

**THE CHRISTIAN AND ROCK MUSIC  
A STUDY OF BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES OF MUSIC**

**This book is authored by seven scholars  
and consists of 14 chapters**

**Chapter 7  
BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES  
OF MUSIC**

**by  
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The story is told of a man who, during an election campaign, had a bumper sticker which read, “My mind is already made up. Please do not confuse me with the facts.” This story reminds us of the ongoing debate over the use of “Christian” rock music for worship or evangelism. Many Christians have strong opinions in favor of or against the use of such music.

As Christians we cannot afford to close our minds to the search for biblical truths, because we are called to grow in “grace and knowledge” (2 Pet 3:18). Sometimes we think we know all that the Bible teaches on a certain doctrine, but we begin investigating it, we soon discover how little we know.

This has been my experience. The many months I have spent examining the biblical references to music, singing, and musical instruments, have made me aware of the fact that the Bible has far more to say about music, especially church music, than I had ever imagined. It is a privilege to share this learning experience with all those who are eager to understand more fully the biblical principles of music.

**Objectives of This Chapter.** The overall objective of this chapter is to distill from the Bible some basic principles regarding appropriate music for the church service and private use. The task is not easy because the Bible is not set up as a doctrinal manual with a section devoted exclusively to music. Instead, the Bible is a source

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book with over 500 references scattered throughout about music, musicians, singing, and musical instruments. The challenge is not where to find these references, but how to draw from them principles applicable to us today.

No attempt is made to trace the history of music in the Bible, as several scholarly studies already address this subject. Our goal is to look at music in the Bible theologically rather than historically. What we seek to understand is the nature and function of music in the social and religious lives of God's people. More specifically, we want to ascertain what distinction, if any, the Bible makes between sacred and secular music. Was rhythmic music associated with dancing and entertainment ever used in the Temple, the synagogue, or the early church?

This chapter divides into three parts. The first part examines the importance of music in the Bible, especially singing. Three major questions are addressed: (1) When, where, how, and why should we sing? (2) What does it mean to "make a joyful noise unto the Lord"? (3) What is the "New Song" that believers are to sing?

The second part of this chapter focuses on the ministry of music in the Bible. The investigation begins with the music ministry in the Temple and then continues with that of the synagogue and finally the New Testament church. The results of this investigation are significant because they show that, contrary to prevailing assumptions, the Bible makes a clear distinction between sacred and secular music. Percussion instruments, rhythmic music with a beat, and dancing were never part of the music ministry of the Temple, the synagogue, or the early church.

The third part of this chapter examines what the Bible teaches about dancing. The question we address is whether or not the Bible sanctions dance as a positive component of church worship. This is an important question because supporters of pop music appeal to some biblical references to dance to justify their use of rhythmic dance music in the church. By way of conclusion, a brief summary will be given of the biblical principles that have emerged in the course of this study.

### **Part 1**

## **THE IMPORTANCE OF SINGING IN THE BIBLE**

The importance of music in the Bible is indicated by the fact that God's creative and redemptive activities are accompanied and celebrated by music. At creation we are told that "the morning stars sang together, and

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all the sons of God shouted for joy” (Job 38:7). At the incarnation, the heavenly choir sang: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased!” (Luke 2:14). At the final consummation of redemption, the great multitude of the redeemed will sing: “Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exalt and give him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; it was granted her to be clothed with the fine linen, bright and pure” (Rev 19:6-8).

**The Singing of Creation.** The response of the natural world to the majestic glory of God’s created works is often expressed in terms of singing. This clearly shows that singing is something which God welcomes and in which He delights. Numerous examples show God’s creation being invited to sing praises to God.

“Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad; let the sea resound, and all that is in it; let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them. Then all the trees of the forest will sing for joy; they will sing before the Lord” (Ps 96:11-12; NIV). “Let the rivers clap their hands, let the mountains sing together for joy; let them sing before the Lord” (Ps 98:8; NIV). “Praise the Lord, all his works, everywhere in his dominion” (Ps 103:22; NIV).

We read about the birds singing because God provides them with water (Ps 104:12). The heavens, the lower parts of the earth, the mountains, the forest, and every tree breaks forth into singing unto the Lord (Is 44:23). The wilderness, the cities, and the inhabitants of the rock sing and give glory to God (Is 42:1-12). Even the desert shall blossom and “rejoice with joy and singing” (Is 35:2).

All these metaphorical allusions to the animated and inanimate creation singing and shouting praises to God indicate that music is something that God ordains and desires. If these were the only references in the Bible, they would be sufficient for us to know that music, especially singing, has an important place and purpose in God’s universe.

**Human Singing.** More wonderful than all of nature singing is the invitation extended to human beings to sing. “O Come, let us sing unto the Lord; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!” (Ps 95:1). “Sing praises to the Lord, O you his saints, and give thanks to his holy name” (Ps 30:4). “Oh that men would praise the Lord for his goodness, and for his wonderful works to the children of men” (Ps

107:8; KJV). Jesus once said that if people would not praise Him, “the very stones would cry out (Luke 19:40).

The Bible specifically mentions that singing should be directed to God. Its purpose is not personal gratification, but God’s glorification. Moses said to the people: “I will sing unto the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously” (Ex 15:1). David declared: “I will extol thee, O Lord, among the nations, and sing praises to thy name” (2 Sam 22:50). Similarly, Paul exhorts the believers to sing and make melody “unto the Lord with all your heart” (Eph 5:19). God and the praising of His people are so wrapped up together that God Himself is identified as “my song”: “The Lord is my strength and *my song*” (Ex 15:2).

Music in the Bible is not only *for* God, it is also *from* God. It is God’s gift to the human family. In praising God for His deliverance, David says: “He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God” (Ps 40:3). Thus, music can be inspired by God, just as His Holy Word. A telling proof is the fact that the longest book of the Bible is Psalms—the hymn book of God’s people in Bible times. This means that sacred music is not only a human artistic expression. We may differ on the style or types of music, but no Christian can legitimately be opposed to music *per se*, because music is part of God’s gracious provision for the human family.

**Music Essential to the Total Human Well-being.** The first statement that we find in the Bible on any given subject has a foundational value. This seems to be true also in the case of music. Only a few generations from Adam and Eve, the Bible tells us that three sons were born to Lamech and his two wives, Adah and Zillah. Each son is introduced as “the founding father” of a basic profession. “Adah bore Jabal; he was the father of those who dwell in tents and have cattle. His brother’s name was Jubal; he was the father of all those who play the lyre and pipe. Zilla bore Tubal-cain; he was the forger of all instruments of bronze and iron” (Gen 4:21-22).

It is evident that these three brothers were the founding fathers of three different professions. The first was a farmer and the third a tool-maker. Both agriculture and industry are essential to human existence. Sandwiched between the two is the musical profession of the middle brother. The implication seems to be that human beings are called, not only to produce and consume food and goods, but also to enjoy aesthetic beauty, such as music.

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The American classical pianist Sam Totman sees in this verse an indication of God's provision for aesthetic human needs, besides the physical and material ones. He writes: "Here, within the compass of but a few verses, God reveals that the provision of man's material needs is not enough; in addition, man must have an outlet for his aesthetic sensitivities. Even from the beginning music was more than a mere pastime which could be viewed as something pleasant but essentially unnecessary. Simply stated, God has created in man a certain aesthetic need which can be best satisfied in music, and in his love and wisdom he has provided for this need."<sup>1</sup>

From a biblical perspective, music is not merely something potentially enjoyable. It is a gift provided by God to fully meet human needs. The very existence of music should give us reason to praise God for lovingly providing us with a gift through which we can express our gratitude to Him, while experiencing delight within ourselves.

**The Reason for Singing.** In the Bible religious music is God-centered, not self-centered. The notion of praising the Lord for entertainment or amusement is foreign to the Bible. No "Jewish" or "Christian" music concerts were performed by bands or singing artists at the Temple, synagogue, or Christian churches. Religious music was not an end to itself, but as a means to praise God by chanting His Word. An amazing recent discovery, discussed later, is that the entire Old Testament was originally intended to be chanted (sung).

Singing in the Bible is not for personal pleasure nor for reaching out to the Gentiles with tunes familiar to them. It is to praise God by chanting His Word—a method known as "cantillation." Pleasure in singing comes not from a rhythmic beat that stimulates people physically, but from the very experience of praising the Lord. "Praise the Lord, for the Lord is good; sing praise to his name, for that is pleasant" (Ps 135:3; NIV). "How good it is to sing praises to our God, how pleasant and fitting to praise him" (Ps 147:1).

Singing unto the Lord is "good" and "pleasant," because it enables believers to express to Him their joy and gratitude for the blessings of creation, deliverance, protection, and salvation. Singing is seen in the Bible as an offering of thanksgiving to the Lord for His goodness and blessings. This concept is expressed especially in Psalm 69:30-31: "I will praise God's name in song and glorify him with thanksgiving. This will please the Lord more than an ox, more than a bull with its horns and hoofs."

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The notion that *singing praises to the God is better than sacrifice* reminds us of a similar concept, namely, that obedience is better than sacrifice (1 Sam 15:22). Singing praises to God by chanting His Word is not only a pleasant experience; it is also a means of grace to the believer. Through singing, believers offer to God a worship of praise, enabling them to receive His enabling grace.

**The Manner of Singing.** To fulfill its intended function, singing must express joy, gladness, and thanksgiving. “Sing to the Lord with thanksgiving” (Ps 147:7). “I will praise thee with the harp for thy faithfulness, O my God; I will sing praises to thee with the lyre, O Holy One of Israel. My lips will shout for joy, when I sing praises to thee” (Ps 71:22-23). Note that singing is accompanied by the harp and lyre (often called psaltery—Ps 144:9; 33:2; 33:3), and not with percussion instruments. The reason, as noted in Chapter 6, is that string instruments blend with the human voice without supplanting it.

In numerous places the Bible indicates that our singing should be emotional with joy and gladness. We are told that the Levites “sang praises with gladness, and they bowed down and worshipped” (2 Chron 29:30). Singing should be done not only with gladness but also with the whole heart. “I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart” (Ps 9:1). If we follow this biblical principle, then our singing of hymns or praise songs in church should be joyful and enthusiastic.

To sing enthusiastically, it is necessary for the grace of God to be applied to the believer’s heart (Col 3:16). Without divine love and grace in the heart, singing becomes as a sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal (1 Cor 13:1). The person who has experienced the transforming power of God’s grace (Eph 4:24) can testify that the Lord has “put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God” (Ps 40:3).

The music of an unconverted, rebellious heart is to God an irritating noise. Because of their disobedience, God said to the children of Israel, “Take away from me the noise of your song” (Am 5:23). This statement is relevant in a day of loud amplification of pop music. What pleases God is not the volume of the music, but the condition of the heart.

**“Make a Joyful Noise unto the Lord.”** The reference to the volume of the music reminds us of the admonition to “make a joyful noise unto the Lord”—a phrase that occurs seven times in the KJV version of the

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Old Testament (Ps 66:1; 81:1; 95:1-2; 98:4, 6; 100:1). These verses are often used to defend the use of loud rock music in the church.

