

True Worship Includes a Heart for Excellence

And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit,¹⁹ addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart,²⁰ giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,²¹ submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

– Ephesians 5:18–21 –

In Ephesians 5:18–21 Paul gives two commands: (1) do not get drunk and (2) be filled with the Spirit. He also gives five participles detailing the single command to be filled with the Spirit:

- (1) Addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs
- (2) Singing and (3) making melody to the Lord with your heart
- (4) Giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ
- (5) Submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Clearly, this passage focuses on the church being filled by the Spirit. All that follows amplifies this command. As a result, we can conclude that apart from the Spirit, there would be no singing (variously described), thanksgiving, or submitting. And thus it is vital to see that worship depends on the Spirit and that Spirit-filled worship aims at the heart. For at the center of the outworking of the Spirit is a heart that singing, giving thanks, and submitting.

Still, it would be premature to say that the Spirit only turns the heart and does not empower the hands. Indeed, worship that loves God does so with heart, soul, mind, and strength (Mark 12:28–29). In other words, true worship includes the inner *and* outer man. All that we are is to worship God and this includes our bodies and the gifts God gives us in all parts of life.

In fact, if we widen our gaze from Ephesians 5 to the whole the Bible, we will discover at least two things about the Spirit and singing that will help worship God in Spirit and truth. First, the Spirit gifts people with artistry, wisdom, skill, and ability. Because of this, we should consider how such skills might inform worship gatherings today. And second, those who once led congregational signing in Israel’s temple were endowed with such skills.

Tracing these two ideas in Scripture will help balance our reading of Ephesians 5. Or to say it differently, we will see how worship that springs from the heart calls music leaders to play for the Lord with growing skill. For certainly, as God looks at the heart of the worshiper (cf. 1 Sam 16:7), we discover Scripture is not silent about the hands. Thus, in what follows, we will see what Scripture says about excellence in congregational singing.

The Spirit Gifts People with Technical Skills

When Isaiah describes the gift of the Holy Spirit, he attributes wisdom and knowledge, counsel and might to him (Isa. 11:2). This description of the Spirit speaks of the “son of Jesse” who will

come to bring salvation in the future (vv. 1–5). But it is important to note that this description of the Spirit is very different than the way he is often understood today—and it’s not because we live in a different dispensation.

Today, we tend to think of the Spirit doing personal and interior work in the life of Christians. And there is biblical support for this: the Spirit convicts us of sin (John 16:8), pours love into our hearts (Rom. 5:5); and produces love, joy, peace, etc. in our lives (Gal. 5:22–23). All these truths are wonderful and real. However, the Spirit also does work in the world (Isa. 32:15) and in gifting his people to do work that builds up others (1 Cor. 12:7). In fact, one of the first places we see this outward manifestation of the Spirit is in the construction of the tabernacle.

Long before the Holy Spirit comes upon the Judges or dwells in the hearts of new covenant Christians, Exodus 31 and 35 tell us about two men gifted by the Spirit to build God’s dwelling place. Listen to Exodus 31:1–6

The LORD said to Moses, ²“See, I have called by name Bezalel the son of Uri, son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, ³and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with ability and intelligence, with knowledge and all craftsmanship, ⁴to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze, ⁵in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, to work in every craft. ⁶And behold, I have appointed with him Oholiab, the son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan. And I have given to all able men ability, that they may make all that I have commanded you.

Importantly, the first spiritual gift in the Bible is not kindness but craftsmanship. Truly, just as the Spirit formed the world with skill and artistry, doing exactly what the Father designed and Son spoke, so the Spirit endows God’s people with creative wisdom. In the Old Testament, this skill is physical in nature; in the New Testament, temple building relates to the living stones of the church.

