

Article

In Like Manner of “Amazing Grace”: A Christian’s Journey for Relationship and the Sound of Spirituality

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Abstract: I was 13 years old when I heard Judy Collins’ rendition of “Amazing Grace” over the radio. At that time, I thought it was an unusual song to be played over a rock station. Collins sang the first verse with a pure yet moving vocal quality unaccompanied until the second verse when an unpretentious-sounding choir joined her. I was immediately mesmerized by the sound, even though I did not understand the meaning of the text. However, after embracing Christianity, “Amazing Grace” has been a wonderful companion and master teacher throughout my journey. In this transcendent autoethnography, I answer the research question, “What does spirituality sound like?” by using “Amazing Grace”. I describe how this hymn played a role in my early Christian life when it caused me to consider biblical truth. Then, I explore the lessons I learned about biblical grace. From a music educator’s perspective, I discuss my fundamental belief that “spiritual music is relationship” and show how “Amazing Grace” is a model for the sound of spirituality. I conclude with the prose of seven biblical reflections on what spirituality sounds like—a sound that leads us to a profound relationship with God.

Keywords: Christianity; music; spiritual; spirituality; “Amazing Grace”; biblical; relationship; transcendent; autoethnography



Citation: Quindag, Susan. 2022. In Like Manner of “Amazing Grace”: A Christian’s Journey for Relationship and the Sound of Spirituality. *Religions* 13: 1054. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13111054>

Academic Editors:
June Boyce-Tillman and
Stephen Roberts

Received: 26 August 2022
Accepted: 29 October 2022
Published: 3 November 2022

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1. Introduction to a Transcendent Autoethnography

It is a wonderful companion—music, that is. Whether I sing along with the Beatles, *I Want to Hold Your Hand*, blunder through *Malagueña* on my guitar, or feel the power of conducting Beethoven’s *Coriolan Overture*—music is a wonderful companion. There is, however, one simple song, a hymn, that has been more than a companion. It has been a master teacher that helped me answer a profound question and many other questions along the way. That profound question serves as the research question for this paper: What does spirituality sound like? To describe the exploration and answer to the research question, I used an autoethnographic methodology.

I call autoethnography “academic storytelling” (Adams et al. 2015). This method allows me, as the researcher, to pursue answers to research questions by studying my story or narrative along with insights and epiphanies within various social contexts (Bochner and Ellis 2016; Poulos 2021). To do so, I engage in reflexivity—the process of thoroughly contemplating and interrogating ideas or phenomena (Poulos 2021). For this paper, the hymn I mentioned is the phenomenon that initiated reflexivity.

There are various forms of autoethnography because it is a highly personalized research method (Fung 2016; Poulos 2021; Walton 2014). Originally, I wanted to use evocative autoethnography to draw readers into my story by arousing their emotions (Bochner and Ellis 2016; Lee 2010). However, there is an essential aspect in this paper that supersedes the need to be evocative, and that is spirituality (Fretheim 2005; Schneiders 2016; Swindoll 2012). Because spiritual principles are fervently set forth, I am introducing a form of autoethnography that has been used frequently and should have an identity—transcendent autoethnography (Bennett and Varghese 2021; Bilgen 2022; De Villiers 2019; Fredrickson-Laouini 2021). This narrative methodology allows for reflexivity that is primarily spiritual,

metaphysical, or supernatural—the transcendent (Boyce-Tillman 2017; Schneiders 2016). Furthermore, researchers can reconcile insights from their lived experiences to a spiritual belief (Bilgen 2022; Slife 2004; Walton 2014). Then, they can either confirm, refute, or ignore their established spiritual belief or develop a novel spiritual system (Boyce-Tillman 2017; Walton 2014). Ultimately, the purpose of transcendent autoethnography is to explore the relationships with the self, culture, or sub-cultures (social contexts), and something spiritual, divine, or otherworldly (Adams et al. 2015; Levin and Steele 2005). In this paper, I present my story with the hymn I referred to, the interactions with the sub-cultures of church and academia, and God (Walton 2014). Before answering the research question, I reconcile the insight of my lived experiences to a spiritual system based on the narrative of the Bible (Boyce-Tillman 2017; Schneiders 2016).

