

Music :: What Makes God Sing?

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We know from the Bible that Jesus turned to song at a time when great courage was needed (Mark 14:26), but today the Church is in danger of both overvaluing and undervaluing the role of music in the Christian life. In this issue we dive head first into the mosh-pit and discover the truth about the oh-so-emotional medium of music.

[The father of music]

Music is first mentioned in the Bible as the invention of Jubal, 'the father of all who play the harp and flute' (Gen 4:21). Jubal was a descendant of Cain (the first murderer). Jubal's brother was the father of those who lived in tents and raised livestock. It's important to note that not much more is ever mentioned of either brother. We are never told if either brother ever honoured God. Music at its origin is simply no more sacred than grazing cattle. Indeed, to say that music had a sacred origin is simply fanciful. In short, music is a gift from God, and as with all things created by God, has an inherent value. However, just like money, morphine or marmalade, music can be (and has been) perverted by evil human motives and use.

[The use of music and song]

With this in mind, it comes as no surprise that music and song are used in a variety of ways throughout the bible: for Holy, secular and evil purposes.

a) Holy use.

Songs of joy flow from Israel's lips after the Lord saves the Israelites from the pursuing Egyptians (Exodus 15). Their song lyrics dwell on the character of God as He has revealed Himself through his mighty acts. Israel is later encouraged to dwell on the words of the 'singers at the watering places' because they recite the righteous acts of the Lord (Judges 5). Songs of mourning and lament flow from David after the death of his beloved Jonathan (2 Samuel 1:17-27). David's Levitical choir used music and song in the temple throughout the year (1 Chronicles 15:16-24). Yet, although the words of the Psalms have been handed down to us, we have next to no idea about the song's musical nature and use. Even the musical words 'gittith' (Ps 8) and 'Selah' leave us tantalisingly uninformed.

b) Secular use.

On the secular front, a proper farewell party in the ancient world involved 'joy and singing to the tambourine and harp' (Genesis 21:27). In the New Testament, music was commonplace in the accompaniment of mourning relatives, in which professional musicians were paid to play to the mourning crowds (Matthew 9:23).

c) Evil use.

The 'wicked' sang to the harp and 'made merry to the sound of the flute' while they rejected God in Job's day (Job 21:7-14). The prostitute finds that songs increase her seductiveness and allure (Isaiah 23:16). Yet the Lord's anger is most keenly aroused when 'godly' songs are sung by a half-hearted people. The Lord comes to despise Israel's religious feasts, and refuses to listen to the 'noise' of their song and the music of their harps because they are unwilling to repent of their sin. The Lord calls:

'Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps but let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never failing stream'

Amos 5:23-24

The Lord is not happy with empty lip service, no matter how fine-tuned and slickly produced it is. The Lord does not rejoice in great songs, or the machinations of a fantastic 'worship pastor'. No, Amos 5:23-24 is a clear warning to those who think that their great music can somehow pacify our Holy God despite their guilt and unrepentance before Him. The Lord is not opposed to good music but He will not tolerate the worship of music - no matter how good it is.

[So what makes God sing?]

After all, what is it that makes the Lord 'sing'? The Lord does not burst into song because Leonard Cohen (or King David for that matter - see dust stirring for details) found a secret perfect chord that pleases the Lord. He is not like us. He doesn't rejoice (as we do) simply because of a delightfully composed tune. Rather, what makes the Lord 'sing', is a repentant people who are completely dependent upon Him for salvation: it is to the people He has saved, to those who have had their punishment removed that the Lord will delight and 'rejoice over with singing' (Zephaniah 3:17, cf. v15). The truly amazing thing isn't that we rejoice in God with singing, but that the God of the universe should rejoice over us (his saved people) with singing. Salvation belongs to our God, and it is His song that we will hear sung to us because He rejoices at saving us. And because of our amazing salvation, we now have more reason to sing than any people on earth!

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