



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Prophetic Music
(*Singing Our Lives*,
pp. 28-35)

What do you think?

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Christian Reflection

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Prophetic Music

Prophetic music—songs that raise our critical awareness of the world's needs and call us to responsible action through a holistic gospel message—occurs outside church walls and in worship. How do we discern and encourage the true musical prophets?

Scripture Reading (A Call to Repentance): Deuteronomy 31:30-32:6

Season of Prayer

Holy God, we come before you, like the people of Israel, having betrayed your love in our thoughts, words, and deeds. We pray silently now, confessing our personal sins and repenting of our rebellion. (*Silent prayers.*)

The institutions where we work, our families, and our community are broken because collectively we have betrayed your love in our thoughts, words, and deeds. We pray silently now, confessing these corporate acts of unfaithfulness and asking that you will restore our broken lives together. (*Silent prayers.*)

Our world is broken because we have betrayed your love in our thoughts, words, and deeds. Each of us selects one part of the world, one troubled nation, or one distorted economy, and now intercedes on its behalf. (*Silent prayers.*)

Holy God, you are the Rock of our salvation, forever faithful in Jesus Christ, and our comfort in the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Scripture Reading (The Assurance of God's Forgiveness): Psalm 65:1-4

Reflection

The "Song of Moses" (Deuteronomy 32:1-43) is not only a searing prophecy of our unfaithfulness—for it pulls no punches in diagnosing how we are prone to betray God when pressed by a discordant culture—it is also a joyous celebration of God's faithful judgment and ultimate rescue. It is no wonder, then, that John the revelator hears this song echoing in heaven on the lips of the martyrs who have resisted the lures of the beast, a distorted Roman society (Revelation 15:3-4).

Scripture abounds in prophetic art. "The Jewish prophets, like Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Amos, employed drama, allegory, and poetry to jolt people into thinking about their lives," notes Nathan Corbitt. "And Jesus used parables to break through to listeners who did not recognize their own role in oppressing the poor."

We should tune our hearts not only to hear the prophetic voices in contemporary secular music, but also to embrace prophetic music in our worship. As first steps, congregations might

- ▶ *grow in their music-making beyond praise and evangelism to include a call for social justice.* We will "develop spiritual sight and courage for the street" as congregational "musicians move out of the choir loft and from behind the pulpit microphone to faithfully minister among the marginalized."
- ▶ *provide financial support for musicians with a prophetic voice, both inside and outside the church.* For example, one congregation supports "a hip-hop artist who left the secular recording industry to enroll in seminary and 'preach' the good news in



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the tough places of Philadelphia.” The artist’s hour-long Christian hip-hop radio program is gaining in popularity.

- ▶ *include the voices of world Christians in worship.* Most Christians now live outside the western world. “When we incorporate some world hymns into worship on a regular basis, we not only will hear our brothers and sisters’ prophetic voices, but also will prophetically proclaim our unity with them.”
- ▶ *discern the true musical prophets.* “There should be no mistake that the primary goal of musical prophecy is the redemption of a fallen world,” Corbitt writes. “It is the fruit of a prophet’s life—how the prophet lives in consonance with Jesus’ way of living and not just what he or she says—that provides the ultimate test of the prophecies.” Some false musical prophets “lose credibility through their abuse of wealth and power.” Others, in their anger and alienation, preach violence and self-gratification.

Study Questions

1. How does Corbitt define “prophetic music”? Are the songs of secular musicians to whom you regularly listen prophetic?
2. Which of the first steps toward embracing prophetic music has your congregation taken? Which need to be taken?
3. In your congregation’s hymnbook, which hymns address issues of social justice, war and peace, wealth and poverty, the care of God’s creation, marriage and sexuality, the nature of discipleship, growth in spiritual discernment, or racial reconciliation? Which hymns are by nonwestern Christians?
4. “Do not think that a congregation must give up the old hymns and change all of its songs in order to embrace prophetic music,” writes Corbitt. What hymns were prophetic for Corbitt and his wife? Have you had similar experiences?
5. What are the barriers to using prophetic music in worship?

Departing Hymn: “In Their Speaking, Art, and Writing” (verses 1 and 3)

In their speaking, art, and writing,
in their music, hear God’s voice.
Why composer, painter, poet,
why the note and color choice?
God has whispered, granted glances,
to the prophets, who, then, show
that life’s dirges and life’s dances
harbor truth we need to know.

Back to old days for the new days,
to the path from which we’ve strayed.
With the truth before them always,
preaching, painting, lest it fade.
Call us forward, to the morning,
lead us to God’s promised day.
Through the darkness, from our wand’ring,
write and paint and sing the way.