I have preached in churches where the music of the band was amplified at such high decibels that my eardrums were in pain for several days afterwards. This is the price I sometimes have to pay for preaching the Word of God in those churches that have introduced music bands with high-power amplification systems. Sometimes their huge speakers are placed right on the platform close to the ears of the preacher.

The defense for the use of deafening sound in the church service is that God does not really care about how we sound, as long as we make a joyful noise unto Him. Since rock bands with their electronic equipment produce a powerful, thundering loud noise, it is alleged that God is made very happy by such “joyful noise.”

Before examining those Bible texts where the phrases “joyful noise” or “loud noise” appear in some mistaken translations, it is important to remember that in Bible times there was no electronic amplification. What was loud in Bible times, would be very normal today. The volume of music produced by the human voice or musical instruments *without amplification* does not increase in proportion of the number of participants.

Ten trumpets do not make ten times the noise or volume of one trumpet. In his book on the *Psychology of Music*, Carl Seashore devotes an entire chapter to the subject of volume. He writes: “The addition of one or more tones of the same intensity tends to increase the total intensity in the volume, but only to a slight degree. For example, if we have a piano tone of 50 decibels and we add to that another tone of the same intensity, the combined effect will be about 53 decibels. If we add a third tone, the total intensity is likely to be 55 decibels. Thus the addition to the total intensity decreases with the number of units combined; and in every case the increase is small in comparison with the original intensity of one element.”<sup>2</sup>

What this means is that the singers that David appointed “to offer praises to the Lord with the instruments” (1 Chron 23:5) could produce at most a sound volume of about 70 or 80 decibels, because they had no amplification possibilities. The usual choir was rather small, consisting of a minimum of 12 adult male singers, accompanied by few string instruments. The level of volume depended on the distance between the singers and the congregation. By contrast, today a four-man rock group with the

right amplification system can output a sound power in the 130-140 decibel level, which can upstage a jumbo jet at takeoff.

The “loud noise” in Bible times was not loud enough to harm people physically. Today the possibility of being hurt by excessive volume is a constant possibility. “Most ear doctors say that we should not listen to anything above the 90 decibels on the sound scale. Many rock music groups, both secular and Christian, play at 120-125 decibel level! (Keep in mind that the SST Concord Supersonic jet hits just over the 130 decibels when leaving Washington’s Dulles Airport.) ‘Your bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit’ (1 Cor 6:19). Certainly that text is applicable to this point. We are to be good stewards of our eardrums, too.”<sup>3</sup>

**Does Loud Noise Praise God?** Do those Bible texts that speak about making “a joyful noise” or “a loud noise” unto the Lord teach us that God is pleased with the excessive amplification of the human voice or musical instruments during the worship service? Hardly so. This conclusion is largely drawn from a mistranslation of the original Hebrew terms commonly translated as “noise.” In his book, *The Rise of Music in the Ancient World*, Curt Sachs answers this question: “How did ancient Jews sing? Did they actually cry at the top of their voices? Some students have tried to make us believe that such was the case, and they particularly refer to several psalms that allegedly bear witness of singing in fortissimo. But I suspect them of drawing from translations rather than from the original.”<sup>4</sup>

The phrase “make a joyful noise” is a mistranslation of the Hebrew *ruwa*. The term does not mean to make an indiscriminate loud noise, but to shout for joy. The God of biblical revelation does not delight in loud noise per se, but in joyful melodies. A good example is found in Job 38:7 where the same word *ruwa* is used to describe the sons of God who “shouted for joy” at creation. The singing of the heavenly beings at creation can hardly be characterized as “loud noise,” because “noise” presupposes unintelligible sound.

The mistranslation of *ruwa* as “noise” has been caught by the translators of the New International Version (NIV), where the term is consistently translated as “shout for joy” rather than “make a joyful noise.” For example, in the KJV Psalm 98:4 reads: “Make a joyful noise unto the Lord, all the earth: make a loud noise, and rejoice, and sing praise.” Note the more rational translation found in the NIV: “Shout for joy to the Lord,



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all the earth, burst into jubilant song with music” (Ps 98:4). There is a world of difference between “making a loud noise unto the Lord,” and “shouting for joy” or “bursting into jubilant song.” Singing jubilantly with the full volume of the human voice is not noise making, but an enthusiastic expression of praise.

Another self-evident example of mistranslation is found in Psalm 33:3 which in the KJV reads: “Sing unto him a new song; play skilfully with a loud noise.” The latter phrase is contradictory, because music skillfully played can hardly be described as “loud noise.” One wonders why the translators of the KJV did not see the contradiction. The NIV correctly renders the verse: “Sing to him a new song; play skillfully, and shout for joy” (Ps 33:3).

Two Old Testament references indicate that sometimes music can degenerate into noise making. The first reference is found in Amos 5:23 where God rebukes the unfaithful Israelites: “Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen.” A similar warning is found in Ezekiel’s prophecy against Tyre: “And I will cause the noise of thy songs to cease; and the sound of thy harps shall no more be heard” (Ezek 26:13).

In both texts the word “noise” correctly translates the Hebrew *hamown*, which occurs eighty times in the Old Testament and is commonly translated as “noise” or “tumult.” The NIV correctly uses the word “noisy”: “I will put an end to your noisy songs, and the music of your harps will be heard no more.” God views such music as “noise” because it is produced by a rebellious people.

In one instance in the New Testament, the word “noise” is used in conjunction with music produced by professional mourners. We read in Matthew 9:23-24: “And when Jesus came into the ruler’s house, and saw the minstrels and the people making a noise, He said to them, ‘Give place; for the maid is not dead, but sleepeth.’ And they laughed him to scorn.” In this case the music and the wailing are correctly characterized as “noise,” because they consisted of incoherent sounds.

On this occasion the Greek verb *thorubeo* refers to the musical wailing and noise making by minstrels and the crowd. The fact that Christ characterizes such music as “noise” suggests that the Lord does not approve of loud musical noise in a worship service. “It was a semitic custom to hire professional mourners to wail, and sing and beat percussion instruments and play mournfully over the dead. . . . Although this verse

definitively connects noise making with music in the New Testament, it does not implicate that in the New Testament dispensation we should make noise unto God with our religious music.”<sup>5</sup>

The review of relevant texts indicates that the Bible does not sanction making a joyful noise unto the Lord, or any kind of noise making for that matter. God’s people are invited to break forth in singing with power and joy. God does care about how we sing and play during the worship service. God has always demanded our best, when making an offering to him. As He required the burnt offerings to be “without blemish” (Lev 1:3), so it is reasonable to assume that He expects us to present Him with the very best musical offering. There is no biblical basis for believing that the loud, noise-making music or questionable lyrics are acceptable to God.

**The Place and Time of Singing.** The Bible instructs us to sing, not only in God’s House, but also among unbelievers, in foreign countries, in time of persecution, and among the saints. The writer of Hebrews says: “In the midst of the congregation I will praise thee” (Heb 2:12). The Psalmist admonishes to “Sing to the Lord a new song, his praise in the assembly of the faithful” (Ps 149:1). Paul affirms “I will praise thee among the Gentiles, and sing to thy name” (Rom 15:9). Isaiah exhorts to praise God in the islands (Is 42:11-12). While in jail, Paul and Silas were “praying and singing hymns to God” (Acts 16:25).

The frequent references to praising God among the heathens or Gentiles (2 Sam 22:50; Rom 15:9; Ps 108:3) suggest that singing was seen as an effective way to witness for the Lord to unbelievers. However, there are no indications in the Bible that the Jews or the early Christians borrowed secular tunes and songs to evangelize the Gentiles. On the contrary, we shall see below that the entertainment music and percussion instruments common in the pagan temples and society were conspicuously absent in the worship music of the Temple, synagogue, and early Christian gatherings. Both Jews and early Christians believed that secular music had no place in the house of worship. This point becomes clearer as we proceed with this study.

Singing, in the Bible, is not limited to the worship experience, but extends to the totality of one’s existence. Believers who live in peace with God have a constant song in their hearts, though the singing may not always be vocalized. This is why the Psalmist says: “I will praise the Lord

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all my life; I will sing praise to my God as long as I live” (Ps 146:2; 104:33). In Revelation those who come out of the great tribulation are seen standing before God’s throne, singing with a loud voice a new song which says: “Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb” (Rev 7:10). Singing praises to God is an experience that begins in this life and continues in the world to come.

**The “New Song” of the Bible.** Nine times the Bible speaks of singing “a new song.” Seven times the phrase occurs in the Old Testament (Ps 33:3; 40:3; 96:1; 98:1; 144:9; 149:1; Is 42:10) and twice in the New Testament (Rev 5:9; 14:2). During the preparation of this manuscript, several subscribers to my “Endtime Issues” newsletter have emailed messages, arguing that for them the contemporary pop religious music is the prophetic fulfillment of the biblical “new song,” because pop songs have “new” lyrics and tunes. Others believe that Christians are required to sing new songs and, consequently, musicians constantly must compose new hymns for the church.

There certainly is a continuing need for new hymns to enrich the worship experience of the church today. However, a study of the “new song” in the Bible reveals that the phrase “new song” refers not to a new composition, but to a new experience that makes it possible to praise God with new meaning. Let us look first at a couple of passages from the Old Testament which help us define the meaning of the “new song.” The Psalmist says: “He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire; he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand. He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God” (Ps 40:2-3, NIV). In this text, the “new song” is defined by the appositional phrase as “a hymn of praise to our God.” It is the experience of deliverance from the slimy pit and of restoration upon solid ground that gives David reason to sing old hymns of praise to God with new meaning.

The “new song” in the Bible is not associated with simpler lyrics or more rhythmic music, but with a unique experience of divine deliverance. For example, David says: “I will sing a new song to you, O God; on the ten-stringed lyre I will make music to you, to the One who gives victory to kings, who delivers his servant David from the deadly sword” (Ps 144:9-10). It is the experience of deliverance and victory that inspires David to sing with a new sense of gratitude the hymns of praises.

The same concept is expressed in the two references to the “new song” found in the New Testament (Rev 5:9; 14:2). The twenty-four elders and the four living creatures sing a “new song” before the Throne of God. The song praises the Lamb “for thou wast slain and by thy blood didst ransom men for God” (Rev 5:9).

On a similar note in Revelation 14, the redeemed join the elders and the living creatures in singing “a new song before the throne” (Rev 14:3). We are told that “no one could learn that song” except those “who had been redeemed from the earth” (Rev 14:3). What makes this song new, is not the new words or melody, but the unique experience of the redeemed. They are the only ones who can sing it, not because the words or melody are difficult to learn, but because of their unique experience. They came out of the great tribulation; thus they can express their praise and gratitude to God in a way no one else can do.

