

# Is Singing Wicked?

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Apse Ceiling Painting in Santa Maria Della Grotella, Copertino, Italy

Preaching on:

Ephesians 5:1–18

Right around the time we were setting the date for Church Music Sunday, Pam was digging around in the church archives and she pulled out an interesting piece of church history. It's the first edition of *The Church Window*, the magazine of the Glen Ridge Congregational Church, published in May 1930. And one of the articles is entitled *Is Singing Wicked?*

Now, don't worry, even in 1930 the answer to this question in our church was already a foregone conclusion, so the author, John Tasker Howard, who was a prominent music historian, was asking the question somewhat tongue-in-cheek. But he was right, in a sense, about needing to ask the question because he understood that the Christian Church's relationship to music throughout history and right

up to the present day has been full of disputes and controversy.

So, this morning I'm going to follow his lead. On this Church Music Sunday, I want to know IS singing wicked? Is it? What are the arguments that support the contention that singing is wicked? (Other than a quick glance over my shoulder at the choir—you don't look that angelic if you don't have something to hide!) But if we decide that singing isn't wicked, what does our tradition's occasional mistrust of music tell us about the power of music? And what does the power of music tell us (we who love church music) about what we believe about God?

We don't know much about music in the early Church. We know that for Gentile Christians, they were trying to separate themselves from the world, and music was a part of the world—their old lives. It was associated with pagan ceremonies, theater, drama, and all kinds of sinful passions. Despite this we know that early Christians were singing together and offering spontaneous solos, but they did it without any kind of instrumentation. Singing was tolerated as long as it wasn't accompanied. Even the chanting of the Psalms was controversial because the Psalms refer to musical instruments. There are all kinds of things in the Bible that might make you squirm, but some of the first Christians just couldn't handle the mention of musical instruments, which shows just how strongly they felt about the potential for worldly music to be a bad influence.

In the Middle Ages the Catholic and Orthodox churches developed chants as the central form of liturgical music. Again, no instruments. But the singing being done in church was now standardized into a specific form and carefully controlled. No more spontaneous solos. The chanting we're most familiar with in the West is Gregorian Chant. Chants are austere without being easy to sing. They could only be sung by someone with training. They weren't sung by the congregation. So, they were a cautious embrace of singing. In traditions that were very concerned with hierarchy and with controlling the access of the people to all things holy, the control of music tells us that they understood that music was a direct connection to the Divine that needed to therefore be tightly controlled.

So, so far we have music as dangerous because it's too worldly and music as dangerous because it can connect us directly to God. The danger of music can go both ways. Now with the Protestant Reformation came another split in opinion about music. The Lutherans loved music. They believed that music was a gift of God and an incredibly powerful tool for spreading the Gospel message. Lutheranism developed all kinds of congregational hymns and choral singing. Our church music program today would not exist if it weren't for the Lutherans.

On the other side of the equation were the Calvinists. The Pilgrims and Puritans (who eventually became the Congregationalists) were Calvinists. The Pilgrims had congregational singing but they only sang the Psalms and other pieces of scripture. No instruments. No musical notation. And they didn't even try to make the Psalms singable. You just sang them straight out of the Bible without any kind of rhyme or meter to make it a more pleasant experience. Since tunes were passed down orally, they were slightly different in every congregation, and when different churches came together to worship as

a larger group the sound was particularly terrible.

That's very fortunate for us, because it turns out that even the Puritans came to believe that bad singing is more wicked than good singing. They decided they needed a Psalm Book with translations that were singable and tunes that were standardized. And that led down the slippery slope to the pianos and organs and choirs and anthems and hymns and artistic expression and even (gulp) the clapping that have become a part of our church's music program.

So, is singing wicked? No, singing in church is a form of devotion and music connects us directly to God. Earlier generations worried that if the music and the singing were too good, they would distract us from worship. This led on the one hand to very beautiful, but very controlled (almost professional) chants. And on the other hand, to very accessible but very bad congregational singing. If you want music that is really accessible and really good, you need what our church music program provides: You need instruments, you need art, you need to teach everyone to sing and read music and play instruments, and (while you're allowed to have musical tastes) you shouldn't be overly concerned with the appropriateness of particular style of "worldly" music making its way into sacred music. Rev. James Cleveland, one of the greatest gospel musicians of all time, explained this to the crowd during the recording of Aretha Franklin's live gospel album *Amazing Grace*. He said that it was OK to perform secular music in church because what you sing is only half the equation. The more important part, in fact, is "who you sing it to." What we've come to believe in our church music program is that good music is not a hindrance to worshipping God. The better the music, the deeper the devotion, the higher the praise. That's what we believe about the power of music.

This also tells us something about the God we believe in. Our music connects us to God because it reflects God in a profound way: Our music program is full of talent, creativity, diversity, and harmony. Talent is wonderful thing because the gifts of talent come to us directly from our creator and are inspired and sustained by God's Holy Spirit. When we express our talents in singing and music, we become an expression of the Holy Spirit among us. We become an expression of God. Our God is a creator God, who is always making something new. Our creativity in music and performance is a testament to who God is and to what God is doing in the world. Our music program teaches and performs music from a variety of cultures and backgrounds and styles, both sacred and secular, because our God is the God who is everywhere, who made and celebrated the great diversity of the heavens and the earth and human beings too. And when we make music, when we sing, when we pray, we make it sound good, because our God is a God of harmony and beauty, so our greatest devotion in art to God is to make our art really good art, not as a distraction from God, but as an expression of and a testament to who God truly is.

Beloved, singing is far from wicked; it's divine. As we continue to embrace and grow our church music program, let's remember that music offers us a unique and profound way to experience and express our faith. Let us sing, then, not just with our voices, but (as we read from Ephesians this morning) with our hearts, with our souls, celebrating the God who has given us the gift of music. Because when we

sing good, when we play good, we affirm that our God is good—a God of beauty, creativity, and endless love, whose presence is magnified in every note we sing, in every melody we play. So, let the Church sing—knowing that in every note, God is with us.