

# Undistracting Excellence

March 15, 2017 | by: Sam Storms|

The psalmist exhorts us to worship “skillfully” ([Ps. 33:3](#)). Does this simply mean with technical precision or is there something more involved? I would like to suggest that what the psalmist likely had in mind is similar to what John Piper calls “undistracting excellence.” Here is how he defined it:

“We will try to sing . . . and pray and preach in such a way that people's attention will not be diverted from the substance by shoddy ministry nor by excessive finesse, elegance, or refinement. Natural, undistracting excellence will let the truth and beauty of God shine through. We will invest in equipment good enough to be undistracting in transmitting heartfelt truth.”

In other words, here at Bridgeway we strive to provide the highest quality sound equipment and lighting and the most aesthetically pleasing surroundings without anyone ever being distracted by them from their focus on God and the truth about who he is. I don't want anyone walking out of our service on a Sunday morning saying: “Wow! The sound was just right today. Not too loud, not too low. And the lighting was so pleasant, neither too bright nor too dim. And that guy could really play the guitar and that gal is amazing on the violin.”

Of course, that is precisely what we strive to do in terms of sight and sound and musical instrumentation: we pursue excellence in all we do, but not so that you would be distracted from God in order to focus on it. That is the difference between excellence and performance. Performance is designed to draw your attention to the singer or the sound technician or the instrumentalist. Excellence is designed to direct your attention to God and the truth of him as revealed in Scripture. Performance is man-centered. Excellence is God-centered. To quote Piper: “We do not pursue the atmosphere of artistic or oratorical performance, but the atmosphere of a radically personal encounter with God and truth.”

So what are the elements of spiritual excellence when it comes to music, singing, and our enjoyment of God in worship?

(1) We aim for all of our worship, in whatever form it is expressed, to be rooted and grounded in Scripture. It must be Bible-based and Bible-saturated. Everything we do must be conformed to the truth of Scripture. We must never sing anything that we do not believe is true. You wouldn't tolerate your pastor preaching heresy or theological error, so why would you tolerate it in yourself or in anyone else when it comes to singing?

(2) We aim for all of our worship, in whatever form it is expressed, to be technically and aesthetically pleasing and conducive to exalted thoughts about God. There are certain rhythms and melodies that make it hard to think about God. They are by their very nature distracting. They make it difficult to focus our thoughts on the lyrics and often feel inappropriate to the message contained in them. I'm not going to get into the argument about whether or not there are certain rhythms and melodies that are either intrinsically demonic or intrinsically divine. But we

must strive to make our music fitting and appropriately expressive to the majesty and glory of the God whom we love and adore.

(3) We aim for all of our worship, in whatever form it is expressed, to be joyful and free and expressive without being flippant or silly or beneath the dignity of both God and the people who are worshipping him. What this means is that some of our songs will be conducive to dancing in celebration of God's grace and love and other songs will be conducive to kneeling and awestruck reverence of him. It also means that we will never stoop to sing such ridiculously silly songs as *Dropkick Me Jesus* (Bobby Bare). In case you're not familiar with it, here goes:

“Drop kick me, Jesus through the goal posts of life  
End over end, neither left nor to right  
Straight through the heart of them righteous uprights  
Drop kick me, Jesus through the goal posts of life

Make me, oh make me, Lord more than I am  
Make me a piece in your master game plan  
Free from the earthly temptations below  
I've got the will, Lord if you've got the toe

Bring on the brothers who've gone on before  
And all of the sisters who've knocked on your door  
All the departed dear loved ones of mine  
Stick them up front in the offensive line” (Bobby Bare)

Again, to quote Piper: “We will try to avoid being trite, flippant, superficial, or frivolous, but instead will aim to set an example of reverence and passion and wonder and broken-hearted joy.”

(4) We aim for all of our worship, in whatever form it is expressed, to embrace both simplicity and complexity. Sometimes we'll sing the simple chorus, “I Love you, Lord,” and at other times the richly complex and deeply theological, “Be Thou My Vision.” They both have their place in our singing.

(5) We aim for all of our worship, in whatever form it is expressed, to engage both head and heart. In other words, we want people to be intellectually engaged with the greatness of God at the same time their heart is warmly touched and their emotions and affections are awakened and stirred. Some are afraid that this might degenerate into manipulation. Should we avoid anything that tends to arouse and awaken our affections and feelings? No. Precisely the opposite is true. Intensified affections and heightened feelings and deepened emotions are to be celebrated as long as what awakens, intensifies, and arouses them is biblical truth! Sinful manipulation only occurs when music is employed to stir someone's emotions simply for the sake of the emotion itself. But if one's emotions are stirred by truth, by grace, by divine love, by the beauty of Christ, then praise God!

(6) We aim for all of our worship, in whatever form it is expressed, to be crafted and energized and sustained by the Holy Spirit, whether that be through careful, strategic planning days in

advance, or through Spirit-prompted, unprepared spontaneity in the very moment of our singing. Some have embraced the misguided notion that spontaneity is inherently more “spiritual” than anything that was carefully prepared well in advance of a Sunday morning. But the Holy Spirit works just as powerfully and authentically on Tuesday morning as he does late on Saturday night.

(7) We aim for all of our worship, in whatever form it is expressed, to be God-centered, Christ-exalting, and Spirit-led. “Shout for joy to God, all the earth; sing the glory of his name; give to him glorious praise! Say to God, ‘How awesome are your deeds!’” ([Psalm 66:1-3a](#)).

Note well: we are to “shout” in worship, but always “to God” in praise. Shouting for shouting’s sake, to give vent to your emotions or as a way of seeking psychological relief, is not fitting in church. But shouting to God in gratitude and joy and celebration of who he is and what he has done is most appropriate. Again, note well: we are not merely to “sing” but to “sing the glory of *his* name,” not our own. Our focus is on the “deeds” of God: “*your* deeds”, Lord, are what fill our hearts and direct our praise.

*(This article was published in Samstorms.com and used by permission)*