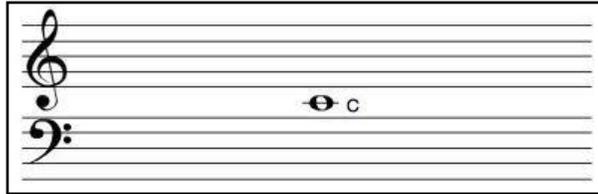


# The 10 C's of Music in Worship: Finding Middle C

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I would like to offer the following words and phrases that begin with the letter C to show how they can help center our thoughts concerning the music that is to be used in corporate worship gatherings. Just as middle C is the exact center of the grand staff, it is my hope that these thoughts will help bring greater clarity and purpose to how we approach planning worship.

Our singing and music should be marked with: (10 things)

## 1. Cross-Centeredness

- Our songs must have as their central theme the same theme as the Bible: The Gospel.
- This is what the singing in heaven is going to be about: those who are redeemed will sing to the redeemer about redemption.
- We need to sing often about salvation and about how God purchased our redemption. Otherwise we will not be able to distinguish our worship from every other religion.
- Colossians 3:15-17 says that we are to sing with thankfulness in our hearts. What should be at the top of our list for which we are thankful? Salvation. This should be a recurring and central theme.
- As we look over our collective body of songs, do they exalt the God of the Bible who sent His Son to die for our sins (“In my place *condemned* He stood”) or do they present a vague view of Christ and only in generalities or emotional responses?
- In Scripture, worship is ALWAYS a response to God’s direct action. We should make sure that the songs that are response-centered and frequently use the “I” pronoun are connected with songs that declare what God has done through Christ.

## 2. Content-Driven Music

- The lyrics are the most important thing when selecting music. When making evaluations regarding using a particular song, we need to ask whether the Word dwells richly in it. If not, perhaps the song should be passed over.
- Is this content faithful to scripture and is the context faithful to scripture? Even if there are Biblical-sounding phrases, are they faithful to the context in which those phrases are used in Scripture?
- What is the weight of the lyrics? Are they too heavy, too light or somewhere in the middle and are they appropriate for the situation?

- The lyrics are being sung, but they are also being prayed as well. It is good to think of singing as sung prayer. Thinking about it in this way allows us to evaluate whether these songs will strengthen our prayer life.
- “Show me a church’s songs and I’ll show you their theology” (Gordon Fee)
- It matters what kind of musical *diet* we are on as a church. *Strong, God-centered, God-drenched lyrics will help produce strong, God-centered, God-drenched Christians.*

### 3. Complementary music and lyrics

- Do the melodies, harmonies and rhythms match the lyrics?
- Does the message of the lyrics sound like what the music is trying to convey? Does the tempo and style of the song match the text?
- The songs should combine words that are theologically substantive and tunes that are musically satisfying.
- The lyrics and melodies should be memorable, not forgettable.
- Example – it is possible to combine the words to “Amazing Grace” with the melody from the theme song of “Gilligan’s Island”. While it technically works, it is probably not wise to include this combination in corporate worship.

### 4. Congregational Focus

- The primary choir is the congregation. All who have been redeemed have a song to sing. The healthy church at worship is seen when the gathered church is all singing rather than just a few participating.
- When we fail to sing because we think others will not like our voice, we are likely living in the fear of man instead of the fear of God. This attitude must be rejected at all levels and at all times, especially by the leadership of the church. Avoid making excuses for the quality of your voice or for any lack of perceived musical knowledge. When excuses are made by leaders, it will be easier for the congregation to offer the same excuses when it comes to non-participation.
- Care should be given to make sure the congregation is not lost in the singing. We need to sing new songs, but not all at once.
- I suggest that it is helpful for the congregation to hear the new songs several times before they are asked to sing them on a Sunday morning. It may be best to introduce them on Sunday evening or to have them played as offertories or preludes first or sung by smaller ensembles. (I compile a prelude CD of songs that we are learning or about to learn as a congregation and ask our sound technicians to play the CD on “shuffle” before each service.)
- The best songs are ones that are easily learned and sung by the congregation. Musically the songs need to be rhythmically and melodically accessible (rhythms not too complicated and melodies not too high or too low). Those in charge of leading music may find it helpful to become with Finale in order to modify the keys or rhythms to best fit their congregation.
- Musicians need to be careful here because they can personally handle very complex music and usually have greater vocal range, but the music for congregational worship should be on a level that most, if not all, can achieve comfortably. When this is not given consideration, it can communicate to the congregation that they were not meant to

participate. While this may be denied as a goal, it can certainly become an unintended consequence.

