

Introduction

Music is powerful. I have zero musical ability. I cannot carry a tune. I can't play a tune. I can't dance or do anything that's all that connected to music. But I do love music.

I love a wide variety of styles. On Tuesday evening I was outside with my noise-canceling headphones cutting the grass and pulling some weeds and watering what's left of my lawn. I was listening to an album by a Eastern Orthodox priest named Father Seraphim. There were times I stopped the mower so I could take it in. This music *moves me*.

There's lots of music that moves me. "Carmina Burana" is one of my favorite works.

I also love really good worship music—but probably not the stuff you hear on the radio. Here's a band singing the Nicene Creed. This music moves me. I don't have the knowledge to explain why, but certain music seems to have a point. I don't mean the lyrics, though that's nice. I mean the music seems to be driving the listener somewhere. I love music that does this.

The music that moves me, however, is almost certainly not the music that moves you. Music is intensely personal. We all have our favorite styles, the genres that we love. Whether it's country or R&B or classic rock or classical or good, crunchy dubstep or old school jazz or thrash metal or EDM or rap or whatever passes for pop music today, we all have our favorite styles.

It is no surprise, then, that music can create division in a church. Whether it's folk leaving a church over the music style or it's simmering anger and bitterness over one's preferences not being implemented, music can be a danger to the unity of the Spirit.

I want to say up front here that New City wishes to embrace diversity in worship. We have tried numerous times to expand our repertoire over the years. As I've explained from the beginning of New City, however, if five jazz musicians volunteer to lead worship, it doesn't matter what style you ask them to play: it's gonna swing a little. At the end of the day what we strive for is music that is culturally accessible. We are not trying to compete with anyone's Spotify list. We're not trying to be edgy and cool with our music. Our aim is to engage in worship together and sing songs that lift our spirits toward God and his glory. If we do that in a way that causes your toe to tap then great! But if we do not, then by all means, let us worship together nevertheless.

I also want to say up front that the musical style that has developed here at New City was not my choice—but I don't mean that I wouldn't choose it. Before we even launched as a church I told our very first worship leader I would never tell him what I think our musical style should be, for I would never want to have that sort of influence over it. In other words, our Sunday morning worship music isn't *J-T's* Spotify list.

This means there are songs we sing that I do not particularly like. I hope you would never be able to pick them out, though, for whether I like a song or not, if that song tells me about who the Lord is or what he has done, that song is worth singing with my church. In our second year as a church I remember singing a brand new song and thinking to myself,

“This song is terrible. It’s so overly emotional! Yikes!” Then I noticed everyone was singing that song. It must have been popular on the radio at the time because our people knew the song and were *singing*. I understood then and there that worship music is not about me and what I like, but about the Lord. If a song facilitates our worship together, then that song is worth singing, *even if J-T doesn’t like it*.

We’re going on another excursus this morning. We’re going to look at Paul’s words about worship music and see what God has in store for us here at New City.

Eph 5:18 And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, ¹⁹ addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart,
Ephesians 5:18–19

Be Filled By the Spirit

In verse 18 Paul issues a direct command: do not get drunk with wine. It’s a straightforward imperative command that is negative: this is a thing you must not do. It’s not simply about controlling behavior, however. *Why* does Paul issue this command? Once again the context is very helpful.

He tells them in chapter 4 verse 17 they must no longer walk as Gentiles walk. Though they were Gentiles, in Christ they have a new identity. They have been transformed. They are a new creation. The old has gone and the new has come. This transformation is so thorough Paul can say they have been “created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness”. If you are in Christ you are fundamentally a new person with a new identity in him.

It is because of this fundamental change, or as Paul put it in chapter 4, “having put away falsehood”—our old identity before Christ, we must live in a manner that matches who we are in Christ. This is the reason for rejecting corrupting talk, for avoiding sexual immorality and impurity and crude joking. These are “out of place” in the life of one whose identity is in Christ.

He tells them in chapter 5 they are light. At one time they were darkness—not merely *in* darkness, but were themselves *darkness*. In Christ they are light in the Lord, therefore they must walk as children of light.