I collected various data to develop credibility for this transcendent autoethnography and for recall and reflexivity (Adams et al. 2015; Chang 2008; Poulos 2021). I constantly engaged in musicking of hymns and related spiritual music through performing and listening. I visited significant locations, specifically my former church and schools, and discussed my recollection with friends and colleagues. I also analyzed various artifacts that included notated music, personal notes I wrote in my Bible, lecture notes for classes I taught, articles and presentations I have written, and social media (Adams et al. 2015; Poulos 2021). Furthermore, I regularly studied the Bible—the source of my beliefs about God and truth (Henry 1964; Poulos 2021; Schneiders 2016).

2. A Single Voice

My clock radio woke me up as it did every weekday morning when I was 13. It was time to get up and get ready for school—the first hour was my favorite class, orchestra. I had the radio tuned to a popular rock station in San Francisco. That morning the DJ played a song I had not heard. It was a slow song. It did not have a Latin beat like Santana's (2017) "Oye Como Va", nor did the text tell the story of lost love like Carole King's (2015) "It's Too Late Baby". This song was unusual—a single voice, a woman's voice with no instruments in the background singing this text:

*Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound!
That saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost, but now I'm found,
Was blind but now I see.* (Collins 2014; Peterson 1974)

Eventually a choir joined in, but never any instruments. For some reason I liked it. At the time I did not know what it meant, but it sounded like "peace". I did not think a song without a strong rock beat would grab my attention, but there was something about that song.

"And that was Judy Collins singing, "Amazing Grace", the DJ said afterward.

At that point, I did not know who Judy Collins was, but it did not matter. All I knew was that I wanted to hear that song again.

Soon afterward, when I heard "Amazing Grace" over my clock radio, I recorded it on my new tape recorder. And even though the quality was not good, I listened to it over and over again.

By the way, what's a wretch?

3. My Personal Savior

I had an experience. Some said I became a "Jesus Freak" (Max 2014, p. 13). My closest friends just said I got religious—maybe too religious for my own good. I did not see it that way when I was 17. Up to that point, I was in a mainstream religion typical of Filipinos, even among Filipinos like my parents who immigrated to the United States (Paredes 2017). I left that religion and accepted Jesus Christ as my personal Savior (Lindsey 1970).

My cousin Clement who "got saved" and converted to Christianity two years prior, would come to my house with his Bible to tell my family and me about Jesus Christ dying

on the cross for our sins. At first, I did not want to hear anything about his new beliefs. I had a religion and went to church almost every Sunday—that was good enough for me. However, Clement was persistent in visiting and “witnessing” (talking about God) to us. Then, specific Bible passages he read, such as Romans 3:23 and Romans 10:9–10, captured my attention. I also became obsessed with death and the afterlife. I started reading Hal Lindsey’s (1970) *The Late Great Planet Earth*. Although I did not quite understand all the theology of Christianity, I eventually believed that the Bible was true and that my sins separated me from God. Yet, the Bible also says in John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in his name should not perish, but have everlasting life”. In the privacy of my room, I repented and asked Jesus to come into my heart. I immediately felt a sense of peace that I had never felt before and knew that by the grace of God, I was saved (Henry 1964; Lindsey 1970). Later, my other family members and my closest friend were also saved.

I started regularly attending my cousin’s church, Calvary Baptist Church—a conservative, fundamental Baptist church in San Francisco. The people at the church were welcoming and friendly. I even knew a few classmates who attended my high school. However, unlike my other church, where I performed a series of rituals during the services, I had to listen to 40–45 min of Bible sermons. I enjoyed learning about biblical truth and listened attentively to the pastor and any other visiting preacher. Also, I started writing notes in my Bible and on pieces of paper. Along with biblical truth, some of the older church members taught me that to be not just a Christian but a “good Christian”, I would have to give up movies, wear dresses to church, and not listen to rock or pop music; these were some of the lifestyle issues of separation practiced by some fundamental Baptists (Pickering 1979). Although my idea of dressing up was wearing blue jeans, a tee shirt, and an old army jacket, I gradually made lifestyle changes. But I did question the need to eliminate rock and pop music because I liked all kinds of music.