The Greek word translated “new” is *kainos*, which means new in quality and not in time. The latter meaning is expressed by the Greek word *neos*. The *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* clearly explains the difference between the two Greek words *neos* and *kainos*. “*Neos* is what is new in time or origin, . . . *kainos* is what is new in nature, different from the usual, impressive, better than the old.”<sup>6</sup>

Only the person who has experienced the transforming power of God’s grace can sing the new song. It is noteworthy that Paul’s famous exhortation in Colossians 3:16 to “sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” is preceded by his appeal to “put off the old nature with its practices and have put on the new nature, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator” (Col 3:9-10). The “new song” celebrates the victory over the old life and old songs; at the same time, it expresses gratitude for the new life in Christ experienced by believers.

## Part 2

### THE MINISTRY OF MUSIC IN THE BIBLE

In discussing the importance of music in the Bible, we have focused so far on the role of singing in the personal spiritual experience. Very little has been said of the ministry of music conducted first in the Temple, and then in the synagogue, and finally in the early church. A brief examination of the public ministry of music during Bible times offers significant lessons for church music today.

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### (1) The Music Ministry in the Temple

Many of those involved in contemporary music ministry appeal to the different styles of music of the Old Testament for “doing their own thing.” They believe that music produced by percussion instruments and accompanied by dancing was common in religious services. Consequently, they maintain that some styles of rock music and dancing are appropriate for church services today.

A careful study of the function of music in the Old Testament reveals otherwise. For example, in the Temple musicians belonged to the professional clergy, played only on limited and special occasions, and used only few specific musical instruments. There was no possibility to turn the Temple service into a music festival where any Jewish “rock bands” could play the entertainment music of the time. Music was rigidly controlled in the Temple. What is true of the Temple was later true also of the synagogue and the early church. This survey will help us to understand that in music, as in all areas of life, God does not give us the license to “do our own thing.”

**The Institution of the Music Ministry.** The transition from the unsettled, nomadic life in the desert to a permanent lifestyle in Palestine under the monarchy afforded the opportunity for developing a music ministry that would meet the needs of the worshipping congregation at the Temple. Prior to this time the references to music are primarily in conjunction with women singing and dancing to celebrate special events. Miriam led a group of women in singing and dancing to celebrate the overthrow of the Egyptians (Ex 15:1-21). Women played and danced for the conquering David (1 Sam 18:6-7). Jephthah’s daughter met her father with timbrels and dance upon his return from battle (Judg 11:34).

With the establishment by David of a professional music ministry of Levites, music making was restricted to men. Why women were excluded from serving as musicians in the Temple is an important question that has baffled scholars. We shall comment upon it shortly. Women did continue making music in the social life of the people.

The book of Chronicles describes with considerable detail how David organized the music ministry of the Levites. An insightful analysis of how David accomplished this organization is provided by the doctoral dissertation of John Kleinig, *The Lord’s Song: The Basis, Function and Significance of Choral Music in Chronicles*. For the purpose of our study,

we limit ourselves to a brief summary of those features that are relevant for the ministry of music today.

According to the first book of Chronicles, David organized the music ministry in three stages. First, he ordered the heads of the Levitical families to appoint an orchestra and a choir to accompany the transportation of the ark to its tent at Jerusalem (1 Chron 15:16-24).

The second stage occurred after the ark had been safely placed in its tent in his palace (2 Chron 8:11). David arranged for the regular performance of choral music at the time of the daily burnt offerings with choirs in two different places (1 Chron 16:4-6, 37-42). One choir performed under the leadership of Asaph before the ark in Jerusalem (1 Chron 16:37), and the other under the leadership of Herman and Jeduthun before the altar in Gibeon (1 Chron 16:39-42).

The third stage in David's organization of the ministry of music occurred at the end of David's reign when the king planned for the more elaborate music service that would be conducted at the temple that Solomon was to build (1 Chron 23:2 to 26:32). David established a pool of 4,000 Levites as potential performers (1 Chron 15:16; 23:5). From this group he formed a professional Levitical choir of 288 members. The Levite musicians accounted for more than ten percent of the 38,000 Levites. "Some kind of examination was probably necessary for the process of selection, since musical ability is not always inherited."<sup>8</sup>

David himself was involved together with his officials in the appointment of twenty-four leaders of the watches, each of whom had twelve musicians for a total of 288 musicians (1 Chron 25:1-7). These in turn were responsible for the rest of the selection of the musicians.

**The Ministry of the Musicians.** To ensure that there would be no confusion or conflict between the sacrificial ministry of the priests and the music ministry of the Levites, David carefully delineated the position, rank, and scope of the ministry of the musicians (1 Chron 23:25-31). The performance of the ministry of music was subordinate to the priests (1 Chron 23:28).

The nature of the ministry of the musicians is graphically described: "They shall stand every morning, thanking and praising the Lord, and likewise at evening, and whenever burnt offerings are offered to the Lord on Sabbath, new moons and feast days, according to the number required of them, continually before the Lord" (1 Chron 23:30-31).

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The context suggests that the musicians stood somewhere in front of the altar, since their music performance coincided with the presentation of the burnt offering. The purpose of their ministry was to thank and praise the Lord. They announced the Lord's presence to His assembled people (1 Chron 16:4), reassuring them of His favorable disposition toward them.

In 1 Chronicles 16:8-34 we find a remarkable hymn of praise that was sung by the Temple choir. "This song consists of portions of Psalms 105, 96, and 106, which were reworked and recombined to produce this remarkable liturgical text. The song itself begins and ends with a call to thanksgiving. A concluding petition and doxology are appended in 1 Chronicles 16:35-36. We thus have in 1 Chronicles 16:8-34 a carefully crafted composition which has been placed there to demonstrate the basic pattern of thanksgiving which David instituted for performance by the singers in Jerusalem."<sup>9</sup>

**Successful Music Ministry.** The music ministry at the Temple was successful for several reasons which are relevant for our church music today. First, the Levite musicians were mature and musically trained. We read in 1 Chronicles 15:22 that "Kenaniah the head Levite was in charge of the singing; that was his responsibility because he was skillful at it" (NIV). He became director of music because he was an accomplished musician able to instruct others. The concept of musical skill is mentioned several times in the Bible (1 Sam 16:18; 1 Chron 25:7; 2 Chron 34:12; Ps 137:5). Paul also alludes to it when he says: "I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my mind" (1 Cor 14:15, NIV).

The choir consisted of a minimum of twelve adult male singers between the ages of thirty and fifty (1 Chron 23:3-5).<sup>10</sup> Rabbinical sources report that the musical training of a Levitical singer took at least five years of intensive preparation.<sup>11</sup> The biblical principle is that music leaders must be mature with an understanding of music, especially today as we live in a highly educated society.

Second, the music ministry at the Temple was successful because its musicians were prepared spiritually. They were set aside and ordained for their ministry like the rest of the priests. Speaking to the leaders of the Levite musicians, David said: "Sanctify yourselves, you and your brethren . . . So the priests and the Levites sanctified themselves" (1 Chron 15:12, 14). The Levite musicians were given a sacred trust to continually minister before the Lord (1 Chron 16:37).

Third, the Levite musicians were full-time workers. 1 Chronicles 9:33 states: “Now these are the singers, the heads of father’s houses of Levites, dwelling in the chambers of the temple free from other service, for they were on duty day and night.” Apparently the Levites’ ministry of music entailed considerable preparation, because we read that “David left Asaph and his brethren there before the ark of the covenant of the Lord to minister continually before the ark as each day required” (1 Chron 16:37). The biblical lesson is that ministers of music must be willing to work diligently in preparing the music needed for the worship service.

Lastly, the Levite musicians were not singing artists invited to entertain the people at the Temple. They were *ministers of music*. “These are the men whom David put in charge of the service of song in the house of the Lord, after the ark rested there. They ministered with song before the tabernacle of the tent of meeting” (1 Chron 6:31-32). Through their musical service the Levites “*ministered*” to the people. In five other instances in the Old Testament, the Levites are said to *minister* to the people through their music (1 Chron 16:4, 37; 2 Chron 8:14; 23:6; 31:2).

The ministry of the Levite musicians is well defined in 1 Chronicles 16:4: “Moreover he appointed certain of the Levites as ministers before the ark of the Lord, to invoke, to thank, and to praise the Lord, the God of Israel.” The three verbs used in this text—“invoke,” “thank,” and “praise”—suggest that the music ministry was a vital part of the worship experience of God’s people.

An indication of the importance of the music ministry can be seen in the fact that the Levite musicians were paid out of the same tithes given for the support of the priesthood (Num 18:24-26; Neh 12:44-47; 13:5, 10-12). The biblical principle is that the work of a minister of music should not be “a labor of love,” but a ministry supported by the tithe income of the church. It stands to reason that if a lay person volunteers to help in the music program of the church, such service does not need to be remunerated.

Summing up, the music ministry at the Temple was conducted by experienced and mature Levites who were trained musically, prepared spiritually, supported financially, and served pastorally. As Kenneth Osbeck observes: “To minister musically in the Old Testament was a great privilege and a most responsible service. This is still true of a church music-ministry today. In a very real sense we are New Testament Levites. Therefore these principles established by God for the Levitical priesthood should be noted as valid guidelines for music leaders in a New Testament church.”<sup>12</sup>



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**The Levitical Choir and the Sacrificial Ritual.** The book of Chronicles presents the musical ministry of the Levites as part of the presentation of the daily offering at the Temple. The ritual consisted of two parts. First came the blood ritual which was designed to atone for the sins of the people through the transference of the blood of the sacrifice to the Holy Place (2 Chron 29:21-24). This service created the ritual purity necessary for God's acceptance of His people and the manifestation of His blessing upon the congregation. During this ritual no songs were sung.

Once the rite of atonement was completed, the burnt offering was presented upon the altar. This ritual signalled God's acceptance of His people and the manifestation of His presence. John Kleinig explains that "As the sacrifices were being burnt upon the altar, the trumpets, which announced the Lord's presence, called for the prostration of the congregation in His presence, and the song of the Lord was sung by the musicians [2 Chron 29:25-30]. Thus, the choral service came after the rite of atonement had been completed. It did not attempt to secure a favorable response from the Lord but presupposed such a response as something already given. The musicians proclaimed the Lord's name during the presentation of the sacrifices, so that he would come to His people and bless them, as He had promised in Exodus 20:24 and demonstrated in 2 Chronicles 7:1-3."<sup>13</sup>

The function of the music during the sacrificial ritual was not to overshadow or replace the sacrifice itself, but to enlist the involvement of the congregation at certain designated moments during the service. In other words, the Israelites did not go to the Temple to hear the Levite bands performing in sacred concert. Instead, they went to the Temple to witness and experience God's atonement for their sins. The music that accompanied the atoning sacrifice invited them to accept and celebrate God's gracious provision of salvation.

At a time when many Christians choose their churches in accordance with the musical style of worship, we need to remember that in the Bible, the music was never an end to itself. In the Temple the music served enhanced the sacrificial service by enlisting the participation of the congregation at certain specific moments. In the synagogue and the early church, music reinforced the teaching and proclamation of the Word of God. To be true to the biblical witness, our church music must support the teaching and preaching of God's Word, and not overshadow it.

**The Musical Instruments of the Temple.** David instituted not only the times, place, and words for the performance of the Levitical choir, but he also “made” the musical instruments to be used for their ministry (1 Chron 23:5; 2 Chron 7:6). This is why they are called “the instruments of David” (2 Chron 29:26-27).

