

Glorifying God in Music

Colossians 3:12-17

Pastor Tom Anderson

Music distinguishes Christian worship like no other element. Visit a Jewish synagogue and a trained cantor will lead you in singing the Psalms but you will not find a piano, an organ or any musical instruments. Visit a mosque and you will rhythmically chant verses from the Koran but you will not find music. But music explodes from Christianity like mayflies out of Houghton Lake in the spring. We write it, we sing it, we put books of music in our pews, we fill our sanctuaries with all manner of musical instruments and the organ is the queen of all musical instruments. We are the music people. Martin Luther said, "Music is a glorious gift of God, very like to theology. I would not part with my little gifts of music for anything in the world. We ought to teach the young this art, for it makes fine and clever people."

What is the purpose of music in the Christian church? Paul answers succinctly in Colossians 3:16, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly...as you sing..." Music brings the good news about Jesus Christ into our hearts so that we can sense his life in us. Paul said in Galatians 2:20, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." Music characterizes this personal and direct connection. Just as heat goes with fire, music goes with the presence of Christ in our hearts.

I am old enough to remember the days when tobacco was advertized on TV. I'm ashamed to say it, but after more than forty years I can still recall and sing for you the musical jingles written to promote such brands as Winston, Salem, Chesterfields and Lucky Strikes. Advertisers know how to scar you for life with music. But the purpose of music in the church is to brand your soul with the presence of Christ! And it works. Who among us could not recall the glory of Christmas by singing *Hark the Herald Angels Sing*? Who among us could not recall the beauty of Easter by singing *Christ the Lord is Risen Today*? Or the power of faith by singing *Amazing Grace*? With music we teach the scriptures and the word of Christ comes to dwell in us richly.

Music has great power. Yuko Maruyama, a Japanese organist working in Minneapolis, was once a devout Buddhist. Now, thanks to the music of J. S. Bach, she is a Christian. "Bach introduced me to God, Jesus, and Christianity. When I play a fugue, I can feel Bach talking to

God." Swedish archbishop Nathan Söderblom (1866–1931) famously called Bach's cantatas "the fifth Gospel."

Organist Masaaki Suzuki is the founder and conductor of the Bach Collegium Japan. During Holy Week, Suzuki's performances of the St. Matthew Passion are always sold out, although tickets cost more than \$600. After each concert, members of the audience crowd Suzuki on the podium asking him about the Christian concept of hope and about death, a topic normally taboo in polite Japanese society. "I am spreading Bach's message, which is a biblical one," said Suzuki. This is the power of music to spread the gospel!

Music holds great promise for us. The Bible says in Psalm 22:3, "But thou art holy, O thou that inhabitest the praises of Israel." It's no surprise that when the Holy Spirit comes into a human heart he brings music. He brings a new song which we sing not just with our lips but with our lives. Singing is praying and praying is living.

In 1971 two Londoners began to film street people. The film captured the daily rituals of the homeless—their trials and joys. Some were drunk, others mentally disturbed. Some were articulate and others unintelligible. One of England's leading composers, Gavin Bryars, agreed to help with the audio. During his work, he became aware of a constant undercurrent of sound that appeared whenever one certain homeless man was filmed. At first, the sound seemed like muttered gibberish. Then, he found the old man was singing.

This beggar did not drink or socialize with others. The old man was alone, filthy, homeless, but he also had a sunny demeanor. What distinguished him from the others was his quiet singing. He would for hours sing the same thing over and over.

One day at the office the composer looped the homeless man's song, preparing to add orchestration to the piece. He left the loop running while he went for coffee. When he returned, he found some of his fellow workers listening and weeping. The old man's quiet, trembling voice had leaked from the recording room and transformed the office floor. Here is what he sang:

*Jesus' blood never failed me yet
never failed me yet
Jesus' blood never failed me yet
there's one thing I know
For he loves me so.*

It does not matter whether you are J.S. Bach or a homeless man, Jesus gives music to the human soul that sustains you in eternal life.