

Faith Pulpit

New Testament Principles of Music

Music tends to express the culture it comes in. Heroic music tends to coincide with heroic areas. Revivals have tended to express themselves in hymns of spiritual depth; and it is no accident that contemporary religious music expresses our own spiritual values.

While the Old Testament contains a whole literature of worship through music, the New Testament says surprisingly little about it. We read songs in Luke and revelation, but the New Testament verses that discuss music could be written on a 3×5 card. On this basis the Zurich Anabaptists ruled out church music altogether. On the other hand, when we have made music such an important element in our own religious activities, we would seem to be under some obligation to align our practice with the New Testament principle.

If New Testament authority is our first basis on which to proceed, a second basis is the assumption that music is a language. We don't play band music at funerals, "No Night There" at weddings, nor Mendelssohn at football games. Ignorance of a language can be dangerous; a tourist might innocently pick up some German swear words, but there is always the possibility that someone might understand what the words really mean. A church musician might by his music subvert the message of the cross, but some discerning souls will know what he did.

How then can we keep our music within New Testament limits? I see several principles that seem to apply.

I. New Testament Music Glorifies God and Minimizes Self (1 Cor. 10:31, John 3:30).

All New Testament religious activity glorifies God. If our music is religious activity, it therefore should glorify God. All New Testament religious activity minimizes self and mortifies the flesh. New Testament music is long on praise. Of the dozen songs in Revelation, all focus on God or the Lamb,

none on the singers. We could get the impression that whatever the beauties of heaven's music, heaven gives little notice to virtuoso performances. "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain."

The New Testament says little to exalt the human element (Rom. 8:4, 1 Cor. 8:1, Gal. 5:24, and Phil. 2:3). New Testament music is then not a performance to exalt the musician any more than a sermon is a performance to exalt the preacher. New Testament music may give pleasure, but it does not entertain. We may imagine the angels' joy at the songs of the twenty-four elders, but we can hardly say that the elders entertain the angels by these songs. When the elders cast their crowns before the throne in selfless adoration, what place will there be for flourishes and displays to draw human applause? – in the presence of the One whose name is Wonderful, no place. In our services we may take such displays and flourishes as evidence that the Shekinah has departed, and the impulse to applaud is a kind of profanity to those who adore Him who sits upon the throne.

II. New Testament Music Involves Worship.

If we live every moment in the Divine Presence, and if this is particularly true of our religious activities, it follows that all our music involves worship and should be appropriate to the holy place. "God is Spirit, and they that worship Him must worship Him in Spirit and in truth" (John 4:24). This would imply that a New Testament church service has no place for an unsaved musician. He can hardly worship in the spirit until he has renounced his rebellion and received Christ. Indeed, there is no place for a saved musician performing in the flesh. Worship rises from the new nature, not from the old one.

1 Corinthians 14:15 takes it a step beyond this. "What is it then? I will pray with the spirit, but I will pray with the understanding also; I will sing ('pluck an instrument') with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also." This seems to require that we understand what we sing, both the words and the music. We do not sing on sheer impulse. A believer should have some understanding of music; even more should the church musician understand what music is about. He above all of us should sing and play with his understanding. He above all of us should grasp that band music is inherently exciting, that "Into My Heart" is introspective, that jazz is always against restraint, and that rock is a command to obey the body (TIME, Jan. 5, 1976).

Some keep suggesting that music is a matter of cultural conditioning, that the message all depends on the mind of the hearer, so that one man's dance music is someone else's hymn. This is like saying that the aspirin and the Pill are the same, that they mean only what the user is culturally conditioned to expect.

If we worship in the spirit, we can well question the fitness of canned music in a worship service.

III. New Testament Music is Instruction.

“Teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord” (Col. 3:16).

While we sing in the presence of God, we sing before men, and some New Testament songs frankly speak to men (Eph. 5:18–20, and even 1 Tim. 3:16). This requires that our songs should convey or at least conform to New Testament truth. It demands a certain discretion in what we sing, in both words and music. We exclude paganism, sacramentalism, post-millennialism, and ecumenicity. We include New Testament doctrine, although this isn’t easy with a recent hymnal or songbook.

If music is instruction, this requires something of the musicians. The church musicians should be something else than performers. They need training in theology if they are to instruct others. In addition, they need to understand music theory and philosophy. Of performers, entertainers, and technicians, we already have an abundance. Of people capable of teaching and admonishing in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, we do not have so many.

IV. New Testament Music Conforms to the Message of the Cross.

In these end times we have all but lost the gospel of grace and the corresponding message of the cross. We have replaced it with a gospel of self-indulgence. Yet we dare not forget the pit from which we were dug, nor the awesome price our Redeemer paid, nor the gravity of our obligation, nor the awfulness of hell. Our music will reflect our view of these. It may be loud and joyous, but it will not be flippant nor jazzy. It may be quiet and reflective, but it will not be sentimental, schmaltzy, or dead. As the cross disciplines the Christian life (Gal. 5:24), it will discipline our music.

The cross is an eternal verity, and this too bears on our music. It is fitting that our music convey something permanent, as against the really contemporary (“And be not conformed to this age” Rom. 12:2). In the light of this verse, it seems strange that the contemporary should have such a place in our churches. In an age when we are rich and increased with goods and have need of nothing, it is not so surprising. But our experience will confirm this observation: if we condone the world’s music in our services, we will soon have our people practicing the world’s values the rest of the week. We will then observe the crumbling of our orthodox doctrine. A little leaven will have leavened the whole lump.

We expect our pastors and teachers to agonize with God before they speak to men; at least we used to. Should not New Testament churches expect our musicians to be men and women of God? Should we not pray for wisdom, that our music might befit the worship of the redeemed?

Dr. Robert Delnay

Former Professor at [Faith Baptist Bible College](#) | [Other Articles](#)

Dr. Robert Delnay (Th.D., Grace Theological Seminary) was a distinguished theologian, educator, and author whose ministry spanned over seven decades. A graduate of Wheaton College, Dallas Theological Seminary, and Grace Theological Seminary, Dr. Delnay served in numerous leadership and teaching roles, including at Faith Baptist Bible College, where he was a beloved professor known for his commitment to expository preaching and biblical scholarship.

A prolific author, he wrote several books and articles, leaving a lasting legacy of theological insight and pastoral wisdom. Dr. Delnay's deep love for God's Word and his dedication to training the next generation of Christian leaders impacted countless students and ministries worldwide. He went home to be with Christ in 2023.