For this reason they must not get drunk with wine. It makes no sense for children of light to allow themselves to come under the controlling influence of alcohol. Hear me: Paul is not prohibiting the consumption of alcohol here. *Drunkenness* is prohibited. There is wisdom for some—many, perhaps—to avoid alcohol altogether on account of addictions. Don’t play with fire! Paul’s concern is for children of light to walk as children of light and drunkenness is darkness. Don’t walk in darkness.

The alternative he offers is significant. Instead of being drunk with wine (or any other substance), he says to be filled with the Spirit. We might say be filled *by* the Spirit. The idea is the Spirit controls and leads and guides and directs. How can you know if you’re being filled by the Holy Spirit? Is your life increasing in love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, and self-control? This is the fruit of the Spirit.

In chapter 1 he told them they have been sealed with the Spirit for the Spirit is the guarantee of their inheritance in Christ. They have been called to unity in the Spirit. They are to live out this reality. When he says to not get drunk with wine, he means drunkenness in particular, but this also stands in for any behavior that does not reveal the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit in their lives. Drunkenness is one more example of how the Gentiles walk and therefore how the believers in Ephesus must no longer walk.

The alternative to all of it, to sexual immorality and impurity and covetousness and drunkenness, is being filled with the Spirit. African scholar Yusufu Turaki put it this way:

Drunkenness does not make for wisdom and discernment. It also often leads to a careless and aimless life dominated by wild living, squandering of money and resources, and an excessive appetite for pleasures. Thus believers should avoid it. Instead of being under the influence of alcohol, believers are to be under the influence of the Holy Spirit.

Yusufu Turaki, Africa Bible Commentary

The work of God in Christ through his Spirit is that of transformation. Drunkenness, along with all the other behaviors and characteristics that are not appropriate for followers of Christ, does not reflect this transformation. It doesn't stem from this transformation. It is, therefore, inappropriate behavior for one who is transformed. Drunkenness belongs to their former identity, to who they were before Christ. Being filled with the Spirit belongs to their new identity, to who they are in Christ. They must put off the old self and put on the new, and the new is led and controlled by the Holy Spirit.

Sing

In verse 19 Paul seems to be changing topics. He says they are to be “addressing one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs”. What does this have to do with getting drunk? He tells them to not get drunk but to be filled with the Spirit. Then in the same sentence he speaks of addressing one another through singing and worship. What is the connection?

Just as drunkenness leads a person to say and do things he or she might otherwise not do, so being filled with the Spirit leads a person to say and do things he or she might otherwise not do, only in the case of being filled with the Spirit, the things the Spirit leads a person to do is all that is good and right and true. What is good and right and true? Worshiping God in Trinity!

Hear what Paul is saying. One very obvious line of evidence one is filled with the Spirit is singing and making melody to the Lord. In this case Paul is speaking of the gathered assembly. When the church in Ephesus assembles in the name of the Lord and the Lord is present among them, the outcome of the Spirit's presence and activity will be singing.

Notice the communal nature of this singing: they address *one another*. They participate together. These aren't solos. He's not talking about singing in the shower. He means when they gather together to worship the Lord Jesus, they participate together in that worship. As I've said before, what happens here on a Sunday morning is not between you and Jesus and him and Jesus and her and Jesus, but between us and Jesus *in community*.

Paul specifies three types of worship music. He says they address one another in *psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs*. We need to recognize the culture shock that this instruction by Paul would have been. Psalms and hymns were from opposite ends of the cultural spectrum. The psalms are, of course, from the book of Psalms. These are mostly Ancient Near Eastern songs written by Ancient Near Eastern Israelites including David and Asaph and the sons of Korah. Along with lyrics that reflect an Ancient Near Eastern mindset, particularly that of an Israelite, the music would have been Ancient Near Eastern. Surely some of them would have been updated over the years, much as hymns today are updated with new melodies and choruses, but the style would have been very strange to a Gentile Christian's ear.