To the trumpets which the Lord had ordained through Moses, David added the cymbals, lyres, and harp (1 Chron 15:16; 16:5-6). The importance of this combination as divinely ordained is indicated by the fact that this combination of instruments was respected for many centuries until the destruction of the Temple. For example, in 715 B. C., King Hezekiah “stationed the Levites in the house of the Lord with cymbals, harps, and lyres, according to commandment of David and of Gad the king’s seer and of Nathan the prophet; for the commandment was from the Lord through his prophets” (2 Chron 29:25).

The trumpets were played by the priests and their number ranged from two in the daily worship (1 Chron 16:6; Num 10:2) to seven or more on special occasions (1 Chron 15:24; Neh 12:33-35; 2 Chron 5:12). “In worship at the Temple the trumpets gave the signal for the prostration of the congregation during the presentation of the burnt offering and the performance of the choral service (2 Chron 29:27-28). . . . While the Levitical musicians faced the altar, the trumpeters stood facing them in front of the altar (2 Chron 5:12; 7:6).”<sup>14</sup> This arrangement highlighted the responsibility of the trumpeters to give the signal for the congregation to prostrate and for the choir to sing.

The cymbals consisted of two metal plates with reflexed rims about 10-15 inches wide. When struck together vertically, they produced a ringing, tinkling sound. Some appeal to the use of cymbals to argue that Temple music had a rhythmic beat like rock music today, and, consequently, the Bible does not forbid percussion instruments and rock music in the church today. Such an argument ignores the fact that, as Kleinig explains, “the cymbals were not used by the precantor to conduct the singing by beating out the rhythm of the song, but rather to announce the beginning of the song or a stanza in the song. Since they were used to introduce the song, they were wielded by the head of choir on ordinary occasions (1 Chron 16:5) or by the three heads of the guilds on extraordinary occasions (1 Chron 15:19). . . . Since the trumpets and the cymbals were played together to announce the beginning of the song, the players of both are called the ‘sounders’ in 1 Chronicles 16:42.”<sup>15</sup>

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In his book *Jewish Music in Its Historical Development*, A. Z. Idelsohn notes that in the worship of the Temple only one pair of cymbals were used and that by the leader himself. “The percussive instruments were reduced to one cymbal, which was not employed in the music proper, but merely to mark pauses and intermissions.”<sup>16</sup> In a similar vein, Curt Sachs explains, “The music in the Temple included cymbals, and the modern reader might conclude that the presence of percussion instruments indicate rigid beats. But there is little doubt that the cymbals, as elsewhere, marked the end of a line and not the beats inside a verse. . . . A word for rhythm does not seem to exist in the Hebrew language.”<sup>17</sup> The term “Selah,” which occurs in some psalms to mark the end of a stanza, may indicate the place where the cymbals were struck.

The third group of musical instruments was comprised of two string instruments, the lyres and the harps, which were called “the instruments of song” (2 Chron 5:13) or “the instruments of God’s song” (1 Chron 16:42). As indicated by their descriptive name, their function was to accompany the songs of praise and thanksgiving to the Lord (1 Chron 23:5; 2 Chron 5:13). The musicians who played the harps and the lyres would themselves sing the song to their own accompaniment (1 Chron 9:33; 15:16, 19, 27; 2 Chron 5:12-13; 20:21).

In his book *The Music of the Bible in Christian Perspective*, Garen Wolf explains that “String instruments were used extensively to accompany singing since they would not cover up the voice or the ‘Word of Jehovah’ which was being sung.”<sup>18</sup> Great care was taken to ensure that the vocal praise of the Levitical choir would not be overshadowed by the sound of the instruments.

**Restriction on Musical Instruments.** Some scholars argue that instruments like drums, timbrel (which was a tambourine), flutes, and dulcimers were kept out of the Temple because they were associated with pagan worship and culture, or because they were customarily played by women for entertainment. This could well be the case, but it only goes to show that there was a distinction between the sacred music played inside the Temple and the secular music played outside.

A restriction was placed on the musical instruments and art expression to be used in the House of God. God prohibited a number of instruments which were allowed *outside* the Temple for national festivities and social pleasure. The reason is not that certain percussion instruments

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were evil per se. The sounds produced by any musical instrument are neutral, like a letter of the alphabet. Rather, the reason is that these instruments were commonly used to produce entertainment music which was inappropriate for worship in God's House. By prohibiting instruments and music styles, like dancing, associated with secular entertainment, the Lord taught His people to distinguish between the sacred music played in the Temple, and the secular, entertainment music used in social life.

The restriction on the use of instruments was meant to be a binding rule for future generations. When King Hezekiah revived Temple worship in 715 B. C., he meticulously followed the instructions given by David. We read that the king "stationed the Levites in the house of the Lord with cymbals, harps, and lyres, according to the commandment of David . . . for the commandment was from the Lord through his prophets" (2 Chron 29:25).

Two and a half centuries later when the Temple was rebuilt under Ezra and Nehemiah, the same restriction was applied again. No percussion instruments were allowed to accompany the Levitical choir or to play as an orchestra at the Temple (Ezra 3:10; Neh 12:27, 36). This confirms that the rule was clear and binding over many centuries. The singing and the instrumental music of the Temple were to differ from that used in the social life of the people.

**Lessons from the Temple Music.** What lessons can we learn from the music of the Temple? The absence of percussion musical instruments and of dancing bands in the music of the Temple indicates, as noted earlier, that a distinction must be made between the secular music used for social entertainment and the sacred music employed for worship service in God's House.

No "Jewish Rock Bands" were at the Temple to entertain the people with loud rhythmic music, because the Temple was a place of worship and not a social club for entertainment. Percussion instruments like drums, tambourines, timbrels or tabrets, which were commonly used for making entertainment music, were absent in the Temple music. Only the cymbals were used, but in a limited way. They marked the end of a stanza and the cessation of the singing.

The lesson for us today is evident. Church music should differ from secular music, because the church, like the ancient Temple, is God's

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House in which we gather to worship the Lord and not to be entertained. Percussion instruments which stimulate people physically through a loud and relentless beat are as inappropriate for church music today as they were for the Temple music of ancient Israel.

A second lesson is that the musical instruments used to accompany the choir or the singing of the congregation should not cover up the voice. Like the string instruments used in the Temple, musical instruments used in the church today should support the singing. Musical instruments should serve as a hand-maiden to the Word of God which is sung and proclaimed. This means, for example, that organ music should not be so loud as to drown the voice of the congregation.

On numerous occasions I have been in churches equipped with powerful electronic organs that are played so loud that the voice of the congregation cannot be heard. Biblical principle indicates that the function of the organ is to support the singing of the congregation; not to cover it up. This principle applies not only to organ music, but to any other instrument or an orchestra that accompanies a choir or a singing congregation.

Some argue that if we are to follow the example of the Temple, we need to eliminate in the church such instruments as the piano and the organ, because they are not string instruments. Such an argument ignores the distinction between a biblical principle and its cultural application.

The biblical principle is that instrumental music accompanying the singing should aid the vocal response to God and not drown it. In Bible times this was best accomplished by the use of string instruments. Note that trumpets and cymbals were used in the Temple, but not to accompany the Levitical choir. Nothing was wrong with these instruments. They simply were not seen as suitable to accompany the singing, presumably because they do not blend well with the human voice, besides supplanting it.

Another point is that instruments like the organ or the piano were unknown in Bible times. Were we to exclude from our life today all that the Bible does not explicitly mention, we could not eat pizza, apple pie, or ice cream.

The important biblical principle is that music in God's House, both instrumental and vocal, must respect and reflect the sacredness of the place of worship. When instruments are used to accompany the singing, they should support the human voice without supplanting it.

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## (2) The Music Ministry in the Synagogue

The function of music in the synagogue differed from that of the Temple, primarily because the two institutions had different purposes. The Temple was primarily where sacrifices were offered on behalf of the whole nation and of individual believers. The synagogue, on the other hand, emerged most likely during the Babylonian exile as the place where prayers were offered and scripture was read and taught. While there was only one Temple for the whole nation, according to the Talmud, there were 394 synagogues located in Jerusalem alone in Jesus' time.

The difference in function between the Temple and the synagogue is reflected in the different roles that music played in these two institutions. While the music of the Temple was *predominantly vocal*, with string instruments aiding the singing, the music of the synagogue was *exclusively vocal*, without any instruments. The only exception was the *shofar*—the ram-horn that served as a signal instrument.

In the Temple the ministry of music was in the hands of professional musicians. Their choral music was an accessory to the sacrificial ritual. We might say that the music was "*sacrifice-centered*." The participation of the congregation was limited to affirmative responses as "Amen," or "Hallelujah." By contrast, in the synagogue the service, including the music, was in the hands of lay persons and their music was, as Curt Sachs call it, "logenic,"<sup>19</sup> that is, "*Word-centered*."

Little evidence suggests that musical instruments were ever used in the synagogue service. We know that after the A. D. 70 destruction of the Temple, the only instrument used in the synagogue service was the *shofar*. The reason, as Eric Werner explains, was "partly because of the hostility of the Pharisees to instrumental music, and partly because of the deep mourning for the Temple and the land, and the disappearance of the Levitical functions, including the provision of music for the sanctuary. . . . The exclusion of instruments from Jewish worship remained in force generally for many centuries; only at the loss of political power by the rabbis in the nineteenth century Emancipation, did instrumental music once again appear in the (liberal) synagogue, and the exclusion still remains in force where, as in modern Israel, orthodox rabbis retain some power."<sup>20</sup>

**Blurring of Music and Speech.** The distinction between music and public speech was blurred in the synagogue, because the word-

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centered worship migrated back and forth between speech and song. The musical ambiguity of the synagogue service was caused by the fact that much of the service consisted of prayers and the public reading of the Scriptures, which often took the form of chanting, known as “cantillation.”

“The concept that the entire Old Testament was originally intended to be chanted (sung) is a new concept to church musicians and pastors, but it is a long established fact among scholars of Bible music. The reason that it is such a well-kept secret is that we tend to ignore what we do not understand.”<sup>21</sup>

“The intonations or cantillations, mentioned as far back as the first century, were cast into a system of modes or formulae, one for each of the books of the Bible intended to be publicly read. . . . Little is known about when the transition from declamatory to musical reading was first evidenced, except that the Psalms were sung in temple worship. Idelsohn and Werner both believe that the chanting of Scripture, in one form or another, went back perhaps as far back as Ezra (fifth century B. C.), and that its eventual complexity and organization was the result of hundreds of years of crystallization.”<sup>22</sup>

“The Talmud scorns those who read the Scriptures without melody and study the words without singing. Service, based on reading the Holy Books, was musical throughout, alternating between the cantor’s chant and the tunes of the congregation. In both forms it was what we call *cantillation*, though not in the stagnant monotone of a Christian lesson, but rather in the noble fluency of Gregorian melodies.”<sup>23</sup>

One of the surprising discoveries of recent years is that the accents of the Masoretic Hebrew Text are musical notations. This made it possible for Suzanne Haik-Vantoura to decipher the ancient music of the Bible, which was found to consist of a seven-note diatonic scale, strikingly similar to our modern diatonic scale.<sup>24</sup>

**Relevance of Synagogue Music for Today.** What lessons can we learn from the ministry of music at the synagogue? Are we required to chant scripture today as the Jews have historically done in the synagogue? No. Nothing in the Bible commands us to sing the Scriptures. This does not exclude the possibility of learning scripture by means of the “Scripture song” and “Psalm-singing.” In fact, considerable efforts have been done in recent times to set to music numerous Psalms and Bible passages.