One Sunday, there was a guest preacher, Frank Garlock. At the time, he was on the music faculty at Bob Jones University and had written a book about music titled, *The Big Beat* (Garlock 1971). I wanted to hear what he had to say because I heard he was a musician and talked about music for Christians. That night Dr. Garlock played his trombone and then preached on the problems of rock music. At the time, I did not quite comprehend what he was saying. However, I do remember fragments of information about rock music not pleasing God because of the heavy beat, vulgar words, and the worldly sinful lifestyle of the performers (Garlock 1971). Dr. Garlock also argued that music used in the church, such as hymns, should not be associated with rock music. He referred to the new style of church music that was once called “Jesus Music” but is now commonly identified as Contemporary Christian Music or CCM (Garlock 1971; Baker 1979). I do not recall anybody at church purchasing Dr. Garlock’s book, but I do remember that various church members had strong opinions. Some, mostly older members, agreed with Dr. Garlock; however, a few of my friends did not like what he said and ignored his admonition to eliminate rock music. At that time, I did not form an opinion and just listened. A few weeks later, I thought it would be best for me to set aside my rock music since I sincerely wanted to please God. I eventually discarded all my tapes and rock records and tuned my clock radio to the classical station. I also set aside many of my piano sheet music of rock songs. With my newfound practices, I was destined to be godly—or so I thought.

As I continued to attend church, I had to learn new hymns and gospel songs. At the services, an organist and pianist would always accompany the singing. There was more congregational singing from the hymnal than I was used to, and it was much more informal, which I enjoyed (Peterson 1974). I had some favorite gospel songs that I loved such as “Blessed Assurance” and “To God Be the Glory”. It was typical for Baptist churches to end with an altar call while singing, “Just as I Am”. However, one Sunday morning, I heard something I never thought I would hear in a conservative, fundamental, Baptist church.

“Before the message,” the song leader said enthusiastically, “let’s sing number 72, “Amazing Grace”.

“What? We’re singing a rock song in church?” I thought. Maybe it was not the same song that Judy Collins made famous in 1969. Maybe it was not the rock song that I taped and listened to over and over again. Maybe it was not the rock song I threw out because I wanted to be a good Christian.

But it was. And even though I was confused and conflicted, I sang along with the others. But I had questions, so many questions.

Do these people know they’re singing a rock/pop song? Can God be happy with this? But what makes a song, any song, spiritual? Most importantly, I asked, “What does spirituality sound like?”

4. Ten Trillion Years

“Remember, when we sing that last verse here”, said the song leader at the pulpit, “we always sing, ‘When we’ve been there 10 trillion years.’ Ten thousand years is not nearly enough time when describing eternity”.

I heard that comment repeatedly from many song leaders at Bob Jones University during chapel time. They referred to the last verse typically sung of “Amazing Grace”. Although this verse was not part of the original hymn published by John Newton in 1779, it was added in 1790 and continues to appear in many of the Protestant hymnbooks:

*When we’ve been there ten thousand years,
Bright shining as the sun,
We’ve no less days to sing God’s praise
Than when we’d first begun.* (Peterson 1974)

For over 30 years, I was on the music faculty at Bob Jones University (BJU) in Greenville, South Carolina, USA, a conservative Christian liberal arts university with a strong emphasis on the arts from a biblical worldview. Although I taught violin and viola for many years, I primarily taught music education courses. When I first heard their rendition of “Amazing Grace” sung in harmony by over 6000 individuals in the Amphitorium at BJU, I thought it was glorious. After all, the writer of this verse was trying to give a sense of eternity to all humanity who is restricted by time and space (MacArthur 2000). However, as I matured as a Christian and as a music educator who loves studying the psychology of music, the “10 trillion years” statement, among others, caused me to ponder the profundity of music in eternity. This is one of the reasons I choose to study and meditate on the design and beauty of music and how we are created to listen, respond to, and perform it rather than to debate the earlier questions that I had as a teenager about rock music. Furthermore, I learned how faith anchored in the Bible and science can be considered, meditated upon, and reconciled (Brand and Yancey 2019; Metaxas 2021).

