The Role of Music in Christian Worship: A Biblical, Theological, And Practical Assessment

Rev.Fabian Vishigho Ngoh PhD
Senior (Lead) Pastor of Berean Baptist
Church Kotto – Douala, Cameroon
And Douala Centre Association Pastor
(+237) 672 32 20 94 /686 361 581
vishigho@gmail.com
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Abstract
Music has occupied a significant place in the worship of God's people throughout biblical history and continues to shape Christian worship in contemporary congregations. Yet the increasing prominence of music in Christian worship raises important theological and practical questions concerning its purpose, content, leadership, and relationship to the other elements of the worship service. This article examines the role of music in Christian worship from biblical, theological, and practical perspectives. Drawing on Old and New Testament texts, theological literature, and scholarship on congregational song, the study argues that music should not be regarded merely as an emotional or aesthetic addition to worship. Rather, it functions as a theological and ecclesial means through which the church praises God, remembers God's saving acts, proclaims biblical truth, teaches and forms believers, expresses the range of human response to God, and strengthens congregational identity and participation. Particular attention is given to Exodus 15, Deuteronomy 31–32, the Psalms, Ephesians 5:19–20, Colossians 3:16, and 1 Corinthians 14:26. The article further examines instrumental, choral, and congregational music and proposes principles for song selection, worship planning, leadership, and contextualization. Special attention is given to the Cameroonian and Cameroon Baptist Convention context. The article concludes that Christian worship music should be biblically grounded, theologically faithful, congregationally participatory, pastorally sensitive, culturally appropriate, and ultimately directed toward the glory of God and the edification of the church.

Keywords: *Christian worship, worship music, congregational singing, theology of worship, church music, praise, music ministry, Cameroon.*

1. Introduction

Music has always been closely associated with the worship of God's people. From Israel's songs at the Red Sea to the Psalms, from the songs of the early Christian community to contemporary congregational worship, music has provided a means through which believers express faith, praise God, remember divine acts, proclaim truth, lament suffering, confess sin, and encourage one another. The biblical witness therefore presents music not as an accidental feature of worship but as an important means by which the worshipping community responds to God.

This study emerged from a practical concern within the Douala Centre Association of the Cameroon Baptist Convention. Following the 2024 Training for Result (TFR) seminar, participants requested further reflection on the proper use of music in worship. The resulting seminar was conducted on May 10, 2025, with the purpose of helping church music ministries and worship leaders develop a stronger theology of music, improve song selection, enhance congregational singing, and plan worship services more intentionally. The original seminar material identified choirs, hymn leaders, praise teams, instrumentalists, and pastors or worship leaders as important participants in the ministry of music.

The need for such reflection extends beyond one local setting. Contemporary Christian worship frequently gives music considerable prominence, and musical styles can influence how congregations understand worship itself. Bradley (2003) argues that congregational music functions as "active theology," because musical practices participate in shaping the faith and identity of Christian communities. Ingalls (2018), similarly, demonstrates that contemporary worship music can participate in forming and reshaping evangelical communities through participatory musical practices.

Consequently, questions concerning Christian worship music cannot be reduced to debates about whether a church should use hymns, contemporary songs, choirs, instruments, or particular musical styles. The deeper questions concern what music communicates about God, how it forms Christian identity, how it relates to Scripture, whether it facilitates congregational participation, and whether the church's musical practice reflects the theological purposes of Christian worship.

This article therefore examines music in Christian worship under three interrelated dimensions: biblical, theological, and practical. Its central argument is that music in Christian worship is not entertainment added to worship but a theological and ecclesial means through which the church praises God, proclaims and teaches biblical truth, remembers God's acts, expresses faith and emotion, strengthens communal identity, and participates corporately in worship.

2. Understanding Christian Worship a. Worship service and worship

A distinction should first be made between worship, the worship service, and what is sometimes called the praise-and-worship time.