We have seen that the ministry of music at the synagogue was largely a ministry of the Word. The Jews came together to the synagogue

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in a rather informal setting to pray, read, and sing the Scriptures. For them, music was not an end to itself, but a means of praising the Lord by chanting His Word and thus learning His revealed will.

At a time when much of CCM is deficient in scriptural content and Christian artists often draw the attention of the people to their singing abilities rather than to the teachings of God's Word, it is good to remember that the music of the synagogue, which Jesus Himself sang, was "*Word-centered*"—it was designed to teach and proclaim the great Scriptural truths.

Does our church music help us to hear the Word of God clearly? Remember that "faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ" (Rom 10:17, NIV). Church music should help us hear the Word of God through its sound, the character of the composition, and its lyrics.

Another important lesson is that the music of the Temple and synagogue was distinct from that of the pagan society. While much of the music played in the pagan society was improvised, "the rigid training of the Levites as described by Josephus and rabbinical sources left little room for spontaneous improvisation. . . . In this respect the Temple [and the synagogue] music must have been untypical of Middle Eastern music, in which improvisation is normally indispensable."<sup>25</sup>

### (3) The Music Ministry in the New Testament

To speak about a music ministry in the New Testament may seem completely out of place. The New Testament is silent about any "musical" office in the church. Outside the book of Revelation, in which music is part of a rich eschatological drama, only a dozen passages refer to music.

None of these passages, however, gives us a clear picture of the role that music played in church services during New Testament times. This is not surprising, because New Testament believers did not see their worship gatherings as being much different from those of the synagogue. Both were conducted in an informal setting, with lay people leading out in the prayer, reading, singing, and exhortation. The New Testament references to worship gatherings reflect to a large extent the worship service of the synagogue, as scholarly studies have established.<sup>26</sup> The fundamental difference between the two was the messianic proclamation, which was present only in the Christian worship.



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Of the twelve references to music in the New Testament, five refer to it metaphorically (Matt 6:2; 11:17; Luke 7:32; 1 Cor 13:1; 14:7-8) and, consequently, are not relevant to our study. The remaining seven shed important light, especially when they are seen within the broader context of the synagogue worship, which was known and practiced by the Christians.

Four references to music are found in the Gospels. Two mention instrumental music and dancing in conjunction with the mourning for the death of a girl (Matt 9:23) and the celebration upon the return of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:25). Two passages are parallel and mention Christ singing a hymn with His disciples at the conclusion of the Last Supper (Matt 26:30; Mark 14:26). Most likely this was the second portion of the Jewish Hallel sung at the completion of the Passover meal. It consisted of Psalms 113 to 118.

One text refers to Paul and Silas singing while in jail (Acts 16:25). We have no way of knowing whether they sang psalms or newly composed Christian hymns. The above examples tell us that music accompanied various activities in the social and religious life of the people, but they do not inform us about the role of music in the church.

**Instructions Regarding Music.** Few instructions regarding church music are found in the Epistles. James states that if a person is cheerful “Let him sing praise” (James 5:13). The implication is that singing should spring from a cheerful heart. Presumably the singing of praises occurred not only privately at home, but also publicly in the church. Other texts suggest that the singing of hymns of praise was a feature of the church service.

More specific information comes to us from Paul, who provides us with insights into the role of music in the New Testament worship services. In the context of his admonitions regarding ecstatic manifestations at the Corinthian church, Paul calls for a balance in music making by urging that singing be done with the mind as well as the spirit: “I will sing with the spirit and I will sing with the mind also” (1 Cor 14:15). Apparently some sang ecstatically without engaging the mind. Senseless singing is like senseless speech. Both dishonor God. As Paul says: “God is not a God of confusion but of peace” (1 Cor 14:33).

Paul’s admonition to sing with the mind, or with understanding, is relevant for us today, when the singing done in some charismatic churches

consists of emotional outbursts of ecstatic shouting which no one can understand. Our singing must be with understanding because God expects from His intelligent creatures “a rational worship” (Rom 12:2—*logike*, that is, “logical” in the Greek).

Singing should be for spiritual edification and not for physical stimulation. Paul says: “When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification” (1 Cor 14:26). This text suggests that the church service was rather informal, like that of the synagogue. Each one contributed something to the worship experience.

Some members contributed a hymn to the service. Most likely a hymn was a newly composed song of praise directed to Christ. Bible scholars have identified several Christ-centered hymns in the New Testament. The important point is that the singing, like all parts of the church service, was to edify the congregation. The biblical principle, then, is that church music should contribute to the spiritual edification of the believers.

**Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs.** The two remaining Pauline texts (Eph 5:19; Col 3:16) are the most informative about music in the New Testament. Paul encourages the Ephesians to “be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart” (Eph 5:18-19). In a similar vein, the apostle admonishes the Colossians: “Let the word of God dwell in you richly, teach and admonish one another in all wisdom, and sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God” (Col 3:16).

Both passages provide the earliest indication of how the apostolic church differentiated between the psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. It is hard to draw hard-and-fast distinctions between these terms. Most scholars agree that the three terms loosely refer to the various forms of musical compositions used in the worship service.

The psalms most likely are those of the Old Testament, though there may have been some Christian additions. The hymns would be newly composed songs of praise directed to Christ. Some evidence for these Christ-centered hymns appears in the New Testament (Eph 5:14; 1 Tim 3:16; Phil 2:6-11; Col 1:15-20; Heb 1:3). The spiritual songs probably refer to spontaneous praise songs which the inspiring Spirit placed on the lips of the enraptured worshipper (1 Cor 14:15).

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The phrase “addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” suggests that the singing was interactive. Presumably some of the singing was responsorial, with the congregation responding to the song leader. The singing was to be done with “thankfulness” and “with all your heart.” Through their singing, Christians expressed their whole-hearted gratitude “to the Lord” for His marvellous provision of salvation.

**Christ-Centered Hymns.** While in the synagogue the singing was “word-centered,” that is, designed to praise God by chanting His Word; in the New Testament church the singing was “Christ-centered,” that is, designed to extol Christ’s redemptive accomplishments.

A good example of a “Christ-centered” hymn is found in 1 Timothy 3:16, which consists of an introductory sentence (“Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of our religion”), which is followed by six lines:

He was manifested in the flesh,  
Vindicated in the Spirit,  
Seen by angels,  
Preached among the nations,  
Believed in the world,  
Taken up in glory.

This hymn embodies in a cryptic way the fundamental truths of the Gospel message. As Ralph Martin explains, “By a series of antithetical couplets in which a second line complements the thought of the first line, the Gospel message . . . is set forth. It treats of the two world orders, the divine and human; and shows how Christ has brought together the two spheres by His coming from the glory of the Father’s presence into this world (‘revealed in the flesh’: cf. John 1:14; Rom 8:3) and by His lifting up of humanity back again into the divine realm. Thus heaven and earth are joined, and God and man reconciled.”<sup>27</sup>

The celebration of Christ’s redemption is the basic theme of other New Testament hymns (Phil 2:6-8; Col 1:15-20; Heb 1:3), and especially in the book of Revelation. We noted in the previous chapter that the angelic choir around God’s Throne sings a new song saying: “Worthy art thou to take the scroll and to open its seals, for thou wast slain and by thy blood didst ransom men for God, from every tribe and tongue and people and nation, and has made them a kingdom of priests to our God” (Rev 5:9). The

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“Christ-centered” singing done by the church on earth reflects the “Lamb-centered” singing done by the living creatures in heaven.

**A Pagan Witness.** A most telling evidence of “Christ-centered” singing by the early church is found in the private correspondence between the Roman Governor Pliny and the Emperor Trajan. In a letter written in A. D. 112, Pliny reported to the emperor that he tortured some young Christian deaconesses in order to find out what possible crimes were committed by Christians in their religious gatherings.

To his surprise, Pliny found that “The sum total of their guilt or error amounted to no more than this. They had met regularly before dawn on a fixed day to chant verses alternately among themselves in honor of Christ as if to a god, and also to bind themselves by oath, not for criminal purpose, but to abstain from theft, robbery and adultery, to commit no breach of trust and not to deny a deposit when called upon to restore it.”<sup>28</sup>

What an inspiring pagan testimony about early Christian worship! Christians became known for singing to “Christ as if to a god,” and for binding themselves to follow His example in their lifestyle of purity and honesty. It is evident that the main theme of their songs was Christ. They witnessed for the Lord by singing about Him and living godly lives in His honor.

The witness of the New Testament singing is relevant for us today. Is our singing “Christ-centered” like that of the apostolic church? Does our church music praise the Savior for His past, present, and future redemptive accomplishments? Does it give us a greater appreciation for Christ’s creative and redemptive love?

If you are tempted to listen to rock music, ask yourself: Do the beat, rhythm, and lyric of this music help me to appreciate the purity, majesty, and holiness of Christ? Does it magnify His character? Does it have appropriate words, a pure tone, and a lovely melody? Music about Christ should be like Christ, reflecting the purity and loveliness of His character.

**No Instrumental Music in the Early Church.** None of the New Testament references to music examined above makes any allusion to musical instruments used by New Testament Christians to accompany the singing. Apparently Christians followed the tradition of the synagogue in prohibiting the use of musical instruments in their church services because of their pagan association.

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Undoubtedly Paul understood that music could be an effective resource to help the church fulfill the overwhelming tasks of evangelizing the Gentiles. He knew what would work in attracting people. He says: “For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom” (1 Cor 1:22). But he chose not to use Gentile or Jewish idioms to proclaim the Gospel. Why? Because he wanted to reach people, not by giving them what they wanted, but by proclaiming to them what they needed. “But we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to the Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Gentiles, Christ is the power of God” (1 Cor 1:23-24).

The outright condemnation of musical instruments, sometimes even of the harp and the lyre, is present in the writings of numerous early Christian authors. In his dissertation on *Musical Aspects of the New Testament*, William Smith concludes his survey of the critical attitude of church leaders toward the use of musical instruments by listing several reasons, of which the first three are as follows:

“(a) Most important of all, at least ostensibly, seems to be the association of instruments with the worship of heathen cults.

(b) The employment of instruments at secular excesses as the theater and the circus.