For example, when considering music in eternity, the book of Revelation in the Bible is a fundamental text to study (De Villiers 2019; Easley 1998; MacArthur 2007). Throughout Revelation, instrumental music and hymn singing are described (De Villiers 2019). However, an interesting passage is Revelation 21:1–8 where heaven is described as a “new heaven and a new earth”. Bible scholars argue that heaven will not merely be an improvement of the universe, but will be an eternal, perfected environment that is entirely different from what exists presently (Henry 1964; MacArthur 2000; Beale 1999). I contend that if heaven will be an entirely different environment, the physical properties that are used to create, perform, and perceive music—frequency, intensity, and waveform, will not be the same or may not even exist in eternity (Hodges and Sebald 2011; MacArthur 2000; Radocy and Boyle 2012). Furthermore, for Christians to exist in this new environment, a physiological transformation will occur as described in Revelation 21:4 (Beale 1999; Henry 1964; MacArthur 2000). This verse is consistent with I Corinthians 15:53 of the Bible, where there is a description of the resurrection of Christians whose bodies will be changed from “corruptible to incorruptible”. Therefore, the minute organs in the ears and brain that receive and perceive music will be perfected, and I believe we will perceive music differently in eternity (De Villiers 2019; Henry 1964). After studying the book of Revelation and commentaries of Bible scholars, I

know there is music in eternity to worship and praise God—but what it sounds like, I do not know (De Villiers 2019; MacArthur 2000). However, I believe and anticipate that our greatest symphonies and musical works that are composed and performed in this temporal state will sound like a “cheap jingle” in eternity. That is probably why John Newton and others are limited in describing this future glory (De Villiers 2019; MacArthur 2000).

Incidentally, I remember hosting a music education colleague who presented a paper on Langer’s (1957) philosophy on virtual time and space. As we discussed Langer’s theories, I mentioned that from my philosophical perspective as a Christian, God has given us the desire to live in eternity, as stated in Ecclesiastes 3:9 (Henry 1964). Consequently, the arts become very important to us because they allow us to feel “eternity” when we have an aesthetic experience, are in a state of virtual time and space, or are in a state of flow (Bogden 2010; Csikszentmihalyi 1990; Langer 1957). Do these ideas provide another perspective on the sound of spirituality?

5. A Great Honor

In 2007 I was honored with an invitation by the West African government and the United States Embassy to present workshops and lectures on Gullah music throughout Sierra Leone, West Africa, as part of the 200th-year commemoration of the abolishment of slavery. The Gullahs were the descendants of the enslaved West Africans who settled along the east coast of the United States, many around South Carolina (Carawan and Carawan 1989; Jones 2000; Joyner 1984). To prepare for this excursion, I studied the life of William Wilberforce (2020), the British Christian member of parliament who wrote, *A Letter on the Abolition of the Slave Trade* in 1807. Before that time, he became friends with John Newton, the author of “Amazing Grace”. Newton was once a global slave trader. Later, he was also enslaved. However, he eventually became a Christian, repented of his sins, especially the sin of slave trading, and worked tirelessly alongside Wilberforce to abolish slavery (Metaxas 2007; Newton 2010).

In the 2006 movie, *Amazing Grace* (Knight 2007), the work of Wilberforce and his friendship with Newton were portrayed. In one scene, Newton was depicted dictating his memoirs and describing the deplorable events of the slave trade. I thought then that he must have been tormented throughout his life when he recalled what he had done to other humans created in God’s image. When I later read Newton’s (2010), *Thoughts upon the African Slave Trade*, I felt disgusted over the global atrocity of slavery. I realized that Newton understood the depth of his wicked sinfulness when he referred to himself as a “wretch” (Bridges 1991; Turner 2002). He knew there was nothing he could do for his own redemption but had to believe the truth in Bible verses such as Ephesians 2:8–9, “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: It is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast”. Through understanding that grace is unmerited favor extended to him by God, he penned:

*‘Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved;
How precious did that grace appear,
The hour I first believed!* (Peterson 1974)

6. A Lesson from Suffering

“I’ve been rethinking our conservative, traditional views about what makes music spiritual”, I said to my graduate students at the beginning of a Psychology of Music class at Bob Jones University. “I know we often think that what makes music spiritual is a well-constructed, balanced composition free from worldly musical elements or associations with genres such as rock music. But I’m beginning to think that what makes music spiritual has more to do with our relationships, first with God and then with others. So, I think whenever we discuss the components of spiritual music, we should start discussing our profound

relationships first rather than other topics that are often criticized, like Contemporary Christian Music”.