A worship service is the corporate gathering of believers for the purposes of glorifying God, receiving God's Word, encouraging one another, exercising Christian fellowship, and responding to God in faith and obedience. The early Christian community gathered around apostolic teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, prayer, praise, and mutual edification (Acts 2:42–47). Likewise, Hebrews 10:24–25 emphasizes Christian gathering for encouragement and mutual stimulation toward love and good works.

First Corinthians 14:26 is especially important for understanding corporate worship: "When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up." The text establishes an important principle: what occurs in the gathered church should contribute to the edification of the body.

Music therefore belongs within the larger theological structure of worship rather than functioning independently of it.

Worship itself is broader than a church service. The biblical understanding of worship encompasses the whole life of the believer. Paul presents the offering of one's body to God as a "living sacrifice" and describes this as an act of worship (Rom.12:1). Similarly, believers are instructed to do everything to the glory of God (1Cor.10:31) and music is included.

Wiersbe (1986) describes worship as the believer's response of the whole person—mind, emotions, will, and body—to God and God's revelation. This lays emphasis to the fact that worship cannot be reduced to singing, lifting hands, kneeling, or attending a church service.
Thus, singing is worship, but worship is not merely singing.

b. Worship and theology

Christian worship is inseparable from Christian theology. What Christians sing communicates what they believe about God, humanity, sin, salvation, Christ, the Holy Spirit, the church, and the future hope of God's people.
This relationship between worship and theology means that music cannot be evaluated solely by musical attractiveness. A song may be emotionally powerful and musically compelling while nevertheless communicating an inadequate or distorted understanding of Christian faith.
Bradley (2003) observes that congregational song can shape theology because worship music conveys and reinforces beliefs within Christian communities. More recent scholarship likewise highlights the importance of maintaining theological and biblical depth in contemporary worship music. Tang (2026), for example, argues that contemporary worship music can contribute positively to emotional engagement while also raising questions about biblical literacy and theological formation when subjective experience becomes dominant.
Christian worship music must therefore be examined according to both what it does musically and what it says theologically.

3. Biblical Assessment of Music in Christian Worship a. Music in Old Testament worship

The Old Testament provides abundant evidence of music in the worship of God's people. Israel's worship included singing, instrumental music, choirs, dancing, responsive singing, and individual and communal songs.
One of the most significant examples is Exodus 15. Following Israel's deliverance from Egypt, Moses and the Israelites sang to the Lord. Miriam and the women subsequently responded with tambourines and dancing. The song recounts God's mighty acts and expresses confidence in God's continuing faithfulness. Music therefore appears as a response to divine salvation.
This pattern is important for Christian worship. Biblical worship music does not merely express generic religious emotion; it responds to God's revealed character and God's mighty acts.
The Psalms provide the most extensive biblical testimony concerning music. They contain praise, thanksgiving, lament, confession, wisdom, testimony, petition, remembrance, and hope.
Consequently, biblical worship music should not be restricted to celebration alone.
The worshipping community needs songs that enable it to say:

- God is worthy of praise.
- God has saved us.
- God is faithful.
- We have sinned.
- We are suffering.
- We need God's help.
- God has forgiven us.
- God will ultimately establish His kingdom.

This breadth is one of the most important contributions of biblical hymnody to contemporary worship.

b. Music as remembrance

Deuteronomy 31–32 provides another significant theological function of music. Moses was instructed to teach Israel a song that would serve as a witness concerning the people's future faithfulness—or unfaithfulness—to God.

The song therefore functioned as a theological memory device. Therefore, music can help God's people remember truth. The memorability of songs makes their theological content particularly important. People may forget the details of a sermon while remembering the words of a song for decades.

This gives musicians and worship leaders an important theological responsibility. Songs should therefore communicate truth accurately.

c. Music as proclamation

Biblical music does not only speak to God; it can also speak about God to people.

Psalm 96:1–3 connects singing with proclaiming God's salvation and declaring God's glory among the nations. Similarly, the songs of Scripture frequently move between direct address to God and proclamation concerning God's character and actions. Music can therefore have an evangelistic and missional dimension.

