

Theology and Philosophy of Music and Worship

First Baptist Church, Jackson, TN

The very purpose of the Christian life is worship, namely that we have been created and redeemed for the purpose of glorifying God and enjoying Him forever. Therefore, the primary gathering of God's people is for the purpose of worship (Hebrews 10:25), which we call corporate worship. What follows is a summary of the theology and philosophy of worship and music at First Baptist Church. Although it is not exhaustive, it seeks to provide an overview of the convictions that drive both our view and practice of worship, particularly in regard to the music of our church.

If the primary gathering of the church is for corporate worship, then this assembly of the congregation must be ultimately God-centered. Its purpose is not to showcase human abilities or personalities, but rather to direct the attention of those present to God so that corporate worship be for His glory. In so doing, the service has a Trinitarian focus on the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in their Triune glory and work in redemption.

As the congregation focuses on God in worship, the corporate gathering functions as a foundational component of Christian discipleship. We express our praise to God, but this time together also forms the believer, both in belief and practice, more into the image of Christ. Thus, as the people assemble and participate in the corporate gathering, the Holy Spirit works through the Word and through the congregation to spur one another on to love and good deeds (Hebrews 10:24).

The structure, elements, and focus of corporate worship is governed by the primacy of God's Word. In other words, Scripture regulates what ought to be included in the corporate worship of the church. Therefore, First Baptist Church has a liturgy that is highly Word-centered and gives attention to the public reading of Scripture (1 Timothy 4:13). What follows is a representative way that the service is structured; although there may be some variation in order, the elements listed are typical for our corporate worship. The service often begins with a scriptural call to worship from a responsive reading. The songs that follow can be described as singing God's Word, as the songs are rich in biblical truth and provide a means for the congregation to sing unto the Lord and encourage one another through song (Ephesians 5:19). The service often includes an anthem from the sanctuary choir, which is likewise couched in scriptural truth and seeks to direct the congregation to a God-ward and biblical focus. Following another responsive reading, the congregation has a time of corporate confession which weekly reminds us of our need to repent of our sins. Immediately following is a scriptural assurance of pardon to remember that forgiveness is provided through Christ's atonement. After the times of singing, responsive Scripture reading, and prayer, the service turns to the preaching of the Word, which follows a pattern of exposition through books of the Bible. In the Reformation tradition, especially of Baptist churches, the reading and preaching of the Word is the central focus of the corporate gathering; this flows out of our conviction of the authority, inspiration, and sufficiency of

God's Word. As the Word always calls for a response, an invitation hymn typically is sung with the encouragement for each person to respond according to the Word and the work of the Spirit in the application of the Word to one's life. The service concludes with a benediction from Scripture. Regarding the ordinances, baptism typically occurs at the beginning of the service, and the Lord's Supper (which we observe monthly) is at the end of the worship service.

The music of the corporate gathering plays an important, although not primary, role by serving to accompany the worship of the congregation. We affirm that the foremost instrument in corporate worship is the voice of the congregation, and we thus emphasize robust singing that is never drowned out by instrumentation; indeed, it is normal for the congregation to sing a cappella on at least one verse each Sunday. The members of the church together make a joyful noise in song, but the church is encouraged to sing with beautiful melody as a part of our desire to give excellence in our singing; it is thus common for the congregation to sing different parts in harmony.

Although the primary instruments of the congregation are the voices of her members, First Baptist places a strong emphasis on musical excellence both in singing and accompaniment. Singing and instrumentation are good gifts from God that are to be used for His praise, and the church, therefore, encourages their use in the corporate gathering of the church. The sanctuary choir functions to help lead the congregation in singing through their harmonization and skillful singing. Likewise, the orchestra, piano, and organ provide a means of musical accompaniment to facilitate and encourage singing (Psalm 150:3-6). As a means of training the next generation of musicians and singers, the church has children's and youth choirs; these choirs encourage children and youth to sing skillfully unto the Lord.

The church's convictions about music thus drive the selection of songs. First and foremost, given the centrality of the Word, the songs must be both biblically accurate and scripturally rich in content. Second, they are primarily God-centered and not man-centered (although we certainly recognize the scriptural command of Ephesians 5:19 that some of our singing ought to be to one another for the purpose of edification). Third, the songs must be singable for the congregation. Although musically complex hymns may be beautiful and appealing to the ear, their difficulty may preclude the ease of singing for the average attender; since the primary instrument of worship is the voice of the congregation, we aim to ensure that the songs can be easily sung by the gathered church.

Although the music of the church can be broadly categorized as neo-traditional or blended, the above demonstrates that our concerns are less stylistic and more theological. Our biblical convictions drive our view of the purpose and content of worship. The gifts and skills of the congregation lead to the kind of instrumentation that accompanies our singing. Ultimately, however, our desire is for worship—and the music that is part of our worship—to glorify God and point people to His majesty and work in redemption.