- This also means that not every song is good for congregational use. Just because it is played on the radio does not mean it is good for us to use as a church. Here is a helpful rating system that has been offered by Bob Kauflin:
  1. We shouldn't use this song
  2. We could use it personally
  3. We could use it in corporate worship
  4. We should use this song

## 5. Clarity

- It is the song clear? Or does it present a *muddy* view of God and the Christian life at best, or a wrong view at worst?
- Example: "At the Cross" – The conclusion of the chorus states "now I am happy all the day." That could be sending an unclear message that the Christian life will be one without problems. I suggest changing that phrase to be: "Now I will praise Him all the day." This gives a clearer picture of what we are to do as believers: live to praise Him in all circumstances.
- There are other songs that have references to Biblical statements, but these are often confusing and obscure (example: "Here I raise my Ebenezer"). If these exist, then some words of explanation should be given so the congregation can sing with understanding.
- Lest we think I am being too picky here, notice that in Colossians 3 we see that we are teaching through our songs. Are we teaching the right things? Do the people understand what we are teaching in our songs? This is vital. Let's be 100% clear.

## 6. Conviction

- Do we believe what we sing? It is affecting us and does it move us emotionally? Our emotions should be stirred because we really believe what we are singing.
- It is not enough to sing truth, we must believe the truth. Hebrews 11:6 reminds us that "without faith it is impossible to please Him." Our singing must be faith-filled.
- From time to time the church should be challenged directly by what we are singing. This can be addressed before or after a particular song by giving a 30-60 second word of admonition or encouragement. It is helpful for those leading to sketch these words out ahead of time to avoid rambling.
- Instead of saying "I just love this song," it is more helpful to say something like "I love the truth that is proclaimed in these words," and then briefly state that particular truth. Aim to let the affections be drawn to truth and not the songs by pointing directly at the truth. Songs don't change people; the truth of God's Word changes people. Focus on these truths.

## 7. Comprehensive Themes

- Are we covering the Biblical themes or are we just stuck on one or a few things?
- There are many themes and we should cover all of them in proportion to the weight they are given in Scripture.

- Examples: *Baptism* – we wouldn't want all of our songs to be baptism songs as the Bible isn't all about baptism. *The character of God* – we should sing about *all* aspects of His character: love, mercy, holiness, grace, goodness, faithfulness, wrath, etc.

## 8. Cheerfulness

- Is our music marked by joy? This comes not by just choosing upbeat songs. The joy comes when we really believe what we are singing and are engaged in the process by responding to the text and not just the style.
- When we sing phrases like, “*And bursting forth in glorious day, up from the grave He rose again,*” we need to encourage joy-filled responses and not be afraid of them. While it is possible to be drawn away by excesses, this should not prevent the right use of physical expression (clapping, lifting hands, shouting, etc.) as a faith-filled response.
- Even though there should be space allowed for times of lament, confession of sin and repentance, the lasting mood should be joy as we are drawn to remember the hope of the gospel and the forgiveness given through Christ. When coupled with the assurance of pardon, knowing and confessing our sins becomes a freeing experience. While we should spend some time *in the dust*, we are not to stay there as we remember that our sin debt has been paid in full.
- Psalm 34:5 “Those who look to him are radiant, and their faces shall never be ashamed.”

## 9. Color

- Is all of our singing of one *flavor*, or are we using many different styles? Are we using varied instrumentation that is faithful to the gifts that are possessed within our congregation?
- We make style an issue when we make style the issue. However, we should be able to step back and see that there are many different styles being used in the worship of the church.
- This is not done to please some of the people some of the time. It is done so that we can reflect the diversity with which God made us.

## 10. Communal Love

- Many churches are struggling over the issues of music and worship, and most discussions can be solved when we do as we are instructed in Colossians 3:14; “Beyond all these things, put on love, which is the perfect body of unity.”
- This also means that we might have to endure some songs that may not be our “favorites.” If these songs pass the other criteria, then we must be willing to include them for the sake of the congregation at large and learn to rejoice as we sing them.
- Chip Stam, former professor of worship at SBTS, would often remind his classes that “The mature believer is easily edified.” As we grow in Christ, we will find it easier to be edified as the body of Christ sings together even when our favorite song or song styles were not included in the service.