A congregation singing about God's holiness, faithfulness, salvation, grace, and kingdom is not merely engaging in emotional expression. It is also confessing publicly what it believes.

d. Music as teaching

The New Testament makes the teaching function of Christian song particularly clear. Paul instructs believers:

"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly … teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs" (Col.3:16). The text explicitly connects singing with teaching and admonition.

Likewise, Ephesians 5:18–20 connects being filled with the Spirit with speaking to one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing, and giving thanks to God.

Music therefore has a formative function. It places biblical and theological truth on the lips of the congregation and enables believers to rehearse Christian doctrine together. This is one reason congregational song deserves serious theological oversight.

4. Theological Functions of Music in Christian Worship a. Music as a response to God's revelation

Christian worship begins with God rather than humanity. God reveals Himself, and God's people respond. This principle applies directly to music. Christian songs should emerge from and respond to biblical revelation. Worship music is therefore not simply the spontaneous expression of whatever worshippers happen to feel. It is a response to who God is (adoration) and what God has done (thanksgiving). Worship grounded in inadequate knowledge of God becomes theologically deficient.

This suggests a fundamental criterion for evaluating worship music:

Does this song help the congregation respond appropriately to the God revealed in Scripture and supremely in Jesus Christ?

b. Music and the knowledge of God

Music contributes to Christian knowledge by placing theological claims into memorable forms. Songs can teach:

- The character of God;
- The Trinity;
- The incarnation of Christ;
- The cross and resurrection;
- Salvation by grace;
- The work of the Holy Spirit;
- Christian discipleship;
- The church; ▪ Christian hope;
- The return of Christ.

The worship leader is therefore not merely selecting attractive songs. The worship leader is participating in the theological formation of the congregation. No wonder, Bradley (2003) describes music as "active theology."

c. Music and Christ-centered worship

Christian worship is ultimately centered on God as revealed in Christ. Songs should therefore help the congregation understand and celebrate the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Christ-centered worship music should address themes such as:

- Incarnation;
- Sin and human need;
- Atonement;
- Resurrection;
- Ascension;
- Lordship;
- Salvation;
- Discipleship;
- Mission;
- Future hope.

A Christian song need not mention the name "Jesus" repeatedly to be Christ-centered, but its theological vision should be consistent with the gospel.

d. Music and the Holy Spirit

Ephesians 5:18–20 provides an important connection between the Holy Spirit and Christian singing. Paul places spiritual fullness and musical participation within the same theological framework.

The Holy Spirit does not replace biblical truth with emotion. Rather, Spirit-filled worship includes speaking, singing, thanksgiving, and mutual edification.

This guards against two extremes.

First, worship should not become emotion without truth.

Second, worship should not become truth without heartfelt response.

Christian worship requires both theological depth and genuine spiritual engagement.

e. Music and emotion

Music possesses unusual capacity to engage human emotions. Music can express joy, sorrow, awe, reverence, gratitude, and other dimensions of human experience.

Emotion, therefore, should not automatically be regarded as a problem in worship. The Psalms demonstrate that authentic worship can include intense emotional expression.

The issue is not whether worship should involve emotion but whether emotion is governed and informed by truth.

A biblically grounded worship song can help believers express grief without despair, joy without superficiality, repentance without hopelessness, and thanksgiving without triumphalism.

f. Music and communal identity

Music also creates and expresses communal identity. When Christians sing together, individual voices become part of a corporate confession. Congregational singing therefore has ecclesiological significance.

Ingalls (2018) demonstrates how participatory worship music can contribute to the formation of Christian communities. Moore (2018) likewise emphasizes congregational singing as an active communal practice rather than merely a collection of individuals producing musical sound.

Music can consequently help a congregation answer the question: Who are we as God's people?

5. Praise and Worship: A Necessary Clarification

The common distinction between "fast praise" and "slow worship" is widespread, but it should not be treated as a biblical definition. This is how some people usually make a distinction between praise and worship. When the song is fast it is praise and when slow it is worship, which is misleading.