Upon finishing that sentence, I saw one of my students abruptly grab her bookbag, pull out her Bible, and immediately turn through the pages.

“Rachel”, I said, “do you have something to add?”

“Oh yes”, Rachel said excitedly. “Just last night, my friends and I were having a Bible study, and we talked about how God uses relational terms like ‘Father,’ ‘brother,’ and ‘friend’ throughout Proverbs. Then we had a long discussion on how the Bible is full of those relational terms so we can understand what God is trying to teach us and show us that relationships are important”.

I replied, “Rachel, I think we’re on to something. Remember in Matthew 22 where Christ was teaching about the two greatest commandments? He said all the laws could be reduced to two commandments—loving God and loving others. Love is an emotion that is part of highly cherished relationships. Can it possibly be that what God wants from us with our music is not primarily a well-constructed composition without a heavy rock beat, but rather us? Our life? Our affections? A relationship?”

The class discussion I just described occurred after returning from my trip to West Africa. When considering the music of the enslaved Gullahs, I realized that music is indispensable during human suffering—created and performed in its most complex or simplistic form and received and embraced for its most profound or simplistic message (Carawan and Carawan 1989; Chenu 2003; Jones and Hawes 1972). This led me to a new research question that needed to be answered—why is there music in the midst of suffering? To answer this question, I realized that suffering cannot always be understood; therefore, we seek metaphysical explanations as to why we suffer (Jones 1994; Swinton 2012). Eventually, I concluded that we want music during suffering because it makes us contemplate and confirm our fundamental spiritual or ontological beliefs about existence, purpose, and the afterlife (Fretheim 2005; Jones 1994; Swinton 2012). I subsequently asked myself, “when I had gone through suffering, what kind of music did I listen to?” The answer was simple—I listened to the music that comforted and reassured me in my relationship with God. In the third verse of “Amazing Grace”, John Newton also expressed the relationship he had with God and God’s grace that sustained him when he experienced suffering:

*Thro’ many dangers, toils, and snares,
I have already come;
‘tis grace has brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home. (Peterson 1974)*

After realizing that relationships are significant during suffering, I wanted to understand where relationships “fit in” with music, specifically spiritual music. I began to study the Bible using relationality as a theoretical framework and did the same with my various musical activities. Concurrently, I delved into many related scholarly works. Among them, I read Buber’s (1970) *I and Thou* to understand his relational models of “I-It”, “I-Thou”, and “I-Eternal Thou”, as well as Slife (2004), Wildman (2010), and Yannaras (2011) to determine the characteristics of a relational ontology. However, the most influential book that I read was Fretheim’s (2005) *God and the World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation*, where he argues,

Through the lens provided by these various images, the God of the opening chapters of Genesis is seen to be a highly relational God. Most basically, God is present and active in the world, enters into a relationship of integrity with the work, and both world and God are affected by that interaction. In this relationship, God has chosen not to stay aloof but to get caught up with the creatures in moving toward the divine purposes of creation, and in such a way that God is deeply affected by such engagement. For example: God involves the human in creational tasks; God walks in the garden and engages the human;

God ameliorates judgment (4:15); God suffers a broken heart (6:6); God limits the divine options in relating to sin and evil (8:212–22) (pp. 108–9).

After my investigation and discussions with friends, colleagues, and even graduate students, I eventually embraced a relational ontology as a Christian and music educator—I study relationships to determine reality. During my daily Bible study, I remembered reading John 17, Jesus’ prayer to God before his crucifixion. I was fixated on verse 21, “That they [Christians] may be one, as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us; that the world may believe that thou hast sent me”. I then presented and published a paper titled, *Seeking Oneness: Exploring a Relational Ontology of Spiritual Music* where I contend that “spiritual music is relationship” (Quindag 2017, p. 95).

