

The Theology and Place of Music in Worship

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The people of God sing. After escaping from the Egyptians and crossing the Red Sea, the people of Israel sang a song to the Lord (Exod. 15). Singing was part of Israel's formal worship in both tabernacle and temple (1 Chron. 6:31-32, 16:42). The Psalms bear rich testimony that in joy and sorrow, in praise and lament, the faithful raise their voices in song to God. Hymn singing was practiced by Jesus and his disciples (Matt. 26:30). The Apostle Paul instructed the Colossians, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (Col. 3: 16-17).

Music and song continue to play a vital role in the life of God's people today. Contemporary culture and modern technology bring new possibilities and new challenges to the music ministry of the church. People's lives are surrounded with music--television and radio, the background music of video games, the muzak of shopping malls, CDs, and synthesizers. Yet much of the time music functions as "background" rather than as an opportunity for serious listening, much less participation. Outside the church there are few occasions or opportunities in North American culture for people to sing together. Much of the popular music (including popular Christian music) composed today is for performance rather than for participation.

The church also has greater access and has shown greater openness to a greater variety of music--from classical hymnody to Christian rock, from European cantatas to South African choruses. Such diversity is to be welcomed and celebrated; it reflects the diversity and richness of God's creation. But greater variety and options in music call for greater discernment and care in planning and implementing the music ministry of the church. The people of God sing; what they sing and how they sing are important issues.

In order to further the dialogue in the RCA about music and worship, and to encourage healthy and vibrant congregational singing as a vital part of ministry, this paper offers some reflections on the theology and place of music in Christian worship. The paper closes with some suggested guidelines for evaluating and selecting music for the congregation's worship.

1. **Music is a gift of God and part of the created order.** From its inception, "when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy" (Job 38:7), to its consummation, when "every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them" will sing to the Lamb on the throne (Rev. 5:13), creation is musical. "All nature sings and round me rings the music of the spheres."¹ Human music-making participates in the music of creation and reflects the order, beauty, and diversity of God's creation.

2. **Of all the musical instruments that may be employed in the praise of God, the human voice has priority.** Other instruments are to be used primarily in the service of the singing of God's people. Reformed theologian Karl Barth points out that singing is not an option for the people of God; it is one of the essential ministries of the church:

The Christian church sings. It is not a choral society. Its singing is not a concert. But from inner, material necessity it sings. Singing is the highest form of human expression....What we can and must say quite confidently is that the church which does not sing is not the church. And where...it does not really sing but sighs and mumbles spasmodically, shamefacedly and with an ill grace, it can be at best only a troubled community which is not sure of its cause and of whose ministry and witness there can be no great expectation....The praise of God which finds its concrete culmination in the singing of the community is one of the indispensable forms of the ministry of the church.²

3. **Singing is a ministry that belongs to *all* the people of God.** The congregation is always the primary choir. The role of professional or volunteer choirs and musicians is to aid the whole people of God in their worship. While anthems or vocal and instrumental solos may be offered, they do not have to be. Congregational singing, however, is essential. While it is possible to be actively engaged in worship and in prayer while listening to an anthem or solo, a diet of worship which does not regularly include ample opportunity for all the members of the congregation to join in song will be impoverished worship, and the life of the church and the faith of its people will suffer.
4. **Of all the art forms that may be employed in worship, singing is especially corporate.** Indeed, it is the art form most suited to expressing the church's unity in the body of Christ.³ Different voices, different instruments, different parts are blended to offer a single, living, and unified work of beauty. John Calvin recognized the power of congregational singing and unison prayer in helping the church express and experience the unity of the body of Christ. Asserting that the human tongue was especially created to proclaim the praise of God, both through singing and speaking, he noted that "the chief use of the tongue is in public prayers, which are offered in the assembly of the believers, by which it comes about that with one common voice, and as it were, with the same mouth, we all glorify God together, worshipping him with one spirit and the same faith."⁴
5. **The church's ministry of song is for the glory of God.** The principal direction of congregational singing is to the Lord (Ps. 96:1). Music is made first of all to the Lord and only secondarily to each other. Music should communicate and express a sense of awe and wonder in the presence of God; it should lead our thoughts toward God rather than toward ourselves.