Praise is not necessarily fast, and worship is not necessarily slow. The distinction should instead be understood primarily in terms of theological function and content.

Praise frequently emphasizes God's acts and attributes: God's salvation, faithfulness, goodness, power, mercy, and mighty deeds. God is praised for what He has done.

Worship, in the broader biblical sense, encompasses the whole response of the believer to God's worthiness. Praise is therefore an essential dimension of worship but does not exhaust its meaning. God is worshipped for who God is.

Musical tempo does not determine theological category. A slow song can be a song of praise, while a fast song can express profound adoration and surrender.

Therefore, the difference between praise and worship should not primarily be determined by musical speed but by the content and theological direction of the song.

6. Forms of Music in Christian Worship a. Instrumental music

Instrumental music has a longstanding place in biblical worship. Psalm 150 explicitly calls God's people to praise God with a range of instruments.

In contemporary worship, instruments may:

Accompany congregational singing;

Provide musical introductions;

Support transitions;

Accompany offerings;

Provide reflective music; Support
prayer and meditation;
Conclude worship.
Segler's discusses prelude, offertory, interlude, and postlude music, provides a useful framework for understanding these functions.
Instrumental music should nevertheless serve the worship rather than compete with it. The musical arrangement should assist congregational participation and theological attentiveness.

b. Choral and ensemble music
Choirs have historically played significant roles in Christian worship. The primary function of the choir as assisting the congregation in worship rather than replacing congregational participation.
This principle is particularly important in churches where choirs possess considerable musical skill. A choir may:

Lead congregational singing;
Provide special musical offerings;
Sing responses;
Introduce new songs;
Support particular moments in worship; ✓ Reinforce biblical themes.

But the choir should not transform the congregation into an audience.

c. Congregational singing
Congregational singing should remain central to Christian worship.
Congregational singing is the primary musical expression of the gathered church and choirs and instruments should not be treated as more important than the congregation.
This corresponds with contemporary scholarship emphasizing participation as an important feature of Christian worship. Bradley (2003) and Ingalls (2018) both highlight the formative significance of communal musical participation.
The question should therefore not simply be, "How well did the worship team perform?"
A more appropriate question is:
"How faithfully and fully did the congregation participate in responding to God?"

7. **Music as a Means of Spiritual Formation**
Music contributes to spiritual formation because repeated singing repeatedly exposes believers to theological language. What Christians sing can eventually become part of how they think, pray, remember, and speak about God.
This is particularly significant because songs are often more easily memorized than prose. The Deuteronomy 32 example illustrates the deliberate use of song for preserving theological memory.
Consequently, Christian music should include the breadth of biblical theology.
A healthy repertoire should make room for:

- Praise;
- Thanksgiving;
- Adoration;
- Confession;
- Lament;
- Petition;

- Testimony;
- Assurance;
- Dedication;
- Mission; • Resurrection;
- Hope.

This theological breadth prevents worship from becoming one-dimensional. Recent scholarship reinforces this concern. Tang (2026) argues that worship music's emotional dimension should be balanced with biblical depth so that worship contributes to comprehensive Christian formation rather than merely facilitating subjective religious expression.

8. Practical Assessment of Music in Worship a. The role of the pastor or worship leader

The pastor should not delegate all theological responsibility for worship music to musicians. The worship leader and pastor should work collaboratively with musicians in determining:

- The theme of the service;
- Theological objectives;
- Song selection;
- Relationship between songs and Scripture;
- Relationship between music and preaching;
- Congregational participation;
- Appropriate musical transitions.