Terry York (2003)

Suggested Tunes: EIGHTH AND SPEIGHT or HYMN TO JOY

Prophetic Music

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Season of Prayer	Season of Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 2, and 5	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To define the idea of prophetic music.
2. To examine the ways that congregations can embrace and support prophetic music.
3. To sample hymns which are prophetic.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Singing Our Lives (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “In Their Speaking, Art, and Writing,” you may either (1) locate the familiar tune HYMN TO JOY in your church’s hymnal or on the web at www.cyber-hymnal.org or (2) download the new tune EIGHTH AND SPEIGHT from the Ethics Library at www.ChristianEthics.ws (search by format under the listing for hymns or search by theme for the *Prophetic Ethics* issue of *Christian Reflection*). The hymn was published on pp. 51-53 of the Prophetic Ethics issue.

Begin with an Observation

“[The] message of good news and confrontation with the evil in society is never timeless,” writes Nathan Corbitt. “Rather it must be spoken to people living in a particular context of pursuing wealth, prestige, in-group solidarity, and power—to people who need to be awakened specifically to their time and reality.

“This is a basic reason, I think, so few prophetic hymns are found in hymnals and why prophetic music clothes itself in contemporary musical idioms. Prophetic music tends to be an oral and contemporary phenomenon, rather than a written and historical tradition. Prophets often address a contemporary form of injustice, and their songs require immediacy to the problem and culturally appropriate language” (*Singing Our Lives*, p. 31).

Scripture Reading (A Call to Repentance)

Ask a group member to read Deuteronomy 31:30-32:6 from a modern translation. This song calls us to repentance.

Season of Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by using the Season of Prayer to guide members in silent prayers of confession.

Scripture Reading (The Assurance of God’s Forgiveness)

Ask a group member to read Psalm 65:1-4 from a modern translation. This song assures us of God’s forgiveness.

Reflection

This study introduces Nathan Corbitt’s broad definition of “prophetic music” that could apply to songs written and performed for a secular market, for the Christian popular market, or for use in Christian worship. The reflection and most of the questions focus on the use of prophetic songs in worship. The

next study guide, “U2: Unexpected Prophets,” examines an important body of prophetic songs written and performed for the secular market by the musicians Bono and the Irish rock band U2.

Study Questions

1. “Prophetic music is a prophetic voice, based on biblical principles, that calls both the church and society to social justice,” writes Corbitt. Though it “may not include Christian language and imagery as it addresses poverty, injustice, degradation of the environment, and other problems in contemporary culture..., effective prophetic music always presents a holistic gospel message: it not only describes the problems, but also presents Kingdom-based solutions and calls individuals, congregations, and society to responsible action.” The words of prophetic songs “raise critical awareness about the needs of the world.”

Most secular musicians do not sing prophetic songs. Encourage members to think of songs that comment on the problems of contemporary culture with a prophetic voice.

2. You might combine a discussion of the first and third steps (singing more songs about social justice and songs written by world Christians) with a review of your hymnbook (see question #3). But you should think outside the hymnal. Worship can include performance, congregational singing, or readings of other songs of social justice (by contemporary musicians, Christian musicians through the ages, or from Scripture). Songs by Christians in other cultures, especially in nonwestern cultures, are more difficult to obtain. For collections of recent songs, see the new hymnbooks by Hope Publishing Company (www.hopepublishing.com), GIA Publications (www.giamusic.com), and major denominational presses. Many hymnals and song supplements are available through The Hymn Society (www.thehymnsociety.org). C. Michael Hawn’s *Gather into One: Praying and Singing Globally* (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002) introduces the work of five influential global church musicians.

On the second and fourth steps (supporting prophetic musicians outside the church and discerning true musical prophets), consider how the church might host concerts, workshops, or other learning opportunities to encourage appreciation for and discernment about the work of contemporary musicians.

3. You might search www.cyberhymnal.org for older hymns in the public domain or search the web for newer hymns. The hymns commissioned by the Center for Christian Ethics are available for download from the Ethics Library at www.ChristianEthics.ws. Carolyn Winfrey Gillette is writing new hymns on themes of social justice (see firstpresby.org/hymnlist.htm).
4. “Give of Your Best to the Master” by Howard B. Grose (1851-1939) and “Faith is the Victory” by John H. Yates (1891) were prophetic for the Corbitts (*Singing Our Lives*, pp. 34-35). Sometimes the text has a prophetic message, but sometimes a hymn takes on new meaning when it is sung in a prophetic context—e.g., in a worship service that unites people from different ethnicities, nationalities, or religious traditions.
5. Corbitt suggests these barriers: the *music* may be unfamiliar, difficult to appreciate, or inappropriate in worship; the *texts* make us uncomfortable when they call attention to significant problems or challenge our way of life. Congregations resist learning new music, and we may feel inadequate to the task of presenting it faithfully, for “new prophetic songs, whether they come to us from around the world or across the street, deserve our best efforts to ‘perform’ them well and present them within a context of meaningful explanation.”

Members may discuss other barriers, like the difficulty in locating and reviewing music by Christians in other cultures, lack of funds for purchasing new hymnals and supplements or paying royalties for new music. Brainstorm on how your congregation might use email contacts with friends or missionaries in other countries, church musician exchanges, providing a venue for local musicians, or other low-cost ways of learning new prophetic songs.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.