

# On This Rock

## *Why The Gates of Hell Appear to Prevail*

*Part Eight*

*The Elements of Worship #3*

*How to Sing a Hymn*

*Matthew 16:18, 19*

*With Study Questions*

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11/4/2018*

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**And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. <sup>19</sup> And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven (Matthew 16:18, 19).**

### **Introduction**

During my undergraduate years I became friends with a student who was studying musical therapy. I asked her to explain her major. She shared that music had been shown to reach a property within the human psyche that cannot be touched by other means. At the time, research in autism was relatively new. But even then it had been observed that those with severe autism, at a level where they would not respond to any stimuli at all, would respond to music. Music was somehow different.

About ten years later I was a youth pastor. I was quite evangelistically aggressive and ran a camp at Catalina Island. We would raise thousands of dollars and I would canvas the South Bay inviting any willing teenager to spend a week hearing the gospel (with no reasonable possibility of escape). Needless to say we had gathered some troubled teens. It was during one of these weeks that a young man, Dean, opened up to me regarding his tendencies toward drugs and violence. He was only fifteen.

When I asked him what triggered his unhealthy behavior he shared something I was surprised to hear. It was music. He was into very aggressive and violent music. I think he could tell that I didn't really get it. With great conviction he confessed how powerful it was. How it would bring him to a significantly different place in his heart. Not a good place.

It would appear that music can be inebriating. Perhaps this is why the Apostle Paul pits it against drunkenness:

**And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit, <sup>19</sup> speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord (Ephesians 5:18, 19).**

All this to say that music should not be considered innocuous or benign (harmless). There is something powerfully good or powerfully bad when it comes to music. And the church is not necessarily a safe zone in this category. It was in the context of religious people worshipping that we read the harsh indictment of Jesus:

**Hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy about you, saying:**  
*<sup>8</sup>These people draw near to Me with their mouth, And honor Me with their lips, But their heart is far from Me. <sup>9</sup>And in vain they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men (Matthew 15:7-9).*

The church ought to be very attentive regarding how close we might be to this precipice. It may be generally true that **“out of the abundance of hit (the) heart the mouth speaks (Luke 6:45)**. But there is another sense in which the mouth utters that which is contrary to the heart or is so shallow that the heart is entirely disengaged.

Mortimer Adler served on the Board of Editors of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. His desire to bring philosophy and deeper thinking to the masses inspired him to write a book entitled, *How to Read a Book*. If I may borrow from Adler, I would like to ask (in light of the power we’ve established involved) *How to Sing a Hymn*.

## Review

But first I would like to place this message in the context of our wider series, a series I’ve entitled *On This Rock, Why The Gates of Hell Appear to Prevail*. We have reflected upon this great promise by Jesus and why it doesn’t seem to be happening, at least in this current era. My thesis is this

is due to the promise being made to and through the church. The church must function as the church in order to see this promise come to fruition.

The non-negotiable central message of the church revolves around the “**rock**”. Jesus is the cornerstone and the foundation is the apostles and prophets. In short, the church must advance biblical Christianity. It seems obvious. The church has been entrusted with a stewardship of God’s grace. The church is the primary outward, visible institution that presents the accomplished work of redemption to the ears of men and women that the Holy Spirit might apply it to the heart.

Although there are numerous definitions for the word *church*, it is the local church that is the contact point with humanity. It was in the midst of the local, named churches in Revelation 2 and 3 that we saw the special presence of Christ. It is when the church gathers that God inhabits the praises of His people (Psalm 22:3).

God has given His church a mission. It is not to be idle, inert or only inwardly focused. There is a “Go” given to the church. We are to reach out and proclaim His gospel. We are to love and care for the souls of our neighbors, seek to bring them to Christ and teach them to obey all that He commands. The wisdom of God is a gem which should not be hidden. The mission of the church is nothing less than a transformed world—the shattering of the gates of hell and its great destruction of humanity.