God can be glorified by beautiful sounds and spirits may be uplifted by a pleasing melody, but it is primarily the joining of the tune to a text that gives meaning to Christians' songs. Not only should both text and tune glorify God and be consistent with each other, but the tune must serve the text. Music is always the servant of the Word.⁵ Calvin cautioned that "we should be very careful that our ears be not more attentive to the melody than our minds to the spiritual meaning of the words....[S]uch songs as have been

composed only for the sweetness and delight of the ear are unbecoming to the majesty of the church and cannot but displease God in the highest degree."⁶

6. **The church's ministry of song is for the edification of God's people.** Through congregational singing Christian faith is not only expressed; to a very real degree it is formed. Since people tend to remember the theology they sing more than the theology that is preached, a congregation's repertoire of hymnody is often of critical importance in shaping the faith of its people. Here again, it is the meaning of the text that is of primary importance. It is through the sense of the words that God's people learn of the nature and character of God and of the Christian life. Noting that if one prays in a tongue, the "spirit prays," but the "mind is unfruitful," the Apostle Paul vows, "I will sing with the spirit and I will sing with the mind also" (1 Cor. 14:14-15, RSV).

Christian hymnody contains some of the most tightly packed, concise doctrinal and devotional thought of the church.⁷ Through congregational song God's people learn their language about God; God's people learn how to speak with God. Songs of worship shape faith. It is, therefore, very important that a congregation have a rich "vocabulary of praise." Simple, repetitive music such as praise choruses and Taize chants are very appropriate in worship and can be very effective in moving individuals to prayer and to praise. But it is also important for the congregation to know some of the great hymns of faith in order to have a sense that the Christian faith is both relevant and enduring, and to be enriched by the faith of the "great cloud of witnesses." Hymns, both ancient and modern, which stretch minds, increase vocabulary, rehearse the biblical story, and teach of the nature and the mighty acts of God are essential for the congregation's growth in faith.

7. **The emotional power of music, rightly employed, is a vital and moving aid to worship.** Music, quite apart from an associated text, is capable of evoking powerful emotions. Hearts are stirred and feet set to tapping by a rousing Sousa march, while another melody may move people to tears. Calvin recognized the emotional power of music and for that reason included the singing (rather than the saying) of Psalms in the church in Geneva. Such singing "lends dignity and grace to sacred actions and has the greatest value in kindling our heart to a true zeal and eagerness to pray."⁸ Music can indeed "excite piety," and depending on its mood, move individuals to penitence, thanksgiving, adoration, love, or any one of a host of emotions. Those who love the Lord are encouraged to "sing till we feel our hearts ascending with our tongues."⁹ It is, therefore, important that the emotional mood of a particular tune be commensurate with the sense of the text. It is also important that the emotional power of music in worship be evocative rather than manipulative, honest rather than manufactured, and that the congregation's singing allow for the full range of emotions in worship.¹⁰

Suggested Guidelines for Evaluating and Nurturing Congregational Singing

Evaluating and choosing music for Christian worship should be a careful process, guided primarily by theological considerations. Pastors, consistories, musicians, choir directors, and

worship committees may be aided in this process by being attentive to the following suggested guidelines. The commission also invites responses to these guidelines, especially from those congregations that can suggest additional or alternative criteria for selecting hymns or a hymnal.

1. **What theology is expressed in our congregational singing?** Is it biblical? Is it consistent with Reformed theology? Is the range of what we sing representative of the "whole counsel of God?" What do our songs and hymns say or imply about the sovereignty and grace of God? About the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ? About the work of the Holy Spirit, the nature and mission of the church, the sacraments, and the Christian life? The *Book of Church Order* specifies that "The hymns used in public worship shall be in harmony with the *Standards* of the Reformed Church in America" and assigns this responsibility to the consistory (*BCO*, Part I, Article 2, Section 6d).
2. **Is there sufficient pastoral breadth in our music ministry?** Do we sing songs that are appropriate to the many and variable life situations in which believers find themselves? Does our congregational singing include the many moods and types of prayer, including praise, thanksgiving, confession, lament, intercession, and dedication? A congregation which sings only "upbeat" praise choruses and hymns, for example, will have a diminished and restricted understanding of prayer.
3. **Is there sufficient liturgical breadth?** Does our congregational singing include songs and hymns appropriate to each of the seasons of the church year? For the celebration of the sacraments? For the various opportunities for congregational responses in the order of worship? Is the congregation provided with the opportunity to sing those parts of the service that are better sung than spoken?
4. **Is there sufficient historical, cultural, and generational breadth?** Does our congregational singing express belief in the communion of saints? Are all the saints present encouraged to join in singing, and do our songs also express our belief that we sing with saints throughout the ages and around the world? Do the hymns and songs include contributions from other cultures, languages, and eras? Are songs included which allow for the full participation of children? For those beginning the journey of faith as well as for more mature Christians?
5. **Is the language of our hymns inclusive?** Do our hymns make use of the full range of biblical imagery for God? Can all believers, male and female, young and old, feel included by the language of our congregational songs?
6. **Are we providing our congregation with a sufficient vocabulary of praise?** Marva Dawn suggests that a hymn text "is great in proportion to what we can learn from it."¹¹ What do we learn about God and the Christian faith from what we sing? Can the text stand on its own?
7. **Does the music serve the text?** "A hymn tune is excellent only as it is subservient to the words, undergirds the thought, and captures the dominant mood."¹² Does the tune help

us to recall the words by bringing forward appropriate features of the text, or does the tune call attention to itself and contradict or stand in the way of the words?

