sins so that we might rule and reign with Him in eternity.

We have much to be joyful about and many reasons to worship the Lord in music and song. Our music in the church should help communicate truth, facilitate praise of our God, encourage us to focus on Jesus, build us up in our faith and express our thanks to God. A faithful Christian and faithful church will desire to sing praises with understanding.

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