Tracking this theme further, Exodus 35:30 repeats the same idea and Exodus 36:1–2 continues,

Bezalel and Oholiab and every craftsman in whom the LORD has put skill and intelligence to know how to do any work in the construction of the sanctuary shall work in accordance with all that the LORD has commanded. ²And Moses called Bezalel and Oholiab and every craftsman in whose mind the LORD had put skill, everyone whose heart stirred him up to come to do the work.

Clearly, “skill” is an important part of God’s gifting. Without it the tabernacle could not have been built. But with it every part of the tabernacle was formed according to God’s word. In fact, the word skill/skillful/skillfully shows up 26 times in Exodus 25–40, all with respect to the tabernacle. Incredibly, when the tabernacle is finished, Exodus 39:43 says, “And Moses saw all the work [of the tabernacle], and behold, they had done it; as the LORD had commanded, so had they done it.” But the only way it could be said that they had done it “as the LORD had commanded” is because

God had gifted the builders with skill. In this way, we see how important skill was for building the tabernacle.

Next, the same attention to skill is found in the construction of the temple. Continuing the temple-building theme, 1–2 Chronicles repeats the importance of skilled workers in the construction of God’s holy dwelling. For instance, here are two places that capture this concern.

You have an abundance of workmen: stonecutters, masons, carpenters, and all kinds of craftsmen without number, *skilled in working* . . . (1 Chr. 22:15)

⁷ So now send me a man skilled to work in gold, silver, bronze, and iron, and in purple, crimson, and blue fabrics, trained also in engraving, to be with the *skilled workers* who are with me in Judah and Jerusalem, whom David my father provided. . . .¹³ “Now I have sent a *skilled man*, who has understanding, Hiram-abi, . . . (2 Chr. 2:7, 13)

Additionally, there are verses that speak of skill in other trades. First Chronicles 28:21 calls skilled servants who will assist the priests and Levites. Second Chronicles 26:15 describes warriors who are skilled in inventing machines of war. Second Chronicles 30:22 speaks of skilled Levites who served well under Hezekiah. Importantly, Hezekiah recognized their skill, encouraged their skill, and rewarded their skill.

Outside of 1–2 Chronicles, we also see Ezra commended for his skill in the law (Ezra 7:6). And Psalm 78:72 speaks of David as one skilled in leading the people. “With upright heart he shepherded them and guided them with his skillful hand.” Truly David had a skillful hand in his leadership as he took a group of disgruntled warriors (1 Sam. 22:2) and trained them to be a unified and loyal team, what 1 Samuel 23:8 calls David’s “mighty men.” Yet, their “might” was not inherent; it came from David’s skilled shepherding.

All in all, we find high esteem for the place of skill in the Old Testament. So much so that Proverbs 22:29 can say, “Do you see a man skillful in his work? He will stand before kings; he will not stand before obscure men.” Likewise, Scripture also speaks of skilled musicians—musicians who play for God’s glory with skill they have received from the Lord.

Song Leaders are Marked by Musical Skill

In the Bible there are two key places where skill is related to music and musicians. The first is in the Psalms, the second concerns the Levites in 1–2 Chronicles. Let’s consider each.

Skill in the Psalms

Intriguingly, the first place where the Bible speaks about a “new song” it also speaks about the skill with which musicians should play. In the Bible, a “new song” is a song for the redeemed. The term only shows up nine times—six times in the Psalms (33:3; 40:3; 96:1; 98:1; 144:9;

149:1), once in Isaiah 42:10, and twice in Revelation 5:9 and 14:3—and it always relates to worship of God for his salvation *by those who are redeemed*.

So, we might venture to guess that these references would focus on the posture of the heart more than the performance of the music. Yet, such a dichotomy is not found in Scripture. In the first instance, Psalm 33:3 states, “Sing to him a new song; play skillfully on the strings, with loud shouts.”

Incredibly, the first command related to the song of the redeemed is to play it “skillfully.” This passage does not follow the logic that says, “Because we have been saved, our playing does not matter.” It makes the opposite case, “Because we have been saved, *our playing matters immensely!*” Skillful playing is the right and rejoicing response to God’s redemption!