(c) The sensuality of instrumental music and its aesthetic effects.”<sup>29</sup>

Contrary to the current philosophy that rock music can be adopted and adapted to reach the secular society, the early Christians distanced themselves not only from secular songs but also from the musical instruments used for secular entertainment and pagan worship. In his book *The Sacred Bridge*, Eric Werner concludes his study of music in the early church: “Up to the third century, the Christian sources reflect almost the same attitude toward Hellenistic music as contemporary Judaism. The very same distrust of instrumental accompaniment in religious ceremonies, the same horror of flute, *tympanon*, [drum], and cymbal, the accessories of the orgiastic mysteries are here in evidence.”<sup>30</sup> The same point is emphasized by the *The New Grove’s Dictionary of Music and Musicians* in its description of the early church: “The ban on dance in the worship service shows that rhythm did not have much of a place in the liturgy.”<sup>31</sup>

We cannot approve the early Christians’ radical rejection of all musical instruments for church services simply because they were used by the pagans in social and religious life. Yet we must commend them for

recognizing the danger of bringing into the church the music and instruments which were associated with a pagan lifestyle.

The early church understood the fundamental truth that adopting pagan music, and the instruments used to produce it, could eventually corrupt the Christian message, identity, and witness, besides tempting people to fall back into their pagan lifestyles. Eventually this is what happened. Beginning from the fourth century when Christianity became the religion of the empire, the church tried to reach the pagans by adopting some of their practices, including their music. The result has been the gradual secularization of Christianity, a process that is still continuing today. The lesson of history is clear. To evangelize people with their secular idioms, ultimately results in the secularization of the church itself.

### Part 3 DANCE IN THE BIBLE

There are conflicting opinions concerning dance and its use in the worship service of ancient Israel. Historically the Seventh-day Adventist church has maintained that the Bible does not sanction dancing, especially in the context of the worship service. In recent years, however, the question has been reexamined, especially by Adventist youth leaders who claim to have found biblical support for dancing.

**Shall We Dance?** A good example of this new trend is the symposium *Shall We Dance? Rediscovering Christ-Centered Standards*. This research was produced by twenty contributors and is based on the findings of the “Valuegenesis Study.” This study is the most ambitious project ever undertaken by the Adventist church to determine how well the church transmits its values to the new generation.

The back cover of *Shall We Dance?* indicates that the book is “jointly sponsored by the Department of Education of the North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists, the John Hancock Center for Youth Ministry, La Sierra University, and La Sierra University Press.” The combined sponsorship by four major SDA institutions suggests that the content of the book reflects the thinking of major Adventist institutions.

For the sake of accuracy, it must be stated that the opening statement of the introduction says: “The book is *not* an official statement

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of the Seventh-day Adventist Church regarding standards and values. Rather it is an invitation to open discussion regarding lifestyle issues. Hopefully even better biblical principles will become the bedrock for our distinctive lifestyle as we move from the peripheral, but ever-present issues to the weightier matters of living the Christian life.”

The clarification that the “book is *not* an official statement of the Seventh-day Adventist Church” is reassuring, because, in my view, some of the conclusions hardly encourage the development of “even better biblical principles.” A case in point are the four chapters devoted to dance and written by four different authors. These chapters present a very superficial analysis of the Biblical references to dance. For example, the chapter entitled “Dancing with a User-Friendly Concordance,” consists primarily of a listing of twenty-seven Bible references to dancing, without any discussion whatsoever. The author assumes that the texts are self-explanatory and supportive of religious dancing. This is indicated by the fact that he closes the chapter, asking: “How could we dance before the LORD today? What type of dance would it be? Why do people dance nowadays?”<sup>32</sup> Surprisingly the author ignores that no dancing ever took place in the religious services of the Temple, synagogue, or early church.

The conclusions derived from an examination of the biblical view of dancing are concisely stated in five principles, the first of which says: “Principle 1: Dance is a component of divine worship. When we study Scripture we find that what it says about dance and dancing is not only *not* condemnatory, but in some cases positively prescriptive: ‘Praise him with trumpet sound; praise him with lute and harp! Praise him with timbrel and dance; praise him with strings and pipe’” (Ps 150:3-4).<sup>33</sup>

The author continues: “A half hour with a good concordance leaves the lingering impression that there is more to a truly Biblical perspective on dance than has previously met our Adventist eyes. Of some 27 references to dance (dance, danced, dances, dancing) in the Scriptures, only four occur in a clearly negative context, and even these references nowhere describe dancing as the object of God’s displeasure.”<sup>34</sup>

This chapter presents this surprising challenge to the Adventist church: “As challenging as it is to our notion of respectability and decorum, it seems evident that Adventists should give new thought and study to the inclusion of dance as part of the worship of God, at least in selected communities and on special occasions.”<sup>35</sup>

**Three Major Flaws.** After spending not “a half hour” but several days examining the biblical data relevant to dance, I find this conclusion unsubstantiated and its challenge unnecessary. For the sake of clarity, I wish to respond to the position that “dance is a component of divine worship” in the Bible by submitting what in my view are three major flaws of his methodology.

(1) The failure to prove that dancing was indeed a component of divine worship in the Temple, synagogue, and early church.

(2) The failure to recognize that of the twenty-eight references to dance or dancing in the Old Testament, only four refer without dispute to religious dancing, and none of these relate to worship in God’s House.

(3) The failure to examine why women, who did most of the dancing, were excluded from the music ministry of the Temple, synagogue, and early church.

**No Dance in the Worship Service.** If it were true that “dance is a component of divine worship” in the Bible, then why is there no trace of dancing by men or women in the worship services of the Temple, the synagogue, or the early church? Did God’s people in Bible times neglect an important “component of divine worship”?

Negligence does not seem to be the reason for the exclusion of dance from the divine service, because we noted that clear instructions were given regarding the ministry of music in the temple. The Levitical choir was to be accompanied only by string instruments (the harp and the lyre). Percussion instruments like drums and tambourines, which were commonly used for making dance music, were clearly prohibited. What was true for the Temple was also true for the synagogue and later for the early church. No dancing or entertainment music was ever allowed in God’s House.

Garen Wolf reaches this conclusion after his extensive analysis of “Dance in the Bible” : “First, dancing as part of the Temple worship is nowhere traceable in either the first or the second Temple. Second, of the 107 times these words are used in the Bible [Hebrew words translated as “dance”], only four times could they be considered to refer to religious dance. Third, none of these references to religious dance were in conjunction with the regular established public worship of the Hebrews.”<sup>36</sup>

It is important to note that David, who is regarded by many as the primary example of religious dancing in the Bible, never instructed the



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Levites regarding when and how to dance in the Temple. Had David believed that dancing should be a component of divine worship, no doubt he would have given instructions regarding it to the Levite musicians he chose to perform at the Temple.

After all, David is the founder of the music ministry at the Temple. We have seen that he gave clear instruction to the 4,000 Levite musicians regarding when to sing and what instruments to use to accompany their choir. His omission of dancing in the divine worship can hardly be an oversight. It rather tells us that David distinguished between the sacred music performed in God's House and the secular music played outside the Temple for entertainment.

An important distinction must be made between religious music played for entertainment in a social setting and the sacred music performed for worship in the Temple. We must not forget that the whole life of the Israelites was religiously oriented. Entertainment was provided, not by concerts or plays at a theater or circus, but by the celebration of religious events or festivals, often through folk dancing by women or men in separate groups.

No romantic or sensually oriented dancing by couples ever occurred in ancient Israel. The greatest annual dance took place, as we shall see, in conjunction with the Feast of Tabernacles, when the priests entertained the people by doing incredible acrobatic dances the whole night. What this means is that those who appeal to the biblical references to dance to justify modern romantic dancing inside or outside the church ignore the vast difference between the two.

Most people who appeal to the Bible to justify modern romantic dancing would not be interested in the least in the folk dancing mentioned in the Bible, where there was no physical contact between men and women. Each group of men, women, and children did its own "show," which in most cases was a kind of march with rhythmic cadence. I have seen "The Dance Around the Ark" by the Coptic priests in Ethiopia, where many Jewish traditions have survived, including Sabbathkeeping. I could not understand why they called it "dance," since it was merely a procession by the priests who marched with a certain rhythmic cadence. To apply the biblical notion of dance to modern dance, is misleading to say the least because there is a world of difference between the two. This point becomes clearer as we survey the references to dance.

**The References to Dance.** Contrary to prevailing assumptions, only four of the twenty-eight references to dance refer without dispute to religious dancing, but none of these have to do with public worship conducted in the House of God. To avoid burdening the reader with a technical analysis of the extensive use of the six Hebrew words translated “dance,” I will submit only a brief allusion to each of them.

The Hebrew word *chagag* is translated once as “dance” in 1 Samuel 30:16 in conjunction with the “drinking and dancing” of the Amalekites. It is evident that this is not a religious dance.

The Hebrew word *chuwł* is translated twice as “dance” in Judges 21:21, 23, with reference to the daughters of Shiloh who went out to dance in the vineyards and were taken as wives by surprise by the men of Benjamin. Again there is no doubt that in this context this word refers to a secular dance done by unsuspecting women.

The Hebrew word *karar* is translated twice as “dance” in 2 Samuel 6:14 and 16 where it states, “And David danced before the Lord with all his might . . . Michal the daughter of Saul looked out of the window, and saw King David leaping and dancing before the Lord.” More is said about the significance of David’s dance below. In this context it suffices to note that “these verses refer to a religious type of dance outside the context of the Temple worship. The word *karar* is only used in Scripture in these two verses, and is never used in conjunction with Temple worship.”<sup>37</sup>

The Hebrew word *machowal* is translated six times as dance. Psalm 30:11 uses the term poetically: “Thou has turned for me my mourning into dancing.” Jeremiah 31:4 speaks of the “virgins of Israel” who “shall go forth in the dance of the merrymakers.” The same thought is expressed in verse 13. In both instances the references are to social folk dancing done by women.

**“Praise Him with Dance.”** In two important instances, *machowal* is translated as “dance” (Psalms 149:3 and 150:4). They are most important because in the view of many people they provide the strongest biblical support for dancing as part of church worship. A close look at these texts shows that this popular assumption is based on a superficial reading and inaccurate interpretation of the texts.

Linguistically, the term “dance” in these two verses is disputed. Some scholars believe that *machowal* is derived from *chuwł*, which means “to make an opening”<sup>38</sup>—a possible allusion to a “pipe”

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instrument. In fact this is the marginal reading given by the KJV. Psalm 149:3 states: “Let them praise his name in the dance” [or “with a pipe,” KJV margin]. Psalm 150:4 reads: “Praise him with the timbrel and dance” [or “pipe,” KJV margin].

Contextually, *machowl* appears to be a reference to a musical instrument; in both Psalm 149:3 and 150:4, the term occurs in the context of a list of instruments to be used for praising the Lord. In Psalm 150 the list includes eight instruments: trumpet, psaltery, harp, timbrel, string instruments, organs, cymbals, clashing cymbals (KJV). Since the Psalmist is listing all the possible instruments to be used to praise the Lord, it is reasonable to assume that *machowl* also is a musical instrument, whatever its nature might be.

Another important consideration is the figurative language of these two psalms, which hardly allows for a literally interpretation of dancing in God’s House. Psalm 149:5 encourages people to praise the Lord on the “couches.” In verse 6, the praising is to be done with “two-edged swords in the hands.” In verses 7 and 8, the Lord is to be praised for punishing the heathen with the sword, binding kings in chain, and putting nobles in fetters. It is evident that the language is figurative because it is hard to believe that God would expect people to praise Him by standing or jumping on couches or while swinging a two-edged sword.