To equip His people for this glorious task, God calls His people together. This battle is not won in isolation. We are to commune with God and each other. The most effectively transforming activity we can engage in for our own souls and the redemption of the world is gathering to worship. Calvin makes an astonishing comment regarding worship:

**If it be inquired, then, by what things chiefly the Christian religion has a standing existence amongst us, and maintains its truth, it will be found that the following two not only occupy the principal place, but comprehend under them all the other parts, and consequently the whole substance of Christianity, viz., a knowledge, first, of the mode in which**

**God is duly worshipped; and, secondly, of the source from which salvation is to be obtained.<sup>1</sup>**

We might intuitively resist the notion of placing worship ahead of salvation in terms of the most important elements of the Christian faith. But they are so intertwined that one cannot be extracted from the other. Calvin further offered:

**...there is nothing more perilous to our salvation than a preposterous and perverse worship of God.<sup>2</sup>**

It was when the world witnessed the proper worship of the living God that we read of the Lord adding **“to the church daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47).**

In light of this, the first element of the kind of worship God has prescribed is the *Call to Worship*. God calls us by His word. It is God who initiates. **“Gather my people together”** says the Lord. That the **“men and women and littles ones, and the stranger...may hear...” Deuteronomy 31:12, 13).** Last time we discussed that the reasonable (and virtually undeniable) response when called by God is the acknowledgment of our own sin. When this confession is made and the mercy is God is beseeched, it is freely given.

When the Savior lays His right hand upon us, lifting body and soul with the words **“Do not be afraid...Your faith has saved...Your sins are forgiven” (Revelation 1:17; Luke 7:48, 50),** it is no stretch to conclude that this is a good time to sing.

## **How to Sing a Hymn**

There may be no topic as controversial in terms of worship than music. This is no new thing. There is no shortage of theologians suggesting that when Satan fell, he landed in the choir loft. To whatever

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<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, “On the Necessity of Reforming the Church,” *Selected Works of John Calvin*, ed. by Henry Beveridge, Grand Rapids, Michigan (Baker Book House), 1983, vol. 1, p. 126.

<sup>2</sup> John Calvin and Jacopo Sadoletto, *A Reformation Debate*, ed. by John C. Olin, New York (Harper and Row), 1966, p. 59.

extent Ezekiel 28:12-17 and Isaiah 14:12-14 have reference to Satan, it has been suggested that the devil was the original worship leader. This is why it is critical when a church selects a worship leader, that the leader be strong in character with a humble heart. Music in the church can be a rodeo of wild bulls.

I do not have the time at this point to address all of the issues surrounding worship and the various ways churches (if they do at all) employ the Regulative Principle.<sup>3</sup> It should be an ongoing quest by churches and their leaders to form a service that is honoring to God and edifying to God's people.

At the same time we should resist the idea that it is possible to create a liturgy that sufficiently warrants God's approval by the very nature of the liturgy itself. Liturgies (the order and elements of worship) might here be compared to the people participating. Every liturgy and every person needs to be seen, as it were, in Christ. Apart from Christ the finest person and the most biblical liturgy would be a stench in the nose of God.

Years ago I attended an elder's meeting at a church where an interim pastor recommended changing the structure of the way communion was administered. One of the elders was indignant at the suggestion. I recall his comment, "It has been generally agreed upon that our administration of the Lord's Supper in this church is second to none!" I don't mean to sound harsh or judgmental (I certainly didn't know his heart), but at a surface observation, a statement like this seems pridefully unhealthy.

So, even though we should strive for perfection, let it be stated that we will never, this side of glory get there. Let it also be stated that in the meantime, we should still engage with a whole heart.

So, how do we sing a hymn?

First, and foremost, we sing a hymn faithfully. We do not want to fall into the category of which Jesus spoke, where our lips are saying one thing and our hearts are somewhere else entirely. Again, not to sound unduly harsh, but there appear to be so many popular entertainers who are admitted unbelievers, sharing that their career began in the church choir.

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<sup>3</sup> This principle holds that the Scriptures must so regulate public worship that only what is explicitly commanded in the Bible may be an element of worship.

This may be the most dangerous. Paul wrote that in taking communion unworthily, we drink to our own “judgment” (1 Corinthians 11:29). May our own words not be a judgment against us when our lips utter than which our hearts have rejected.