“Good morning, y’all”, I said cheerfully at the beginning of my Psychology of Music class. “Before we get into today’s topic of rhythm, I want to throw something at you to think about and discuss with your friends around the lunch table. A few class periods ago, we discussed how God uses relational language and that perhaps we should consider music relationally. Last night I thought about how the first thing we lost due to the fall of Adam and Eve was our relationship with God. The first thing we gain when we are saved and become Christians is our relationship with God through Jesus Christ. And the most glorious thing we will experience in heaven is an eternal relationship with God”. I continued and asked, “Doesn’t this show how much God values a relationship with us? Shouldn’t our spiritual music reflect this profound relationship in every way?” I observed and sensed my students contemplating the answers to these questions, which was gratifying.

7. A Year of Change

I view 2019 as a year of change; I started an educational consulting business and a new academic position as a contracted dissertation chair at the graduate school of Liberty University. I even worked as an academic coach at a local community college for a while. However, the most significant change came on May 10th when my mother passed away into eternity. Mom had dementia for over six years, and every vacation or long weekend, I flew to Arizona to be with her and help with her care. Like most people with dementia, she had good and bad days; however, the bad days eventually overcame the good (Swinton 2012). During that period, I would look into my mother’s eyes and see life slowly slipping away. It was a long and sad farewell, yet I remained hopeful.

At one point, I had to prepare myself that Mom would possibly forget that I was her daughter. Since we shared the same faith in Jesus Christ, I prayed, “Lord, even though she probably will forget who I am, please don’t let her forget who you are and keep her in the palm of your hands”. I saw my prayer answered many times over through music. Despite my mom’s failing, corruptible body, she loved to sing hymns. Even when she could not string words together to make a whole sentence, if somebody would start singing a hymn, she would sing one or two or sometimes three verses from memory. My mom would even begin to sing the hymns in the middle of the night, interrupting my sleep. Her favorite one was, “How Great Thou Art”. But she also loved “Amazing Grace”. Every time she sang a hymn, I knew she remembered who God was and that he had her in His care (Swinton 2012). I was also reminded of Psalm 103, which states that God knows who I am and how much pressure and anxiety I can manage.

Many researchers and music therapists have studied and observed that patients with Alzheimer’s and dementia respond to music (Baird and Samson 2015; Campbell and Wosch 2022). Generally, they found that musical information is stored in various parts of our brain, especially in the hippocampus—a part of the temporal lobe responsible for long-term memory. When music is presented to patients with dementia, various parts of their brain that are not frayed are activated, and they can engage in music (Amen 2005; Goleman 2006; Swinton 2012). Furthermore, there is evidence that the right temporal lobe also allows them to respond to spiritual information (Alper 2006; Swinton 2012). This scientific explanation is viable and supports the premise in Psalm 139 of the Bible that states that we are “fearfully and wonderfully made”. However, beyond science, I am confident that God kept my mom

in a relationship with Him (Swinton 2012; Swindoll 2012). During this time, I remembered Bible passages such as Matthew 28:20, "... I [God] am with you always, even unto the end of the world", Hebrews 13:5, "... I [God] will never leave thee, nor forsake thee" and Romans 8:38–39, "For I [Paul] am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, or principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord". Incidentally, my mom never forgot who I was and always knew I was her daughter.

When it was time to prepare Mom's memorial service, I wanted to celebrate her life with her favorite hymns. I found a copy of "Amazing Grace" from one of my hymnbooks and read an obscure verse by John Newton that I had never sung. After reading the verse, it had to be part of the service. Every time I read this verse, I feel like my mom is talking to me right after she ate a tiny bit of breakfast, took her last breath, and dropped her head as she was ushered into heaven.

*Yes, when this flesh and heart shall fail,
And mortal life shall cease;
I shall possess, within the veil,
A life of joy and peace. (Trinity Hymnal 1999)*

8. Final Reflections and Reconciliation with the Bible

When I first heard "Amazing Grace" I was unaware of its history or implications (Collins 2014). Yet, this simple song contributed to my belief in my Savior, Jesus Christ, who proclaimed in John 8:12, "... I [Jesus] am the light of the world; he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness but shall have the light of life". After becoming a Christian, "Amazing Grace" became a song that made me aware of the importance of growth as it states in II Peter 3:18, "But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ". As a Christian music educator and musician, "Amazing Grace" was evidence that no matter how we may want to reduce spiritual music into a "tightly-knitted" formula, we are woefully limited (Bridges 1991). Despite our talents, knowledge, or education, we should be mindful of Isaiah 55:8–9, "'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,' saith the Lord. 'For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.'"

