

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

**PayPal**

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *Grace Journal* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_grace-journal.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_grace-journal.php)

# TOWARDS A CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

## III. THE PLACE OF MUSIC IN CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

FRANK E. GAEBELEIN

We turn now to "The Place of Music in Christian Education." "But why," someone asks, "single out one subject, and why choose music for that subject?" There are several answers to the question. For one thing, it is logical to consider a particular field at some length rather than to deal more superficially with various areas of knowledge. Again, of all the subject areas, music, along with English and speech, is closest to us all. Not a day goes by when we do not hear music; not a school day passes on the Christian campus when students do not participate in music through singing in chapel. Music is as constantly with us as food and drink. Even the student who never takes a single course in it, nevertheless to some real extent lives with it daily. A woman once said to her pastor, "The strange thing about life is that it is so daily." That is true also of music.

Moreover, music is united to Christianity in the closest kind of bond. Of all the great religions of the world, Christianity is the most musical. The essential handmaid of our worship is music. It accompanies some of our deepest experiences. Recall the quiet but eloquent service it renders after an evangelistic sermon as when the organ plays, or the choir sings such a hymn as "Just As I Am," or those who come forward join in singing, "Where He Leads Me, I Will Follow," or some similar hymn of commitment. Luther called music "a noble gift of God next to theology"<sup>1</sup> and said: "We must teach music in schools; a schoolmaster ought to have been well exercised in music." It was Goethe, the greatest of German writers, who said, "If the rainbow stood for a day, no one would look at it."<sup>2</sup> So it is with music; because we live with it, we may forget its wonder.

To define music is a subtle and difficult problem. Let it simply be said, quite apart from an attempt at definition, that music is the greatest of the arts. Nor is this merely a private estimate. Its dimensions are more than this-worldly, for it is identified, as is no other art, with time, the most mysterious and fluid thing we know, the element of our experience that impinges most closely upon eternity. It is no accident that there is more in the Bible regarding music than about any other of the arts. According to the Book of Revelation, music will be heard in heaven. Observe in these passages the survival in eternity of music, both instrumental (typified by the harps) and vocal.

"And they sung a new song, saying, Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation; and has made us unto our God kings and priests: and we shall reign on the earth. And I beheld, and I heard the voice of many angels round about the throne and the beasts and the elders: and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands."<sup>3</sup>

"And I heard a voice from heaven as the voice of a great thunder: and I heard the voice of harpers harping with their harps: And they sung as it were a new song before the throne, and be-

influences, radio, TV, advertising, and the press.<sup>12</sup> In both formal and informal education, and, above all, in Christian education, music should have an essential place.

What kind of music has a place in Christian education?<sup>13</sup> What kind of music belongs in the school program, in the home, in the church, in the recreational life of Christians? These are leading questions. Now the theme, the foundation, upon which our thinking about the place of music in Christian education must be based is the principle set down in the preceding lecture: All truth is of God. Therefore, music that is true, music that has integrity, belongs to God's truth and has its place in Christian education. For truth is not confined to the spoken and written word and to such subjects as mathematics and the sciences; it relates to the arts also.

Let this premise, then, that all truth, including truth in music, is of God stand as our basic theme. On it and out of it our thought will proceed. Thus we consider some implications or variations of this theme that music is a valid part of God's all-embracing truth. For one thing, the fact that music belongs to God's truth breaks down the misleading distinction between sacred and secular music.

What, after all, is sacred music? Well, according to common understanding, it is music linked either to religious words or music written for religious use. Thus there are Christians who, while suspicious of all so-called secular music as worldly, will attend with clear conscience a performance labelled a sacred concert in which a good deal of inferior, sentimental music has been baptized, as it were, by association with Christian verse, or in which tawdry, tasteless hymn arrangements, false to any real musical integrity, are deemed sacred. But is the principle of sanctification by association a valid criterion for the distinction, so common today, between sacred or Christian and secular or worldly music? Certainly not. Rather the only defensible criterion as to whether music is fit for use in Christian worship and for service as a handmaid of the glorious truths of the Gospel is its own, inherent quality, provided that it meets first of all the test of truth.

"And what," we are asked, "is truth in music?" Now it would be presumptuous to attempt anything like a final answer to the question. But one may at least point in the direction of the answer. Let me put it negatively, first of all. Music that is pretentious, music that is vulgar, as in some of the so-called evangelistic styles of piano playing, lacks integrity. As music it is not true, even though doctrinally it keeps the best of company.

