

Liturgy, part 2

Unity and Music: Five Hills To Die On

By Tim Nichols

One of the worst things about Christians is our tendency to feel that because everything is a matter of principle, everything is equally important. Consequently, we often waste time and resources fighting over trivial things when there are really serious issues in play. Nowhere is this more true than in church music. I have, to my considerable shame, been a combatant in some really stupid arguments over Christian music, and I'm sure I'm not alone in that. As we explore church music together and grow toward musical maturity as a church, we will have our share of arguments. That's inevitable and healthy. My hope in this paper is to get the coming arguments started on the right foot, so that we don't lose our sense of proportion.

To that end, here are five hills that I believe we should be prepared to die on. Most things in this discussion will be negotiable (even when we think they're not), but these five things are core matters of biblical truth, and we should not be prepared to compromise them for any reason.

Hill #1: We Will Sing Psalms

The New Testament is abundantly clear that believers should sing psalms both individually and corporately, as part of worship.¹ There is ample room for other music, too, but there is no room at all for *not* singing the psalms. This is simply a matter of obedience, and we *must* do it. There are 150 of them, and we should set as our long-term goal to learn them all. As a short-term goal, we should learn at least one of each of the different types of psalms: hymns of worship, enthronement psalms, communal lament, individual lament, and individual thanksgiving.²

Historically, the church has recovered psalm-singing a number of times, most recently during the Protestant Reformation in the early sixteenth century. The trend, though, is for the psalms to slowly be crowded out of the worship service by other music—good songs, to be sure, but not Scripture.

I suspect this is because the psalms are often comforting, but never quite comfortable. God wrote them, and so they are demanding, always challenging us to greater holiness. Because we like to be comfortable, we slowly gravitate toward comfortable songs, and therefore away from the psalms.

¹ 1 Corinthians 14:26, Ephesians 5:18-19, Colossians 3:16, James 5:13

² This is one of several different ways of categorizing; which scheme we pick really doesn't much matter. The point is to learn a representative cross-section of the psalms as soon as possible, and then grow from there until we know them all.

We must resist that trend, and it will not be easy. Like all sanctification, we will be “pushing uphill” the whole way, but we will grow accustomed to it as the psalms shape us. The first step, of course, will be to actually learn some psalms, which we’re working on now.

Hill #2: Wherever We’re Going, We’re Going Together

While singing the words of the psalms is mandatory, the tunes are negotiable. God didn’t hand down any music with the psalms, so we have no choice but to supply our own. Throughout the ages, God’s people have done just that, leaving us with a gold mine of metrical translations and tunes to work with. This doesn’t relieve us of the burden of making our own contributions, as maturity and talent enable us to do so, but it does give us a useful place to start in the meantime.

By far the most important thing in the process of finding tunes is that we leave no one behind. Consider the words of Paul:

I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to guard the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. *For there is* one body and one Spirit, as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who *is* above all, and through all, and in you all.³

A worthy walk, Paul tells the Ephesians, protects the unity that God has created in His church through His Spirit. We do that by maintaining a humble attitude toward each other, bearing with each other in love. This walk is worthy of our calling because the God who called us is one, and if we are united with Him as the body of Christ, we are to be one as well.

This means that we don’t divide fellowship over music, either in the big, public, church-splitting fashion or in the smaller ways of individually withdrawing from each other because we have different opinions about a piece of music. When we have differences, we must be kind to each other and find a way to handle them so that our unity is preserved.

This will not happen without work *on everyone’s part*. Suppose, for example, you have a group of friends over to your house to have dinner and spend some time together. After dinner, the group is discussing what to do and collectively decides to watch a movie. They begin to discuss different options, discarding some as they move toward consensus, and gradually a curious dynamic emerges. There’s one person who makes no suggestions, but very vocally rejects every suggestion someone else makes. In the space of about five minutes, what had been a group endeavor to settle on a movie that everyone wanted to watch becomes a desperate attempt to find something, *anything*, that will get past this person’s veto.

³ Ephesians 4:1-6

That dynamic is an offense against unity, and we must not allow it to happen in our group. While some of us will spend more time digging up options than others, everyone must contribute to the discussion, not only with their discomforts, dislikes and fears, but also with hopes, aspirations, and music they want to sing. If this sounds easy enough, think again. Music is highly personal, and putting a tune you like in front of the group for discussion opens up your musical tastes for criticism—and you probably will get some. This takes courage, but it's necessary if we are going to grow together as a group.

Hill #3: Open and Honest Discussion

Preserving our unity won't happen without open, honest discussion, and we need to have plenty of it. As our more timid members put suggestions before us, we need to encourage them to do it again (and therefore to be tactful if we don't like the suggestion). That said, if your honest response to a tune is "Wow, who died?" don't keep it to yourself. In the rough-and-tumble style of discussion that characterizes our church, it will usually be okay for you to just say "Wow, who died?"—most of us can take it. But be mindful of whose toes you're treading on. On the other hand, if you think someone doesn't like a tune because their tastes are just too narrow, and you figure they'll grow into it with time, express that opinion. And be gracious when others say the same things to you. Believe me, they will.

This is terribly important. Music reaches us deeply, and therefore music we dislike *really* grates on us. We cannot, as a group, find ways to alleviate those tensions as best we can if we do not know where the tensions are. This is no time to "be the bigger man (or woman)" and keep silent—say your bit! If it turns out we can't find another tune to replace the one you hate, you'll have plenty of chance to "be the bigger man" when we sing that psalm in obedience to the Lord even though we know you don't like the tune.