More tacitly, we can see this idea again in Psalm 144:9. There David says, “I will sing a new song to you, O God; upon a ten-stringed harp I will play to you, who gives victory to kings, who rescues David his servant from the cruel sword.” Again, the idea of singing in response to God’s redemption is present and David says he will play on his “ten-stringed harp.” To be sure, we don’t find any statement about David’s skill here, but we do find two curious statements leading up to these verses.

The first is that God trained David’s hands for war (Ps. 144:1) and we can deduce that he who gave skill to David for battle also gave skill for music. This in fact is the case when we look at 1 Samuel 16:16, 18. David played the harp for Saul, because he was found to be with skill.

However, we also find something else in Psalm 137:4–6. These verses read,

- ⁴ How shall we sing the LORD’s song in a foreign land?
- ⁵ If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its skill!
- ⁶ Let my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth,
if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy!

Here the mention of skill relates to song and the Psalmist (not David, as it comes from the Babylonia exile). It suggests that skill can be forgotten and remembered and that when salvation is lost (or Israel is deported from the place of God’s dwelling), skill *should* be lost too.

By implication this would mean that those who play instruments in worship to God should do so remembering (read: practicing) their instruments so that they play with the greatest skill possible. This, of course, goes back to the command in Psalm 33:3 and it is the model we find in the musicians commissioned by David in 1–2 Chronicles.

Skill in the Levitical Singers

In 1 Chronicles 25 we find that David in organizing the temple (in preparation for Solomon) has organized the musicians. And who are these musicians? They are the Levites, but not just any

Levites. Only those skilled in music could lead the congregation in song. First Chronicles 25:6–7 reads,

All these were the sons of Heman the king's seer, according to the promise of God to exalt him, for God had given Heman fourteen sons and three daughters. They were all under the direction of their father in the music in the house of the LORD with cymbals, harps, and lyres for the service of the house of God. Asaph, Jeduthun, and Heman were under the order of the king. ⁷ The number of them along with their brothers, who were trained in singing to the LORD, all who were skillful, was 288. ⁸ And they cast lots for their duties, small and great, teacher and pupil alike. (vv. 5–7)

As a musician himself, David understood the importance of music and thus he appointed a team of skilled musicians. However, he did not simply open the door for any and all. He appointed a specific number with clear lines of leadership. From 1 Chronicles 25, we can make five observations:

1. David appointed Asaph, Juduthun, and Heman to lead music. These Levites are familiar because each has a Psalm or more (Asaph has 12) attributed to them.
2. David also appointed Heman, who had seventeen children, to play various instruments.
3. The list of instruments (cymbals, harps, and lyres) suggests there is a division of labor in God's house, but also that each musician would play the right instrument.
4. Additionally, the total number of singers is 288, indicating not everyone was skilled to sing or lead in song.
5. Using lots, they assigned various roles related to teacher pupil, indicating that some measure of instruction, development, and discipleship was taking place.

From these three verses, we might find a whole class, in music leadership, and certainly it reinforces the principle—skill matters! The skills of these musicians were both recognized and honed for purposes in worshiping God in congregational worship. In fact, the longevity of David's organizational wisdom—again, his skill in shepherding is seen here (cf. Ps 78:72)—is observed in the Psalms that these Levites wrote. Likewise, their ongoing service continues in reigns of Hezekiah and Josiah.

For instance, we find Hezekiah speaking encouragingly “to all the Levites who showed good skill in the service of the Lord.” (2 Chr. 30:22). This “all the Levites” includes the musicians, but it also means not all the Levites were singers—others were gatekeepers, etc. (Psalm 84). Nevertheless, skill continues to be an important piece of worship in Israel and one that Hezekiah rightly encourages.

Later, the same kind of encouragement is found in Josiah's reign, where 2 Chronicles 34:12 speaks of “the Levites, all who were skillful with instruments of music.” As Josiah reestablished true worship in the temple, he set over the workers musicians to spur on the labor. Might this relationship between musicians and other laborers be repeated in the church today? Possibly, or at least, another class on the place of music in encouraging the saints could be found here.