Positively, what are some of the elements of truth in music? Are they not honesty of expression, sincerity in the sense of avoidance of the cheap and contrived? And surely they include such qualities as simplicity and directness. Yet on the other hand, they do not rule out either complexity or sophistication, as opposed to artless simplicity. Bach wrote some enormously complex music, yet there is no higher musical truth than his. Honesty and integrity in music are not confined to the simple and naive. In point of fact, there is a vast body of music that has truth and integrity, yet is not fitted for church use, although Christians may enjoy it because it is part of God's truth. Strictly speaking, there is no such thing as Christian music, just as there is no such thing as Christian mathematics. Music is itself, simply music. What we call Christian music--and the word implies a body of doctrine--always gets its name by association, usually with

Christian words. For example, the Chopin polonaises or mazurkas, beautiful as they are, do not convey religious feeling. They have their place in the Christian's enjoyment of music, but not in church.

Is there, then, music that as music, regardless of words or religious associations, is compatible with spiritual worship? The answer is a clear "Yes." There is music that is innately spiritual in appeal. Not all of Bach's religious music was written for church use. Some of the forty-eight Preludes and Fugues, such as the great E major Prelude and Fugue in the Second Book of The Well-Tempered Clavichord are deeply spiritual. Unquestionably many of Beethoven's slow movements in the symphonies and sonatas, such as the wonderful second movement of the last Piano Sonata, Op. 111, speak with a transcendental, almost heavenly voice. Mendelssohn's Reformation Symphony has its religious moments and not just because of his use of Ein' Feste Burg. But the Cesar Franck Symphony, without any such reference, is also religious, even mystical, in spirit. The firm majesty of Handel, so compatible with faith, is not confined to The Messiah. Witness the universally familiar Largo, which, though composed for secular use, has found such wide religious acceptance. Or take a piece like the Mendelssohn Song without Words, named Consolation, that we have in our hymnals under the name, Communion; or the Schumann Nachtstücke, that we know as the hymn tune Canonbury. Granted that personal taste enters into comments like these, the point is clear that there is a wealth of absolute music that is in itself conducive to worship.

My own feeling is that more of this kind of music should be used in our services in schools and churches, not self-consciously but unobtrusively. It may sound radical, but I wonder if the practice of always printing on our church calendars the names and composers of preludes and postludes and the offertories is a good thing. Yes, I know that we want to develop the people's understanding of fine music. But a church service is not a course in music appreciation. And we must be careful, in our reaching out for a higher level of church music, not to foster what Don Hustad calls "spectatorism," in which the people settle back in their pews as at an opera or concert and look on parts of the church musical service as a performance.

Consider an example from another of the arts. A distinguished artist had finished a painting of the Last Supper. All was done with great skill, and the chalice in particular had been painted most beautifully. As one after another of the artist's friends looked at the painting, they said: "What a beautiful cup!" Then the artist realized that he had diverted attention from the Lord. Taking his brush, he painted out the gorgeous chalice and substituted for it a more quietly beautiful and far less obtrusive one. So should it be with music in worship. It should not call attention to itself nor monopolize the center of attraction that belongs to the Lord. And it may well be that the use, almost anonymously, of some first-rate music that, while unfamiliar, is in itself spiritual, will help the atmosphere of worship.

"But what," we are bound to be asked, "about Gospel hymns? Are you saying that all of our church music must be serious and classical?" This is the inevitable inquiry growing out of a very present point of tension in evangelical Protestant worship. Yes, what about Gospel hymns? Surely the answer is still, as was pointed out in The Pattern of God's Truth, that "when it comes to Gospel hymns and their more formal companions, it is not a matter of 'either - or' but of 'both - and.'"<sup>14</sup> For the criterion for Gospel music must be nothing less than the truth just as the truth must be the criterion for the words of Gospel hymns. Christians ought not to tolerate a double-standard in worship—namely, zeal for the truth in doctrine and disregard of the truth in art.