Steven Baugh, whose PhD work was in the numerous Ephesian inscriptions, making him a leading expert on ancient Ephesus, says the word "psalm" never occurs in the Ephesian inscriptions. This indicates the typical Ephesian did not use or encounter the word all that much. On a surface level the word psalm means "plucked" in Greek, indicating the accompanying instruments were usually stringed instruments. Still, this was not a style known to the general Ephesian people. When they heard psalms being sung for the first time, the style would have been very strange to them.

The reaction to hymns may have been stronger. Hymns were extremely popular in first century Ephesus. There were hymn-writing guilds. Temples employed people to write hymns. Steven Baugh points out that in Greek culture, public celebrations of all kinds included the singing of hymns, both new and old, similar to how we start sporting events with the national anthem. In most public events hymns would have been sung by a professional choir.

Hymns were very popular. There were, of course, the classic hymns that everyone knew and loved and the hymn writers were always writing, trying to come up with new classics. Think "Amazing Grace" and "In Christ Alone". Both are now classics, though one is a newer classic, having been written in 2001.

The reason for the reaction is hymns represented a specific style. Greek and Roman people enjoyed hymns to their various deities. Whereas the psalms cover the full gamut of human emotion, whether lament or jubilant celebration or even calling down judgment on the enemies of God, hymns focused on a god's attributes, often praising the god for what he has done or simply for a characteristic believed to be true of him. They often called upon the god to act in a particular way. In comparison, Psalms would have sounded downright sappy and overly emotional.

Imagine being a Christian Jew, one who grew up in or around Jerusalem. You're aware of the worship of foreign gods, for the Romans brought their gods with them when they conquered Judea. Even the Antonia Fortress—part of the temple mount in Jerusalem!—had a small shrine to the Roman god Jupiter. You would have been familiar with Greek and Roman hymns—songs praising and worshiping false gods.

Now imagine you travel outside the land of your birth for the first time. Maybe an uncle is an elder in the church in Ephesus and you're going to visit him for the summer. This is your first time being in a city that was majority pagan. You knew to expect this, though, so you were prepared for it. Then Sunday comes and you go with your uncle to where the Ephesian church meets. Someone prays and then you sing a psalm together but you notice most people are not really into it. It feels off. Awkward. Like they don't really know the music. You're thinking, "What? This is my favorite psalm!" Still, they're very awkward with it, like they're trying to clap on one and three but the song is syncopated.

When the song is finished the worship leader says, “Now let’s sing our favorite hymn”, and the entire assembly joyfully and loudly sings the hymn. They know *this* song! Your instinctive reaction might have been something like, “This is *pagan*! Why are we singing pagan music!?” You’re hearing strange instruments and melodies you’re not familiar with. Everything is so very foreign to you. “Uncle,” you say, “why are we singing this pagan song!?” “We’re singing to Christ”, he says.

Diversity in Worship

This is not unlike the debate our culture had many years ago. Many of you are too young to remember, or perhaps you weren’t even alive during it. *hashtag-blessed-and-highly-favored* When churches began to introduce guitars and drums to their worship music, many revolted. *How dare we bring secular music into the church*, they demanded. When churches began doing this they were, simply and *finally*, obeying Paul’s instruction!

Paul is saying to the Ephesian church they need both ends of the spectrum! He’s saying, “Don’t sing just psalms! Don’t sing just hymns! Sing, and embrace a wide diversity of styles!” The third category, spiritual songs, includes everything else. It is significant that Paul instructs them to worship through singing but specifies neither a style nor a particular cultural expression. Rather, he opens up the experience of worship to a diversity of styles. African scholar Yusufu Turaki clarifies an important point concerning this:

The instruction *to make music* implies that a variety of musical instruments and rhythms can be used. God is not concerned with the type of music but with its content, which is worship, thanksgiving and praise to God and Jesus Christ. The ultimate goal of the Spirit is to bring honour to God and Jesus Christ, and that is why *always giving thanks* is one of the signs that we are filled with the Holy Spirit (5:20).