The same is true of Psalm 150 which speaks of praising God, in a highly figurative way. The psalmist calls upon God’s people to praise the Lord “for his mighty deeds” (v. 2) in every possible place and with every available musical instrument. In other words, the psalm mentions the *place* to praise the Lord, namely, “his sanctuary” and “his mighty firmament”; the *reason* to praise the Lord, namely, “for his mighty deeds . . . according to his exceeding greatness” (v. 2); and the *instruments* to be used to praise the Lord, namely, the eight listed above.

This psalm makes sense only if we take the language to be highly figurative. For example, there is no way in which God’s people can praise the Lord “in his mighty firmament,” because they live on earth and not in heaven. The purpose of the psalm is not to specify the *location* and the *instruments* to be used to praise for church music. Nor it is intended to give a license to dance for the Lord in church. Rather, its purpose is to invite *everything* that breathes or makes sound to praise the Lord *everywhere*. To interpret the psalm as a license to dance, or to play drums in the church, is to misinterpret the intent of the

Psalm and to contradict the very regulation which David himself gave regarding the use of instruments in God's House.

**Celebration Dance.** The Hebrew word *mechowlah* is translated seven times as "dance." In five of the seven instances the dance is by women who celebrate a military victory (1 Sam 18:6; 21:11; 29:5; Jud 11:34; Ex 15:20). Miriam and the women danced to celebrate the victory over the Egyptian army (Ex 15:20). Jephthah's daughter danced to celebrate her father's victory over the Ammonites (Jud 11:34). Women danced to celebrate David's slaughter of the Philistines (1 Sam 18:6; 21:11; 29:5).

In the remaining two instances, *mechowlah* is used to describe the naked dance of Israelites around the golden calf (Ex 32:19) and the dance of the daughters of Shiloh in the vineyards (Jud 21:21). In none of these instances is dance a part of a worship service. Miriam's dance may be viewed as religious, but so were the dances performed in conjunction with the annual festivals. But these dances were not seen as a component of a divine service. They were social celebrations of religious events. The same thing occurs today in Catholic countries where people celebrate annual holy days by organizing carnivals.

The Hebrew word *raqad* is translated four times as "dance" (1 Chron 15:29; Job 21:11; Is 13:21; Ecc 3:4). Once it refers to how "children dance" (Job 21:11). Another is to "satyr dancing" (Is 13:21), which may refer to a goat or a figure of speech. A third instance is a poetic reference "to a time to dance" (Ecc 3:4), mentioned in contrast "to a time to mourn." A fourth reference is to the classic example of "King David dancing and making merry" (1 Chron 15:29). In view of the religious significance attached to David's dance, special consideration is given to it shortly.

**Dance in the New Testament.** Two Greek words are translated as "dance" in the New Testament. The first is *orcheomai*, which is translated four times as "to dance" with reference to the dancing of Herodias' daughter (Matt 14:6; Mark 6:22) and a children's dance (Matt 11:17; Luke 7:32). The word *orcheomai* means to dance in a rank-like or regular motion and is never used to refer to religious dance in the Bible.

The second Greek word translated as "dance" is *choros*. It is used only once in Luke 15:25 with reference to the return of the prodigal son. We are told that when the elder son came close to the

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house “he heard music and dancing.” The translation “dancing” is disputed because the Greek *chorus* occurs only once in this passage and is used in extra-biblical literature with the meaning of “choir” or “group of singers.”<sup>39</sup> At any rate, this was a family reunion of a secular nature and does not refer to religious dancing.

The conclusion that emerges from the above survey of the twenty-eight references to dance is that dance in the Bible was essentially a social celebration of special events, such as a military victory, a religious festival, or a family reunion. Dance was done mostly by women and children. The dances mentioned in the Bible were either processional, encircling, or ecstatic.

No biblical references indicate that men and women ever danced together romantically as couples. As H. Wolf observes, “While the mode of dancing is not known in detail, it is clear that men and women did not generally dance together, and there is no real evidence that they ever did.”<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, contrary to popular assumptions, dance in the Bible was never done as part of the divine worship in the Temple, synagogue, or early church.

**Dancing in Pagan Worship.** Most indications of religious dancing in the Bible have to do with the apostasy of God’s people. There is the dancing of the Israelites at the foot of Mount Sinai around the golden calf (Ex 32:19). There is an allusion to the dancing of the Israelites at Shittim when “the people began to play harlot with the daughter of Moab” (Num 25:1). The strategy used by the Moabites women was to invite Israelite men “to the sacrifice of their gods” (Num 25:2), which normally entailed dancing.

Apparently the strategy was suggested by the apostate prophet, Balaam, to Balak, king of Moab. Ellen White offers this comment: “At Balaam’s suggestion, a grand festival in honor of their gods was appointed by the king of Moab, and it was secretly arranged that Balaam should induce the Israelites to attend. . . . *Beguiled with music and dancing*, and allured by the beauty of heathen vestals, they cast off their fealty to Jehovah. As they united in mirth and feasting, indulgence in wine beclouded their senses and broke down the barriers of self-control.”<sup>41</sup>

There was shouting and dancing on Mount Carmel by the prophets of Baal (1 King 18:26). The worship of Baal and other idols commonly took place on the hill with dancing. Thus, the Lord appeals to Israel through

the prophet Jeremiah: “Return, faithless people; I will cure you of backsliding. . . . Surely the idolatrous commotion on the hills and mountains is a deception” (Jer 3:22-23, NIV).

**David Dancing Before the Lord.** The story of David dancing “before the Lord with all his might” (2 Sam 6:14) while leading the procession that brought the ark back to Jerusalem is viewed by many as the most compelling biblical sanction of religious dancing in context of a divine service. In the chapter “Dancing to the Lord,” found in the book *Shall We Dance?*, Timothy Gillespie, Seventh-day Adventist youth leader, writes: “We can dance to the Lord like David, reflecting an outburst of excitement for the glory of God; or we can introspectively turn that excitement inward, reflecting on ourselves and our selfish desires.”<sup>42</sup> The implication of this statement seems to be that if we do not dance unto the Lord like David, we repress our excitement and reveal our self-centeredness. Is this what the story of David’s dance teaches us? Let us take a close look at it.

To say the least, David’s dance before the ark poses serious problems. In the first place, David “girded himself with a lined ephod” (2 Sam 6:14) like a priest and “offered burnt offerings and peace offerings before the Lord” (2 Sam 6:17). Note that the ephod was a sleeveless linen waistcoat garment to be worn only by the priests as an emblem of their sacred office (1 Sam 2:28). Why did David choose to exchange his royal robes for those of a priest?

Ellen White suggests that David revealed a spirit of humility by laying aside his royal robes and attiring “himself in a plain linen ephod.”<sup>43</sup> This is a plausible explanation. The problem is that nowhere does the Bible suggest that the ephod could be legitimately worn by someone who was not a priest. The same holds true when it comes to sacrifices. Only the Levite priests had been set aside to offer sacrifices (Num 1:50). King Saul was severely rebuked by Samuel for offering sacrifices: “You have done foolishly; you have not kept the commandment of the Lord your God” (1 Sam 13:13). By offering sacrifices dressed like a priest, David was assuming a priestly role in addition to his kingly status. Such an action cannot be easily defended biblically.

**David’s Behavior.** More problematic is David’s manner of dancing. Ellen White says that David danced “in reverent joy before

God.”<sup>44</sup> Undoubtedly this must have been true part of the time. But it would appear that during the dance, David may have become so excited that he lost his loin cloth, because Michal, his wife, rebuked him, saying: “How the king of Israel honored himself today, uncovering himself today before the eyes of his servants’ maids, as one of the vulgar fellows shamelessly uncovers himself!” (2 Sam 6:20). David did not dispute such an accusation nor did he apologize for what he did. Instead, he argued that he did it “before the Lord” (1 Sam 6:21), and that he was prepared to act “even more contemptibly” (1 Sam 6:22). Such a response hardly reveals a positive aspect of David’s character.

Perhaps the reason David was not troubled by his uncovering during the dance is that this kind of exhibitionism was not uncommon. We are told that Saul also in an ecstatic dance “stripped off his clothes, and he too prophesied before Samuel, and lay naked all that day and all that night” (1 Sam 19:24; cf. 10:5-7, 10-11).

It is a known fact that at the time of the annual festivals, special dances were organized where priests and nobles would perform acrobatic feats to entertain the people. There is no mention, however, of the priests uncovering themselves. The most famous dance was performed on the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles, and it was known as the “Dances of the Water-Drawing Festival.”

The Talmud offers a colorful description of this Water-Drawing dance which was performed in what is known as the women’s court of the Temple: “Pious men and men of affair danced with torches in their hands, singing songs of joy and of praise, and the Levites made music with lyre and harp and cymbals and trumpets and countless other instruments. During this celebration, Rabbi Simeon ben Gamaliel is said to have juggled eight torches, and then to have turned a somersault.”<sup>45</sup>

Dances done by men or by women in Bible times, within the context of a religious event, were a form of social entertainment rather than part of a worship service. They could be compared to the annual carnival celebrations that take place today in many Catholic countries. For example, during the three days before Lent, in countries like Brazil, people organize extravagant carnival celebrations with endless types of colorful and sometimes wild dancing, similar to the Mardi Gras in New Orleans. No Catholic would consider such dances as part of the worship services.

The same is true for the various types of dances mentioned in the Bible. They were social events with religious overtones. Men and women

danced, not romantically as couples but separately in processional or encircling dances. In view of the religious orientation of the Jewish society, such folk-type dances are often characterized as religious dances. But there is no indication in the Bible that any form of dance was ever associated with the worship service in God's House. In fact, as noted below, women were excluded from the music ministry of the Temple, apparently because their music was associated with dancing and entertainment.

**Women and Music in the Bible.** Why were women excluded from the music ministry of the Temple, first, and of the synagogue and early church later? Numerous biblical passages refer to women singing and playing instruments in the social life of ancient Israel (Ex 15:20-21; 1 Sam 18:6-7; Jud 11:34; Ezra 2:64-65; Neh 7:66-67), but no references in the Bible mention women participating in the worship music of God's House.

Curt Sachs notes that "Almost all musical episodes up to the time of the Temple describe choral singing with group dancing and drum beating. . . . And this kind of singing was to a great extent women's music."<sup>46</sup> Why then were women excluded from the music ministry of the Temple, when they were the main music makers in the Jewish society?

Scholars who have examined this question suggest two major reasons. One reason is musical in nature and the other sociological. From a musical perspective, the style of music produced by women had a rhythmic beat which was better suited for entertainment than for worship in God's House.