"But does not this criterion rule out all Gospel music?" our questioner persists. Not if we realize the wonderful comprehensiveness of God's truth. Some of the truest music ever written, music of utter integrity, is folk music. Think of the true nobility of Negro spirituals like "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" We speak of "highbrow" or "long-haired" music. May we reverently say that God recognized no such distinction but only the truth. It is a mistake to confine truth in music to the classical or sophisticated, or to the old. There are Gospel hymns--and the number is not inconsiderable--that in their sincere, artless expression are valid and honest music. They belong in our worship and education. Without attempting anything like a list, let me say that they include hymns such as What a Friend We Have in Jesus, Blessed Assurance, or Saviour Like a Shepherd Lead Us, a tune by the way, that Dvorak wove into the last movement of his Violincello Concerto. Jerome Hines of the Metropolitan Opera, a great singer and an earnest Christian, in no way compromised his artistic integrity when he sang at the prayer breakfast in Washington Blessed Assurance as his testimony before the President and other leaders of our nation. One gets a little weary of extremists who say, "Away with all Gospel music; it's all trash;" or those on the other side who say, "Away with all the older hymns; they're all staid, doleful, and joyless." The antitheses are false. Not all the old, standard hymns are staid and sombre; and, on the other hand, if the truth must be told, even the best denominational hymnals contain some hymns of negligible value, hardly worth singing. And to classify all Gospel music as trash is nothing less than obscurantist. It is much more difficult to be thoughtfully discriminating than to fall back upon sweeping generalization, but nevertheless discrimination according to the truth as one sees it is the only responsible answer to the tension between Gospel hymns and standard hymns.

In point of fact, there is a far greater threat to the musical integrity of our evangelical worship and education than the Gospel hymn. This threat is the invasion of Christian music by the techniques of the entertainment world and show business. With the advent of TV and the widespread use of record players and hi-fi sets, the great God-ordained center of education, the home, has been infiltrated by the musical devices of Hollywood and the night club. What does the habitual use of such music do in a home? It debases taste and cheapens the Gospel. Whoever wrote the editorial in the September 16, 1961, issue of the Sunday School Times was absolutely right in his slashing attack upon the dressing up of our Gospel melodies in the garments of show business. If the state of music among evangelicals is not what it should be, then records in which the precious doctrines of our redemption are unequally yoked with the movie-theatre organ or sung in the over-sweet mood of cocktail-hour ballads has much for which to answer. Paul's exhortation quoted in the preceding lecture, "Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold,"<sup>15</sup> is an aesthetic as well as a moral imperative and it applies as much to some of the music that is so popular among many Christians as it does to jazz, which is generally unacceptable to Christians.

Now we come to the heart of the matter, which is the formation of musical taste. In an essay entitled the Place of Classics in Education, the great philosopher Alfred North Whitehead has a noble sentence. It is this: "Moral education is impossible apart from the habitual vision of greatness."<sup>16</sup> Let us paraphrase it thus: "Musical education is impossible apart from the habitual hearing of greatness." This is the key to the place of music in Christian education.

Look again at the home. Look forward to the homes college students will set up. And indulge me in a bit of autobiography. I am privileged to be the son of a great Bible teacher, one who stood firmly for the Word of God and who preached the Gospel fearlessly wherever he went. Why

am I a Christian today? Because of my home, the place where as a small boy I received Christ as my Saviour. And why am I a musical person today? Again, because of my home. Among my earliest memories is that of hearing my father and my oldest brother playing Beethoven's Fourth Symphony in a four-hand piano arrangement. This was long before the day of radio and record players, but we had music in our home. My father and brother were not fine pianists, but they loved and played good music. Yes, musical education is impossible apart from the habitual hearing of greatness--not necessarily in great performance, for that was not nearly so available in my boyhood as it is now, thanks to long-playing records, but in constant hearing even of unskilled performance of great music.

What of musical education in school and college? Here too the same principle holds. Whatever else we do we must expose youth to greatness in music. Moreover, we need to tell them the difference between the good and the bad in music. Today one of the watchwords in education is, as was pointed out in the preceding lecture, the pursuit of excellence. Christian education, committed to that which is most excellent of all, the truth incarnate in Him who is altogether lovely, can do no less than seek excellence in music, as in everything else. Seminary students may well remember that, when they become pastors, they have a responsibility for the kind of music used in the services they lead.

As headmaster of a school that stresses academic standards and college preparation in these competitive days, I deplore the imbalance of the curriculum in schools like ours. I wish that music might be a major subject like English and mathematics. Yet with the all-too-little time at our disposal, some real exposure to greatness is still possible. At Stony Brook, aside from our choir, which is one of our most respected extra-curricular activities, and the usual class in music appreciation, private lessons on various instruments, and a rudimentary band, we try to give all of our boys some personal exposure to musical greatness.