Yusufu Turaki, Africa Bible Commentary

Whether you sing psalms or you sing hymns you must sing so as to worship the Lord. The aim of the songs, whether psalms or hymns or some other style, ought to be worship. Clinton Arnold explains:

Paul probably used the combination of the three terms to commend a variety of forms and musical styles in his multicultural churches, which were comprised of Jews and Greeks. He affirms Jewish forms (psalms) as well as Greek forms (hymns) in the worship of these communities.

The one common denominator of all is that they should be “spiritual” (*πνευματικαῖς*). The adjective should be understood as qualifying all three nouns. ... They are “spiritual” in that the Holy Spirit is viewed as actively inspiring the composers as they write their songs of praise to the risen Christ and what he has accomplished by his work on the cross.

Clinton Arnold, ZECNT, pp. 353–354

I’m reminded of the words of an older saint back in our early days. I’ve shared this before. She was only able to be part of New City for a couple years but it was enough for

her to notice something she thought was extraordinary. She said to me one Sunday, “Have you ever noticed all our songs are about Jesus?”

The instruments we use are not that important. The melodies we sing are not that important. The style of music is not that important. What is important is *that* we sing, but notice what he says in verse 19: “singing and making melody to the Lord in your heart”. What matters more than the externals of worship music is the heart of worship.

The *result* of being filled with the Spirit is a heart that worships the Lord through singing. It isn’t a heart that goes through the mechanics of singing. It isn’t a heart that loves the drum beat or the bass line or the specific melody of a particular song. The result of being filled with the Spirit is a heart that participates with the church in singing *to the Lord*. John Chrysostom, writing about J-T in the fourth century, makes this very point.

“Making melody to the Lord” means paying attention while you are singing. It means not letting your mind drift. Those who in singing do not offer this deep attention to God are merely mouthing psalms, uttering words, while their hearts are preoccupied elsewhere.

John Chrysostom, Homily on Ephesians 19.5.19–21

Singing—actively singing—is an act of worship that demonstrates we are filled by the Spirit. The opposite, then, must also be true: not singing is a demonstration we are not filled with the Spirit. The Lord Jesus is worthy of worship. The reason we pray for our church to grow is not so that we’re the biggest church around. It is not so that we’re the coolest church around. It is not so that our budget grows sufficiently that we might get air conditioning up in here. We pray for our church to grow *because Jesus is worthy of more worshippers*.

The Importance of Worship

We need to recognize how this instruction to be filled with the Spirit resulting in corporate worship through singing comes out of the gospel. It is the direct and immediate impact of the gospel in the lives of God’s people. The promise of the new covenant is God will be with us. After he ascended into heaven the Lord Jesus sent us his Spirit. The Holy Spirit mediates the presence of Jesus among us. What is one significant thing the Spirit leads his people to do? He leads them to sing and make melody to the Lord with their heart!

We see a similar point in Paul’s letter to the Romans. There he offers an even more in depth explanation of the gospel of Jesus, spanning eleven chapters, and then applies the gospel to the situation in Rome. They were very divided along race and ethnicity. After the Jews had been kicked out of Rome, many of the church leaders were gone so Gentile believers rose up to fill the void. When the Jews returned they did not reintegrate the churches but chose to have local assemblies divided by cultural heritage. Just think of all the Jew / Gentile stuff he writes about in that letter. Paul speaks to this directly in chapter 15:

Rom 15:5 May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus,⁶ that together

you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.
7 Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.

Romans 15:5–7

When Paul gets to applying the gospel to the situation in Rome, what does he emphasize? He stresses their need to worship God together *with one voice*. This cannot happen if on one street corner is First Jewish Church and on the other corner is First Greek Church and right next to it is First Arab Church and down the block is Second Jewish Church, each with their own preferred style of worship. The solution is simple: we must embrace diversity in worship. We must embrace diverse styles of worship, from psalms to hymns to spiritual songs, songs that worship our Lord, even if doing so doesn't give us goose bumps.

In an article on the worship music contained in the book of Revelation, Robert Smith quotes Paul Barnett who explains what worship is:

Worship is not to be thought of primarily, in either aesthetic or emotional terms, though aesthetics and the emotions may be involved. *Worship is the expression of agreement by the people of God about the truth of God.* Worship is based on the evangelical declaration about who God is, and what God does.