Robert Lachmann, an authority on Jewish cantillation, is quoted as saying: "The production of the women's songs is dependent on a small store of typical melodic turns; the various songs reproduce these turns—or some of them—time and again. . . . The women's songs belong to a species, the forms of which are essentially dependent not on the connection with the text, but on processes of movements. Thus we find here, in place of the rhythm of cantillation and its very intricate line of melody, a periodical up and down movement."<sup>47</sup>

Women's music was largely based on a rhythmic beat produced by tapping with the hand the tabret, toph, or timbrel. These are the only musical instruments mentioned in the Bible as being played by women and they are believed to be the same or very similar. The tabret or



timbrel seems to have been a hand drum made up of a wooden frame around which a single skin was stretched. They were somewhat similar to the modern tambourine.

“It is interesting to note,” writes Garen Wolf, “that I have not been able to find a single direct reference to women playing the *nebel* [the harp] or the *kinnor* [the lyre]—the instruments played by men in the music worship of the temple. There can be little doubt that their music was mostly of a different species than that of the male Levite musicians who performed in the Temple.”<sup>48</sup>

The tabret or timbrel were played largely by women in conjunction with their dancing (Ex 15:20; Jud 11:34; 1 Sam 18:6; 2 Sam 6:5, 14; 1 Chron 13:8; Ps 68:25; Jer 31:4). The timbrel is also mentioned in connection with strong drink (Is 5:11-12; 24:8-9).

**Secular Nature of Women’s Music.** From a sociological perspective, women were not used in the ministry of music of the Temple because of the social stigma attached to their use of timbrel and the entertainment-oriented music. “Women in the Bible were often reported as singing a non-sophisticated kind of music. Usually at its best it was for dancing or funeral mourning, and at its worst to aid in the sensuous appeal of harlots on the street. In his satire about Tyre, Isaiah asks: ‘Shall Tyre sing as an harlot?’ (Is 23:15; or as rendered KJV margin, ‘It shall be unto Tyre as the song of an harlot’).”<sup>49</sup>

It is noteworthy that female musicians were extensively used in pagan religious services.<sup>50</sup> Thus, the reason for their exclusion from the music ministry of the Temple, synagogue, and early Christian churches was not cultural, but theological. It was the theological conviction that the music commonly produced by women was not suitable for the worship service, because of its association with secular and, sometimes, sensual entertainment.

This theological reason is recognized by numerous scholars. In his dissertation on *Musical Aspects of the New Testament*, William Smith wrote: “A reaction to the extensive employment of female musicians in the religious and secular life of pagan nations, was doubtless a very large factor in determining Jewish [and early Christian] opposition to the employment of women in the musical service of the sanctuary.”<sup>51</sup>

The lesson from Scripture and history is *not* that women should be excluded from the music service of the church today. Praising the Lord

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with music is not a male prerogative, but the privilege of every child of God. It is unfortunate that the music produced by women in Bible times was mostly for entertainment and, consequently, not suitable for the divine worship.

The lesson that the church needs to learn from Scripture and history is that secular music associated with entertainment is out of place in God's House. Those who are actively involved in pushing for the adoption of pop music in the church need to understand the biblical distinction between secular music used for entertainment and sacred music suitable for the worship of God. This distinction was understood and respected in Bible times, and it must be respected today if the church is to remain a sacred sanctuary for the worship of God rather than becoming a secular place for social entertainment.

### CONCLUSION

Several important biblical principles relevant to church music today have emerged during the course of this study. An attempt will be made to summarize them by way of conclusion.

Music has a special place and purpose in God's universe. It is a divine gift to the human family through which human beings can express their gratitude to God while experiencing delight within themselves. Pleasure in singing comes not from a rhythmic beat that stimulates people physically, but from the very experience of praising the Lord. "How good it is to sing praises to our God, how pleasant and fitting to praise him" (Ps 147:1).

Singing is seen in the Bible as an offering of thanksgiving to the Lord for the blessings of creation, deliverance, protection, and salvation. We found this concept expressed especially in Psalm 69:30-31: "I will praise God's name in song and glorify him with thanksgiving. This will please the Lord more than an ox, more than a bull with its horns and hoofs."

God does care about how we sing and play during the worship service. He is not pleased with unintelligible "loud noise," but with orderly, melodious, and intelligible singing. Those Bible texts that speak about making "a joyful noise" or "a loud noise" unto the Lord do not teach us to praise God with excessive amplification of the human voice or musical instruments during the worship service. Such a notion is derived

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from a mistranslation of *ruwa* as “loud noise.” The correct translation as found in the NIV is “shouting for joy.”

Music ministry is to be conducted by people who are trained, dedicated, and spiritually minded. This lesson is taught by the Temple’s music ministry, which was performed by experienced and mature Levites who were trained musically, prepared spiritually, supported financially, and served pastorally. This principle established by God for Temple musicians is applicable to ministers of music today.

Music is to be God-centered, not self-centered. The notion of praising the Lord for entertainment or amusement is foreign to the Bible. Percussion instruments which stimulate people physically through a loud and relentless beat are as inappropriate for church music today as they were for the Temple music in ancient Israel.

We found that the music in the Temple was “sacrifice-centered,” that is, designed to praise God for the provision of forgiveness and salvation through the sacrificial offerings. In the synagogue, the music was “Word-centered,” that is, intended to praise God by chanting His Word. In the early church the music was “Christ-centered,” that is, designed to extol Christ’s redemptive accomplishments.

The Bible does not support the kind of romantic or sensual dancing which is popular today. Nothing in the Bible indicates that men and women ever danced together romantically as couples. We have found that dance in the Bible was essentially a social celebration of special events, such as a military victory, a religious festival, or a family reunion. Most of the dancing was done by women who were excluded from the music ministry of the Temple, synagogue, and early church because their entertainment music was deemed unsuitable for the worship service.

The biblical principles of music outlined above are especially relevant today, when the church and the home are being invaded by various forms of rock music which blatantly rejects the moral values and religious beliefs espoused by Christianity. At a time when the distinction between sacred and secular music is blurred, and many are promoting modified versions of secular rock music for church use, we need to remember that the Bible calls us to “worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness” (1 Chron 16:20; cf. Ps 29:2; 96:9).

No entertainment type of music was allowed in the Temple, synagogue, and early church. The same should be true in the church today.

Those who disagree and want to adopt pop music for their church services are free to have their own music. But let those who hold to the authority of Scripture keep to music that praises God in a way which is neither sensational nor sensual—a music which reflects the beauty and purity of God’s character and celebrates His marvelous creative and redemptive accomplishment for the human family. May the Lord give us the discernment and desire to fill our homes and churches with music that meets His approval, rather than the applause of the world.

### ENDNOTES

1. Quoted in the *Banner of Truth* (January 1977), p. 13.
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3. Tom Allen, *Rock ‘n’ Roll, the Bible and the Mind* (Beaverlodge, Alberta, Canada, 1982), P. 156.
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7. John W. Kleining, *The Lord’s Song: The Basis, Function and Significance of Choral Music in Chronicles* (Sheffield, England, 1993).
8. *Ibid.*, p. 57.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 67.
10. See, Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (Philadelphia, PA, 1969), pp. 173 and 208.
11. See, *Babylonian Talmud, Hullin 24*. The text is discussed by A. Z. Idelsohn, *Jewish Music in Its Historical Development* (New York, 1967), p. 17.
12. Kenneth W. Osbeck, *Devotional Warm-Ups for the Church Choir* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1985), pp. 24-25.
13. John W. Kleining (note 7), p. 113.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 80.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 82-83.
16. A. Z. Idelsohn (note 11), p. 17.
17. Curt Sachs, *Rhythm and Tempo* (New York, 1953), p. 79.
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21. Garen L. Wolf I (note 5), p. 351.
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23. Curt Sachs (note 4), p. 90.
24. Suzanne Haik-Vantoura, *The Music of the Bible Revealed*, trans. Dennis Webber (Berkeley, CA, 1991), p. 32.
25. Stanley Sadie, ed. (note 20), vol. 9, p. 622.
26. See, for example, C. W. Dugmore, *The Influence of the Synagogue upon the Divine Office* (London, England, 1944).
27. Ralph P. Martin, *Worship in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1964), pp. 48-49.
28. As cited by F. Forrester Church and Terrance J. Mulry, *Earliest Christian Hymns* (New York, 1988), p. ix.
29. William Sheppard Smith, *Musical Aspects of the New Testament* (Amsterdam, Holland, 1962), p. 53.
30. Eric Werner, *The Sacred Bridge* (Hoboken, NJ, 1984), p. 317.
31. *The New Grove's Dictionary* (note 20), vol. 9, p. 364.
32. Steve Case, "Dancing with a User-Friendly Concordance," in *Shall We Dance? Rediscovering Christ-Centered Standards*, ed. Steve Case (Riverside, CA, 1992), p. 101.
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38. See, for example, Adam Clarke, *Clarke's Commentary* (Nashville, n. d.), vol. 3, p. 688.
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40. H. M. Wolf, "Dancing," *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, ed. Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids, 1976), vol. 2, p. 12.

41. Ellen G. White, *The Story of Patriarchs and Prophets* (Mountain View, CA, 1958). p. 454. Italics added.

42. Timothy Gillespie, "Dancing to the Lord," in *Shall We Dance? Rediscovering Christ-Centered Standards*, Ed. Steve Case (Riverside, CA, 1992), p. 94.

43. Ellen G. White (note 40), p. 707.

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45. Cited in "Dance," *The Universal Jewish Encyclopedia* (New York, 1942), vol. 3., p. 456.

46. Curt Sachs (note 4), p. 90.

47. Cited by Curt Sachs (note 4), p. 91.

48. Garen L. Wolf (note 5), p. 144.

49. Ibid.

50. For discussion and illustrations from pagan antiquity regarding the employment of female musicians in the social and religious life, see Johannes Quasten, "The Liturgical Singing of Women in Christian Antiquity," *Catholic Historical Review* (1941), pp. 149-151.

51. William Sheppard Smith, *Musical Aspects of the New Testament* (Amsterdam, 1962), p. 17. See also Eric Werner (note 30), pp. 323-324; A. Z. Idelsohn (note 11), p. 18; Philo, *De Vita Contemplativa* 7; Babylonian Talmud *Berakot* 24a.

Knowledge of the biblical period is mostly from literary references in the Bible and post-biblical sources. Religion and music historian Herbert Lockyer, Jr. writes that "music, both vocal and instrumental, was well cultivated among the Hebrews, the New Testament Christians, and the Christian church through the centuries." He adds that "a look at the Old Testament reveals how God's ancient people were devoted to the study and practice of music, which holds a unique place in the historical and Culture is not neutral. Daniel 3:7. Wrong use of music. Philippians 4:8. Think on these things.Â You might also like MU 213 Biblical principles. 15 terms. Etche. Appreciation of Fine Arts verses. 15 terms. blondetabby. The ancient music of Biblical times was often a form of praise. Writings of the time are filled with testimonies of music's power to perform miracles, to heal and to bring about transformation. One important characteristic of ancient language itself...Â The ancient music of Biblical times was often a form of praise. Writings of the time are filled with testimonies of music's power to perform miracles, to heal and to bring about transformation. One important characteristic of ancient language itself was rhythm. That rhythm carried on to include music of praise, of prayer, of sorrow, of war and of celebration. Music is mentioned in the Bible over 800 times and there are many scriptures that refer to music.