8. **Does our music encourage corporate worship?** Does the music encourage congregational singing or is it designed for the solo artist or does it come across as entertainment? Are soloists and choir effectively leading and supporting the congregation in its worship or are they merely displaying their virtuosity? Do the hymns and choruses we sing express the faith of the gathered community or do they tend toward individual and private expressions of faith?
9. **Is the music appropriate to the ability of the congregation?** Do our musical selections respect the past practice of congregation? Do we include enough familiar hymns?
10. **Do the hymns and choruses we sing assume and encourage growth in discipleship?** Is continuing congregational education in music and worship a part of our ministry? Do we take the time and effort to learn new hymns and challenging hymns? Worship is a "living sacrifice," and therefore our gifts to God should represent some cost to us. Learning more difficult music and coming to understand and appreciate richer theology may be difficult work, but it can also be a source of spiritual renewal and growth.

--Commision on Worship, Reformed Church in America, 1996

NOTES:

1. Maltbie D. Babcock, "This is My Father s World," 1901.
2. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. IV, part 3, chapter 16, par. 72, #4.
3. With apologies to the Apostle Paul, a paraphrase of 1 Corinthians 12, substituting music imagery for body imagery, illustrates the point: There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of notes, but the same song; and there are varieties of voices, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good....For just as the song is one and has many parts, and all the parts of the song, though many, are one song, so it is with Christ....Indeed the song does not consist of one part, but of many. If the tenors should say, we are not sopranos so we do not belong to the song, that would not make them any less a part of the song. And if the altos should say, because we do not sing bass, we have nothing to contribute to the song, that would not make them any less a part of the song. If the whole congregation were sopranos, where would the tenors be?....But as it is, God has

arranged the parts of the song, each one of them as he chose. If all sang the same part, where would the harmony be? As it is there are many parts, many voices, yet one song. Now you are the song of Christ, and individually members of it.

4. John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, III. 20, #31.
5. Howard Hageman, "Can Music Be Reformed?" *Reformed Review*, 1960.
6. Calvin, *Institutes*, III. 20, #32. In his list of practical rules for congregational singing, John Wesley offered similar instructions: "Above all, sing spiritually. Have an eye to God in every word you sing. Aim at pleasing Him more than yourself, or any other creature. In order to do this, attend strictly to the sense of what you sing, and see that your heart is not carried away with the sound, but offered to God continually; so shall your singing be such as the Lord will approve here, and reward you when He cometh in the clouds of heaven." Cited by Austin Lovelace and William C. Rice, *Music and Worship in the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976), p. 157.
7. Harold M. Best, *Music Through the Eyes of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper, 1993), p. 200.
8. Calvin, *Institutes*, III. 20, #32.
9. William Hammond, "Come, We that Love the Lord," 1745.
10. Although music evokes deep and powerful emotions, even more important than the emotion of the moment is the way worship shapes our affections, values, perceptions, and beliefs over time. Don E. Saliers notes, for example, that to speak of how worship shapes "deep emotions such as thankfulness and trust in God does not mean simply 'feeling thankful' from time to time. Vital liturgy certainly may produce feeling states, but that is not the criterion for praise and thanksgiving to God....Christian gratitude is not so much 'felt' or 'produced' as it is elicited in season and out of season." *Worship as Theology: Foretaste of Glory Divine* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), p.37. John Campbell Shairp's hymn, "From Noon of Joy to Night of Doubt" (1871) also speaks of the need to base our faith on something more permanent than fleeting human emotion.

From noon of joy to night of doubt our feelings come and go;
our best estate is toss'd about in ceaseless ebb and flow;
no mood of feeling, form of thought, is constant for a day,
but thou, O Lord, thou changest not; the same thou art alway.

I grasp thy strength, make it my own, my heart with peace is bless'd;
I lose my hold, and then comes down darkness and cold unrest.
Let me no more my comfort draw from my frail grasp of thee:
in this alone rejoice with awe, thy mighty grasp of me.

Thy purpose of eternal good let me but surely know;
on this I'll lean, let changing mood and feeling come and go;

glad when thy sunshine fills my soul, not sad when clouds o'ercast,
since thou within thy sure control of love dost hold me fast.

11. Marva Dawn, *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for the Turn-of-the-Century Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 201.
12. Austin Lovelace and William C. Rice, *Music and Worship in the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976), p. 20.

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