It is worth recommending that the pastor assist the music minister in selecting songs and that each song have a definite purpose within the worship service.
This is a significant principle for church leadership.

b. Selecting songs

Song selection should be guided by at least seven criteria:

i. Biblical faithfulness

The lyrics should be consistent with Scripture.

ii. Theological accuracy

The song should communicate Christian doctrine responsibly.

iii. Christological coherence

The song should fit the gospel and Christian understanding of Christ. iv. Congregational accessibility

The congregation should be able to sing the song rather than merely listen to it.

v. Liturgical appropriateness

The song should fit the particular point in the worship service.

vi. Cultural appropriateness

The musical form should communicate effectively within the cultural context of the congregation.

vii. Spiritual and pastoral suitability

The song should serve the spiritual needs and theological formation of the congregation.
It is recommended that each hymn should have a definite purpose.

c. Music and preaching

Music should not be disconnected from preaching.

Where appropriate, the songs before and after the sermon can prepare the congregation for the proclamation of Scripture and provide a musical response to the Word.

For example:

Before preaching: a song may prepare the congregation to hear God's Word.

After preaching: a song may enable response through confession, commitment, thanksgiving, or dedication.

Such planning prevents worship from becoming a sequence of unrelated activities.

d. Introducing new songs

New music should be introduced thoughtfully.

New songs should not be introduced for the first time in the main worship service without adequate preparation, but that congregations become familiar with new music progressively.

This principle remains useful because congregational worship depends upon participation. A song that only the platform can sing is poorly suited to congregational worship.

9. Music, Culture, and Christian Worship in Cameroon

Christian worship takes place within particular cultural contexts. Consequently, music in Cameroon cannot simply imitate musical practices developed elsewhere without considering local theological, linguistic, cultural, and ecclesial realities.

Cameroonian churches are characterized by considerable linguistic and cultural diversity. Christian worship music therefore needs to engage appropriately with local musical traditions while remaining faithful to biblical and theological convictions.

This does not mean that every traditional musical form should automatically be incorporated into worship. Nor does it mean that Western hymns or contemporary Christian music should automatically be rejected. Instead, the relevant questions include:

- Does the musical form communicate clearly to the congregation?
- Does it facilitate participation?
- Is its theological content sound?
- Does it respect the cultural identity of worshippers?
- Does it strengthen rather than divide the congregation?
- Does it serve worship rather than performance?

Bradley's (2003) observation that congregational music interacts with broader culture is especially relevant here. Music is not culturally neutral; it participates in how Christian communities articulate their faith within particular contexts.

For the Cameroon Baptist Convention, this calls for a contextual approach in which English-, French-, and indigenous-language resources can be employed responsibly according to the congregation and setting.

10. Avoiding Performance-Oriented Worship

One of the major practical dangers facing contemporary Christian worship is the transformation of congregational worship into performance.

Professional musical ability is valuable, but Christian worship is not fundamentally a concert.

The distinction is important:

Performance Orientation	**Congregational Worship**
Platform-centered	God-centered
Audience-oriented	Congregation-oriented
Musicians are the primary actors	Congregation participates
Musical excellence becomes the goal	Musical excellence serves worship
Emotion can become the objective	Emotion serves truthful response
Songs may entertain	Songs proclaim and embody Christian truth

This does not imply that musical excellence is unimportant. Scripture encourages skilled musical service, and competent musicians can greatly assist worship. The issue is the purpose of excellence. Excellence should serve the glory of God and the edification of the church rather than draw attention primarily to the musicians.

Wakeling (2021) further demonstrates that even textless instrumental music can function symbolically in Christian worship, but its theological significance depends upon how the music is situated and interpreted within worship.

11. Implications for the Cameroon Baptist Convention and Douala Field

The preceding discussion has several practical implications for churches within the Cameroon Baptist Convention, particularly the Douala Field.

a. Develop a theology of music

Churches should deliberately teach musicians and worship leaders the biblical and theological foundations of worship music. Training should include:

- Biblical theology of worship;
- Biblical theology of music;
- Hymnody;
- Song evaluation;
- Congregational leadership;
- Music and discipleship; ▪ Music and pastoral ministry.

b. Strengthen collaboration between pastors and musicians

Music ministry should not operate independently of pastoral leadership. Pastors and music leaders should plan worship together, particularly where songs relate directly to biblical preaching.

c. Evaluate song lyrics

Churches should develop a process for evaluating songs according to biblical and theological criteria. A song's popularity should not be the primary reason for its inclusion.

d. Prioritize congregational participation

Choirs, praise teams, and instrumentalists should facilitate rather than replace congregational singing.

e. Encourage contextual music

CBC churches should develop and promote songs that communicate biblical truth through musical forms and languages that resonate meaningfully with Cameroonian congregations.

f. Recover the breadth of biblical song

Churches should intentionally include songs of:

- Praise;
- Thanksgiving;
- Confession;
- Lament;
- Repentance;
- Testimony;
- Commitment;
- Mission; ▪ Hope.