Paul W. Barnett, quoted by Robert S. Smith, *Themelios* 43.2 (2018), 193–204

Notice the focus of worship: who God is and what God does. Through our songs we proclaim who God is and what God does together. When we express our agreement about the truth of who God is and what he has done, we are worshiping together. This is why our prayer time is worship. This is why our Scripture reading is worship. This is why our *offering* is worship. When we give we are declaring *together* God is good and kind and God is the generous giver of all good things. *This is worship.*

For this reason Paul instructs them to address one another—in agreement together about God—by singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. What is the primary command that chapters 4–6 is working out in practical ways? After laying out the gospel to them for three chapters, he begins chapter 4 this way:

Eph 4:1 I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ² with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³ eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Ephesians 4:1–3

Because the gospel is true, because God in Christ through his Spirit is transforming the Ephesians, they must walk in a manner worthy of that calling, which means they must bear with one another in love, that they might maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. The rest of the letter is working out what it looks like to walk in a manner worthy of the gospel, which is to say, a manner that maintains the unity the Holy Spirit has created among his diverse peoples.

This includes embracing diverse styles of music. Listen: the church in Ephesus, being made up of primarily Gentiles, was never going to be great at the psalms. It wasn't their

music. The styles and rhythms and such were always going to be a bit odd to them. Maybe one day, if enough Jewish believers joined them who could sing and play instruments they could—and they should—get better at them. In the same way the church in Jerusalem, being thoroughly Jewish in culture, was never going to do the hymns all that well. It wasn't their music. In fact, they had hang-ups for that style of music. As the church grew and diversified, however, they too must embrace psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.

The Lord Jesus said he would build his church. He promises that his church will include men and women from every tribe and language and people and nation. In Revelation 21 John's vision of the future is one in which the nations will bring their glory and honor into the new Jerusalem. This treasure isn't gold and silver, but the diverse cultures of the diverse peoples of God. This includes psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.

Application

When the Lord returns and re-creates the heavens and the earth and his people dwell with him forever, our worship music will be incredibly diverse as the nations bring their glory and honor to Jesus. We will spend all of eternity worshipping the Lord Jesus together—worshipping in ways that are truly strange to our ears. We will worship with Jubal, who in Genesis 4 was said to be “the father of all those who play the lyre and pipe”. He seems to have been instrumental in the early development of music. What might that music have sounded like? *We'll find out.* We'll sing with Abraham and Sarah, with King David and his the sons of Korah, with Asian and South American and African believers, all of whom bring their different instruments and rhythms and melodies and lyrical styles to the Lord Jesus. We will do what Psalm 96 instructs us to do: we will sing to the Lord a new song. And some old ones.

Because we are singing together in agreement about who God is and what he has done, the style of music pales in comparison. Should we strive for culturally accessible music? Yes, of course! I said that at the beginning of my sermon. Does this mean we will nail it perfectly? No, of course not! When Paul tells us to walk in a manner worthy of our call he has to urge us to bear with one another in love. This means we will walk together *imperfectly*.

When we sing together in one voice we remind one another of who we are in Christ, for we sing of who he is and what he has done. My wife and I have sung with thousands of others at conferences over the years. Last Friday we sang with about as many in the pews as were up front leading us. Yes, singing with thousands was beautiful, but it wasn't more beautiful than singing with my local church last Friday.

The reason the worship was beautiful wasn't because the musicians played with such skill—though they did. The reason the worship was beautiful wasn't because the singers sang with such skill—though they did. The reason the worship was beautiful wasn't because of the a/c here in the auditorium—though it about 90°F. The reason the worship was beautiful is because the one to whom we sang is beautiful.

We want to embrace greater diversity in worship. We want to more fully embrace a variety of styles. We want to embrace psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. We can only be as diverse as our musicians and singers allow. The one thing that will always be true of our music is this: we will praise and glorify our Lord Jesus by declaring together who he is and what he has done.