Speaking of "being the bigger man," we need to talk about getting offended. In all likelihood, you will get offended at some point in this discussion. Christians are accustomed to being nice to each other, and this is too important to be nice about. Because we tend to be nice when we shouldn't, we often haven't cultivated a tolerance for truly honest discussion. Well, here's our chance. As discussion proceeds, we have to keep very short accounts with each other. If you get offended, *say so*. If you've offended someone, address it with them. The temptation here is to communicate openly and honestly until someone gets offended, then to crawl back into our shells and start lying to be nice. The biblical solution is to be honest about the offense, to gain skill in communicating honestly, and to learn to live with differences of opinion. If the offense was a matter of tactlessness on the offender's part, that's easily resolved. If it is the *substance* of the offender's opinion that offends, not just the way he said it, that's more difficult, but in those cases, too, we bear with one another in love.

Hill #4: It's Not Really About What We Like

Although we've been discussing these issues in terms of musical tastes, it's important to note here that church music is not really about our tastes. When we sing together in worship, we "offer the sacrifice of praise to our God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name."⁴ Our worship is a sacrifice to God, and as with all sacrifice, the point is not what *we* want to offer, but what *He* wants to receive. The long history of failing to learn this lesson starts with Cain. It didn't go well with him, and it hasn't gone well for anyone since.

So what is it that God wants to receive? The answer is obviously bigger than just music, but with regard to the music, He's told us that He wants to hear us singing His psalms. It is only fitting that we adorn these psalms with music that fits the content God wrote. There will be times when this rubs us the wrong way. Some of us dislike sad music, but we will be singing Psalm 51, and when we do, it won't be set to the tune of "Gilligan's Island." It's an individual lament psalm, written on an occasion when the author, seeing his life as God saw it, had every reason to lament. It will be set to sad music, as it should. Others with a more melancholy disposition might enjoy the soulful, contemplative music, but struggle with the loud, happy-clappy stuff. Well, we're going to sing Psalm 150, and can you imagine singing "Praise Him with loud cymbals" quietly and mournfully? I can't. Most of us *hate* repetitious music, but we will sing Psalm 136, in which *every other line* is exactly the same: "For His mercy endures forever." That's 26 times in a single song.

We may not like them now, but these are God's songs, and it is our job to learn to love them, and to trust that if we have a problem with them, the problem is with us, and not with the psalms. Insofar as the music reflects the words God wrote, we should make our peace with the music too. The music should *intensify* the content, not "soften the blow" by being unfaithful to the words or structure of the psalm.

We'll all have ample opportunity to be annoyed as we do this. Some of the stresses will come from immaturity: a poor match between music and words, a badly composed tune, or a tune that's just too difficult for us to grow into at our present level of skill or aesthetic maturity. These we can eliminate by finding different music. Other stresses, though, will come from the fact that the psalms themselves are stretching us, and they won't fit easily into our tastes or our comfort zones. These are growing pains. We should not just endure them; we should welcome them, knowing that in the end they yield the ripe fruit of maturity.

Hill #5: "Our" Culture Is Not A Given

Lastly, I want to address a matter of culture and aesthetics. The psalms often feel alien to us, and so there is a temptation to think of the psalms as lyrics from someone else's culture, to think that they "just don't fit" with our music. We then set forward "our" music as an acceptable substitute, as the way that Christians sing *today*, and then slot in whatever words will fit.

⁴ Hebrews 13:15

The initial observation is half-true: the average psalm really can't be crammed into a 3 ½ minute pop song. It is not true, however, that the psalms belong to a different culture, nor is it true that 3 ½ minute pop songs are “our” music in the way we mean it. The psalms belong to the culture of God's people—that's us. God has commanded that His people be psalm-singers, both in their hearts, privately, and publically for all to hear in daily life and in corporate worship. If this is contrary to “our” culture, then so much the worse for “our” culture.

I keep putting “our” in scare quotes because what we mean by it is 21st-century American culture, and that is not truly our primary culture. We are citizens of a heavenly city, whose builder and maker is God. That is our first cultural allegiance, and the culture of that city—*our* city—is a psalm-singing culture. When we start talking about 21st-century American music as “our” music, as opposed to the psalms, which are supposedly not, then we are thinking of 21st-century America as our primary culture. This is getting our allegiances backwards, and it has the effect of cutting us off from our kinship with God's people in other times and places—*our* people, who are citizens of the same city, and who can help us learn what it means to be a citizen there.

The authority is in the Bible, of course, but *our* people have 20 centuries of practice at application, and in that time we've learned quite a lot. Therefore, when we find that our Christian faith clashes with something in 21st-century American culture, we ought to have no hesitation about looking to our people in other times and places to see what they've done. Nor should we hesitate to bend or break American culture to fit Christianity—never the other way around.

Of course this does not mean that all our music must be from before 1700, or sound like it. We can, and should, bring modern music into service to the Psalms wherever it fits. As we do this, though, we must understand that we are part of a long line of God's saints, giants who did in their day what we are seeking to do in ours. We should not try to start *de novo*, but to stand on their shoulders, that we may see farther still.

Conclusion

I don't have some secret Seven Year Plan for reforming our worship. Truthfully, I don't really know where all this is going to end up. But I'm confident that the Word of God will not steer us wrong, and that if we will believe His Word and obey, seeking understanding as He is pleased to give it, then we will grow. Into what, I don't know, but I look forward to all of us finding out together.