During my mom's long departure with dementia, hearing her sing "Amazing Grace" and singing along with her reminded me of the hope in God (Swindoll 2012; Swinton 2012). David, King of Israel, sang about this hope expressed in Psalm 62:5–6, "My soul, wait thou only upon God; for my expectation is from him. He only is my rock and my salvation; he is my defense; I shall not be moved". Furthermore, "Amazing Grace" helped me consider and anticipate heaven's eternal glory described in Revelation 21:4, "And God shall wipe away all the tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain for the former things are passed away".

In July 2022, I presented an abbreviated version of this paper at the "Amazing Grace" and its Legacies: Reflections at 250 Conference held in Olney, England. Afterward, a participant asked, "When you are talking about the sound of spirituality, are you referring to just the text, the music, or both? Can music alone, without text, sound spiritual?"

To answer these questions thoroughly would require another paper or possibly a book. The debate on whether music alone without text holds spiritual communicative properties is somewhat mysterious (Radocy and Boyle 2012). This discussion can be traced to the early Greek philosophers who believed that specific scale systems embody human emotions and morality (Hustad 1993; Mark 2002). I am hesitant, though, to classify or define the genres or constructions of music that are spiritual since I had been conflicted when I was a young Christian about whether "Amazing Grace" should be sung in church. Furthermore, music theologians have not adequately articulated specific, universal compositional techniques that make music spiritual (Best 1993; Garlock and Woetzel 1992; Hustad 1993; Makujina

2002). However, I do believe that within a cultural or personal context, music that is meant to be spiritual without text should at least evoke an emotional response that may reference beliefs (Best 1993; Jourdain 1998; Langer 1957). When this music is coupled with a strong text (accurate theological information based on the Bible), it results in one powerfully transcendent and transformational sound (De Villiers 2019). It causes individuals to see or sense a reality beyond their physical experience and contributes to a profound life change based on belief—this is the purpose of spiritual music (Best 1993; Jourdain 1998; Radocy and Boyle 2012). Although the music and text may be listened to or performed by themselves, they exceed their individual power when melded together. “Amazing Grace” is one such hymn. Regardless of a hymn’s power, however, its potency is minimal unless there is a relationship or a desire for a relationship (consciously or unconsciously) with God (Revelation 3:20, Luke 19:10).

“Amazing Grace” is an exceptional spiritual song. It has transcended time and culture and continues to be one of the world’s most beloved performed sacred works. Hymn writers and songwriters of spiritual music can use “Amazing Grace” as a model as they work toward creating music that is spiritual and text that is strong.

This paper is based on the research question I asked soon after I converted to Christianity: what does spirituality sound like? Before considering my response in the next section, I encourage readers to listen to Judy Collins (2014), “Amazing Grace” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rswH9CSyWHk> accessed on 1 February 2022). Then my responses to the research question in the following section should become vivid.

9. What Does Spirituality Sound Like?

It is a sound that arrests and tugs on the heart and soul of a sojourner, a wretch, or a sinner toward a “light” that is brighter than no other.

It is a sound that can be with us when we are mere “infants” on our spiritual journey until we are mature and understand the things that were once hidden.

It is a sound that cannot be fully explained and is not easily understood by any rules, laws, or patterns we may develop.

It is a sound that can remind us of our imperfections and dismal past while creating the possibilities of unexplainable hope and joy beyond suffering.

It is a sound of a loved one describing the passage from life to death and to new life.

However mysterious, it is a sound that can transcend our temporal state so we may have a foretaste of eternity.

But above all else, it is a sound that secures us in a perfect relationship with the One who lovingly sacrificed His Son for us because of His “Amazing Grace”.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Ethical review and approval were waived for this study due to the author being the only research subject.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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