All in all, these historical records give us a fulsome view of music in the temple, and in every case, those who worship God truly do so with skillful hands.

Those Who Lead the Church in Song Should Pursue Excellence

From the Old Testament we have seen that skill matters. And we might (wrongly) assume that because the New Testament is less concerned with the external (i.e., we don't go to a temple covered with gold), outward appearances (outward sounds) no longer matter. But I believe this would be a misdirected conclusion.

First, we cannot conclude that excellence no longer matters. On the basis of the Spirit's *greater work* in the New Testament church, we should see a greater care for excellence *and* a greater ability to share in that excellence. Truly, we who know the greater grace of God can and should be more attentive to serving God with the gifts he has given.

In fact, following the direction of Andreas Kostenberger who has written at length on excellence (see his book by that title, *Excellence*), we might conclude our inquiry into excellence by looking at 2 Peter 1:3–11. This passage gives us a second reason for seeing skill as ongoing spiritual discipline and one that springs from our knowledge of God's excellence, which in turn, drives us to grow in our knowledge of him and our service to him.

Consider Peter's words,

³ His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, ⁴ by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. ⁵ For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, ⁶ and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, ⁷ and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. ⁸ For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins. ¹⁰ Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall. ¹¹ For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. (2 Pet. 1:3–11)

Two highlights from these words relate to excellence and progress. First, God is a God of excellence. In every temple he has ever "lived in," he has used the finest materials in order to

reflect the reality of heaven.¹ In the Old Testament this meant gold, silver, and precious metals. Today, living stones are what make up the temple of God. And redeemed stones are what bring honor to him. Yet, those stones are also undergoing a process of growth, sanctification, and preparation for Christ's return (i.e., entrance into the eternal kingdom).

In this way, and this is the second highlight from 2 Peter 1, our lives should reflect the progress that Peter marks out here: faith that leads to virtue, to knowledge, to self-control, to steadfastness, to godliness, to brotherly affection, and finally to love. Indeed, these marks of character reflect to our personal sanctification, but that includes all aspects of life, and that must include, by extension, music.

Balancing the argument here, we maintain that skilled musicianship is not the zenith of our praise. But if the glory of God is our chief end of worship, then playing skillfully, preparing faithfully, living honestly, and working collectively is what a musician and a team of musicians will do. In other words, how might 2 Peter 1:3–11 help inform our approach to worship and musical skill? It's a question worth asking.

Here's my short answer: skill is not ultimate, but it is vitally important. Skill should be recognized, affirmed, encouraged. Lack of skill should also be noted, and leaders (like those appointed by David) should help foster skill in others. Or, when skill detracts from the congregation's ability to worship, a faithful shepherd will lovingly protect the flock from musicians who distract from worship.²

Moreover, leadership, communications, feedback, and development should be put in place to enhance musical skill and to make sure it never becomes an overreaching idol. Skill should be harnessed and focused on God so that the gifts God gives by the Spirit result in praise to him. In this way, we rightly steward musical gifts (ours or others), as we (help) return them to the Father of Lights who gives all good gifts.

Truly, in the Bible we see skill as a necessary and good part of worship. It is not the first priority, but it is a priority nonetheless. And to that end musicians who seek to worship God from the heart and who want to lead others from the heart must train their hands in order to play and sing skillfully for the glory of God and the beauty of his praise.

¹ His world, which is described as a temple (Ps. 104), also displays immense care and detail. See Franky Schaefer, *Addicted to Mediocrity*, for a discussion of the place creation has in teaching us to be skillful in our creative efforts.

² This principle finds an analogy in the ministry of teaching. Not everyone who wants to teach should teach. Similarly, not everyone who wants to sing/play should. Skilled shepherds (Ps. 78:72) will know how to lead and develop this people.