Each year the whole school of about 200 plus the faculty is organized for part singing. Through weekly rehearsals, we learn some great music and sing it at public occasions, such as the annual academic convocation or the baccalaureate service. Thus we have learned choruses from The Messiah, a Gloria from one of Mozart's Masses, some Bach, and this year we are working on a chorus from Haydn's Creation. It is refreshing to hear adolescent boys walking along the campus humming or singing Mozart, Handel, or Haydn. Again, there may be regular exposure to music of truth and beauty through daily and Sunday chapel, not only in the singing of fine hymns, but also through the organ. Concerts for the whole school at which good artists perform fine music are an essential part of the program. But I speak of these things with humility, realizing how much more we should do than we are doing.

The principle remains unchanged, whatever our situation. The key to better things in our Christian use of music is the habitual hearing of greatness--not only in the day or boarding school, not only in college and seminary, but in Sunday School also. For the music that children hear exercises a formative influence on their taste. Not even the very little child may be safely fed an aural diet of musical trash.

Music is a demanding art, and "life is short but art is long." To achieve excellence in music requires discipline and unremitting work. Yet in this, as in all else, we Christians must keep our priorities clear. God is the giver of talent. When He gives talent--musical talent or any other--

He gives it not to be made an idol of, but to be used first of all to His glory. In humble words the great composer Haydn summed up his musical life: "I know," he said, "that God appointed me a task. I acknowledge it with thanks, and hope and believe I have done my duty and have been useful to the world."<sup>17</sup> Truly, music is a great gift; but it is the Giver, not the gift, who must have the first place in the teaching and practice of music in Christian education.

In the account of his conversion that has come down to us from the fourth century, the great church father, Jerome, who made the Latin translation of the Bible, tells of a dream that led to his conversion. He dreamed, he says, that he appeared before the judgment seat of the Judge. "Who are you?" the Lord asked. "I am a Christian," was the reply. But the Lord said: "Thou liest; thou art a follower of Cicero, not of Christ. For 'where thy treasure is, there will thy heart be also.'"<sup>18</sup> Jerome was a rhetorician and his consuming interest and first love was the study of Cicero.

By no means all of you will be tempted to give music the first place that belongs to Christ, simply because only a comparatively few are called to be musicians. But the principle is the same regardless of the particular thing involved. There are many things that may usurp the central place in our lives and actually crowd out Christ. For some, it may be athletics; for others, studies; or it may be a personal relationship, including the closest of all relationships, that to ourselves. In his First Epistle, John says: "Little children, keep yourselves from idols."<sup>19</sup> But what is an idol? It is anything in life that counts for more than Christ. Look hard at the word "idol;" observe that it begins with "I."

Therefore, let our closing thought be this: Everything--no matter how fine and worthy, whether it be music or scholarship, athletics or profession, or even the human being who is nearest and dearest--everything must be brought into captivity to Christ.<sup>20</sup> For in all things He must have the preeminence.<sup>21</sup>

#### DOCUMENTATION

1. A Compend of Luther's Theology, Hugh Thomson Kerr, ed., Philadelphia, 1943, p. 147.
2. Quoted in God and the Cosmos, Theodore Graebner, Grand Rapids, 1932, p. 42.
3. Revelation 5:9-11.
4. Revelation 14:2,3.
5. Revelation 15:2,3.
6. Ephesians 5:19.
7. Documents of the Christian Church, Henry Bettenson, ed., New York, 1947, p. 6.
8. Dialogues of Alfred North Whitehead, Lucien Price, Boston, p. 231.
9. Collected Works of Plato, B. Jowett, trans., New York, n.d., p. 67.
10. Problems, XIX. 27. 919b26, Quoted by Butcher, Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art, London, 1920, p. 131.
11. Cf. Christian Education in a Democracy, Frank E. Gaebelein, New York, 1951, p. 67.
12. Ibid., 68, 69.
13. The material from this point to the last two paragraphs of this lecture appeared in somewhat condensed form in Christianity Today, 16 February, 1962, under the title, "Music in Christian

Education." The entire lecture, somewhat adapted, contains the substance of an address before the National Church Music Fellowship in Philadelphia, 28, November, 1961.

14. The Pattern of God's Truth, Frank E. Gaebelain, New York, 1949, p. 77.
15. Romans 12:2, Phillips.
16. The Aims of Education and Other Essays, Alfred North Whitehead, New York, 1949, p. 77.
17. How Music Grew, Marion Bauer and Ethel Peyser, New York, 1925, p. 282.
18. A Treasury of Early Christianity, Anne Fremantle, ed., New York, 1960, p. 91.
19. I John 5:21.
20. II Corinthians 10:5.
21. Colossians 1:18.