This would help prevent worship from becoming excessively focused on only celebration or personal experience.

12. Recommendations

Based on the biblical, theological, and practical assessment presented above, the following recommendations are proposed.

i. Churches should develop explicit theological guidelines for worship music.

Such guidelines should establish biblical and theological criteria for song selection, musical leadership, and congregational participation.

ii. Pastors and worship leaders should plan worship collaboratively.

The music ministry should be integrated into the broader theological purpose of each worship service. iii. Song selection should be based on theological content rather than popularity alone.

Songs should be evaluated for biblical accuracy, theological richness, congregational accessibility, and appropriateness to the service.

iv. Congregational singing should remain central.

Choirs, praise teams, and instrumentalists should support the congregation rather than turn worshippers into spectators.

v. Music should complement biblical preaching.

Where appropriate, songs should reinforce, prepare for, or provide a response to the biblical message. vi. Churches should intentionally teach biblical theology through music.

Because songs are memorable, their theological content should receive careful attention.

vii. Christian worship should embrace the full emotional range of biblical faith.

Joy should not displace lament; celebration should not eliminate confession; victory should not eliminate dependence upon God.

viii. CBC churches should develop culturally appropriate worship resources.
Cameroonian musical and linguistic resources should be engaged thoughtfully while maintaining biblical and theological fidelity.

ix. Worship musicians should receive continuing theological and musical training.
Musical competence and theological competence should be developed together.

x. Churches should continually evaluate whether their music is serving worship.
The central question should remain whether music is helping the congregation glorify God, receive God's Word, respond faithfully, and build one another up.

13. Conclusion

Music occupies a significant place in Christian worship because it enables God's people to express, remember, proclaim, teach, and embody their faith. The biblical evidence demonstrates that music accompanied God's saving acts, communicated theological truth, preserved communal memory, expressed the full range of human response to God, and strengthened the identity of God's people. The New Testament develops this trajectory by connecting singing with mutual teaching, admonition, thanksgiving, spiritual fullness, and corporate edification. Ephesians 5:19–20 and Colossians 3:16 therefore prevent Christian music from being reduced to entertainment or emotional stimulation. Music belongs within the church's broader ministry of proclamation and formation.

Theologically, music is significant because worship itself is a response to God's revelation. Christian songs should therefore be grounded in Scripture and directed toward the triune God revealed through Jesus Christ. Their emotional power is valuable, but emotion should be shaped by truth. Their artistic quality is desirable, but excellence should serve worship rather than performance.

Practically, music should enable congregational participation. Choirs, instrumentalists, worship teams, and pastors each have important responsibilities, but none should eclipse the congregation's role as the worshipping community. Music should be carefully selected, intentionally planned, theologically evaluated, and appropriately contextualized.

For churches in Cameroon and particularly within the Cameroon Baptist Convention, the challenge is not simply to choose between traditional hymns and contemporary worship music. The deeper challenge is to cultivate worship music that is biblical, theological, participatory, pastoral, culturally meaningful, and God-centered.

Ultimately, the question is not merely whether a church has good music. The more fundamental question is whether its music helps the church become a people who know God, proclaim Christ, live by the Spirit, remember God's mighty acts, teach one another the truth, and offer their whole lives in worship. In this sense, music is not an ornament added to Christian worship. Properly understood and faithfully practiced, it is one of the means through which the worshipping church expresses its faith and is continually formed by the gospel.

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