Second, we are to sing knowledgably. At a time when there was great confusion in the church due to people supernaturally speaking foreign languages resulting in pandemonium, Paul emphasized the need to understand.

**What is *the conclusion* then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will also pray with the understanding. I will sing with the spirit, and I will also sing with the understanding.**

**<sup>16</sup> Otherwise, if you bless with the spirit, how will he who occupies the place of the uninformed say “Amen” at your giving of thanks, since he does not understand what you say (1 Corinthians 14:15, 16)?**

We should know what we are singing and even when we sing the same song, there should always be a deeper understanding as we mature in the faith. “Jesus loves me this I know...” may be childish lyrics, but they should mean more to a mature Christian than an immature Christian.

Third, we should sing as a choir. Referencing again the Lord’s Supper. It is communion with God and each other. The infraction of the Corinthians was a lack of thoughtfulness to the brethren. It is similar with singing. Paul wrote that we should be...

**...speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord (Ephesians 5:19).**

He adds in his letter to the Colossians:

**Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord (Colossians 3:16).**

There is an effect we should have on each other during worship. I might add that this is not as efficiently accomplished when all eyes and focus are upon a few perhaps highly talented and amplified leaders (which often unintentionally encourages the congregation to merely enjoy spectating).

Fourth, we are to worship enthusiastically. The word enthusiasm in worship carries its own baggage. The Puritans associated it with excessive emotion (which can be a problem). But the word enthusiasm comes from *en* "in" and *theos* "god". We are to sing as those possessed by God. I am not naturally a musical person. Singing comes difficult and I am self-conscious. But I should seek to overcome such self-centeredness. I see it in myself and I see it in others. It is a lack of focus and energy. Speaking as a coach, these are the earmarks of a losing team.

**I will praise You, O Lord, with my whole heart; I will tell of all Your marvelous works. <sup>2</sup>I will be glad and rejoice in You; I will sing praise to Your name, O Most High (Psalm 9:1, 2).**

My friends, the enemy has stirred his forces to engage in ungodly songs with reckless abandon, and here we sit, blessed with the riches of heaven, in relative silence.

I know it may sound corny, but there is a very moving scene in the movie *Casablanca*. The movie was made in 1942 so World War II was actually in full throttle at the time. There is a scene where the Nazi's have occupied a portion of Northwest Africa and in a bar begin to sing a song that was uniquely German while the other patrons (most of whom were French) sit idly by. At least until Victor Laszlo (the hero) instructs the band to play the French National Anthem (at which Rick gives the famous nod). The Nazis are soon stifled and overwhelmed by the enthusiasm of the anthem.

History has testified to a number of deathly encounters where Christians sang *A Mighty Fortress* while facing certain death. Music that is truly honoring to God is both honoring to God and life-changing.

Fifth and finally, we are to worship with an awareness of our environment. We generally think of worship as something we've invited God to. We invoke His presence. We summon the deity. But we have it backwards. He has summoned us. It has been said that **"Worship draws the Christian into heaven in communion with the ascended Christ."**

We spoke previous of the *special presence* of Christ in worship from Revelation 1, 2. And we think of that as His presence with us when, perhaps, we should think of our presence with Him. And what greater definition of heaven can there be than to enjoy the presence of Christ? It is in worship that we come closest to grasping that we are seated **“in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 2:6).**

## Questions for Study

1. Discuss the power of music. In what ways can it be inebriating? What are some of your experiences with the good and bad of music (pages 2, 3)?
2. Review the series On This Rock. What promise is made to and through the church? What is the central message of the church? What does the word *church* mean? What is the mission of the church? How does God equip His church?
3. Why do you suppose music in the church is so controversial (pages 5, 6)?
4. How important is a good liturgy? What will a good liturgy never accomplish on its own (pages 5, 6)?
5. What does it mean to sing faithfully (page 6)?
6. Why is knowledge important in worship (page 7)?
7. What does it mean that we should sing as a choir (page 7)?
8. Is it good or bad to be enthusiastic in worship? Why (pages 7, 8)?
9. What is our environment in worship (page 8)?