



Music, song and worship: A brief overview

For a number of years I have taught a course surveying the history of the modern church at Westminster in California. One of the subjects we study early in the course is Puritan worship and its relation to Reformed worship more generally. Part of the discussion we have in class on that subject revolves around the role of music in worship, focusing in particular on the use of the Psalms in praising God. To aid that discussion I have prepared and refined a modern "Puritan" statement on music and Psalm-singing (although most of the Reformed tradition would have agreed substantially with the Puritans on this point). I offer it now to readers of *The Outlook* with the hope that it will stimulate thinking about the vital question of how to praise our God.

Music is not a prominent element in the New Testament. No bands or choirs accompany the preaching of Jesus. There is no evidence of musical instruments in the synagogues as described in the New Testament. Church music seems absent from the Acts of the Apostles – although Paul sings in prison and the praise of the churches may well have been sung. The only unambiguous reference to singing in the churches is in 1 Corinthians 14:26 – although Colossians 3:16 and Ephesians 5:19 may well reflect the activities of public worship. No musical instruments are mentioned in relation to the worship of the New Testament churches.

Music seems somewhat more prominent in the heavenly worship described in the Book of the Revelation. This added prominence probably reflects the correspondence between the heavenly temple and the music of the earthly temple of the Old Testament. In the OT temple musical instruments and choirs of singers especially accompanied the offering of sacrifices (2 Chronicles 29:25ff.) Still in the heavenly worship as described in the Book of the Revelation the only musical instrument referred to is a harp (e.g. Revelation 5:8) and the harp there is probably intended as a symbol of praise rather than a literal reference to harps in heaven (see Revelation 14:2).

If the worship of the New Testament church is a model for the contemporary church, serious re-examination of contemporary practice is needed. Music – so peripheral in the New Testament – has become central and crucial in our time. Choirs, solos and special music occupy much time. Debates rage over the style of music between champions of everything from classical to contemporary.

For many it would appear that music has become a new sacrament. Intense, prolonged singing is a way in which God comes to bless the worshiper and in which the singer seeks a transcendent experience of God. That experience is so important that many judge a church on the character and quality of its music. In many places the amount of time spent in prayer, Bible reading and preaching is reduced so that more time can be given to music.

Reformed Christians in particular have sought to follow the teaching of Scripture on worship. They have believed that only the directions or examples of the Bible can guide our worship. This conviction flows from the words of the Bible itself (e.g., Colossians. 2:23 and Matthew 15:6). Theologically the Reformed passion for faithful, Biblical worship flows out of the strong warnings in Scripture against idolatry. Idolatry is both the worship of a false God and the false worship of the true God. Idolatry is a violation of the first or the second of the Ten Commandments. The Reformed commitment to Biblical worship must apply to music as to all other aspects of worship.

While music seems to be a relatively secondary element of worship in the NT, it is still one of the elements. Jesus sings with His disciples at the Last Supper and the Corinthian church clearly sang (as did the Colossian church most likely). Singing is an element in its own right as a distinctive act of worship. It may function in similar ways to other elements. It may share functions with teaching

and prayer, for example, yet it remains a distinct element. (Just as Bible reading, preaching, and blessing may all use the same words of the Bible and all have in part a teaching function, yet be distinct elements of worship.) As a distinctive element of worship it needs to be understood in terms of its unique function in worship as directed by the Scriptures.

What kind of singing should be an element of Christian worship? The words used of singing in the NT ("psalm," "hymn" and "song") are not technical terms, but simply seem to refer to songs. (In the Greek OT these three words are all used to refer to the canonical Psalms.) For example Jesus is said to sing a hymn (Matthew 26:30) where almost certainly one of the canonical Psalms is meant. By contrast the psalm referred to in 1 Corinthians 14:26 is probably not a canonical Psalm. (See also the references to songs in Romans 15:9, 1 Corinthians 14:15, and James 5:13.) The kind of song used in NT churches cannot be established by the words used. Other indications are necessary to know what should be sung.

Many argue that Christians are free to compose and sing any songs that are orthodox in content. The argument runs that singing praise to God is parallel to praying. Since we are free to formulate prayers, we are free to compose songs. But it is not self-evident that song should be seen as parallel to prayer. Perhaps it should be seen as parallel to Scripture reading. (See the articles by Sherman Isbell on Psalm-singing in *The Presbyterian Reformed Magazine*, beginning in the summer, 1993 issue.)

The worship element of Scripture reading is limited to the reading of inspired, canonical Scripture. Such a limitation may not seem to be strictly necessary logically. Many orthodox, edifying writings by Christians might be read in worship. But most Christians would agree that we should have as an act of worship the reading of the inspired words of God (see 1 Timothy 4:13).

On reflection, at least in OT worship, singing seems more like Scripture reading than prayer because while the OT has no book of prayers, it does have a book of songs. God, for reasons that may elude us, has seen fit to inspire songs for worship, but not prayers. (Actual reasons may account for the need of inspired songs. Song is an activity of the people of God that unites them in one activity of heightened emotional response to God. The heightened emotion of song and its potential for abuse might well be a reason for God to inspire the words of that response. Also the "free" praying and preaching in public worship in the Reformed churches has been done by ordained leaders. The church has set aside leaders who are gifted, called, examined and ordained to that work. "Free" singing seldom meets those standards of care and supervision.)

Clearly the canonical Psalms were set for singing as Jesus and His disciples sang them at the Last Supper. Surely Paul's call to sing "*psalms and hymns and spiritual songs*" includes the call to sing canonical Psalms. At a minimum then we should conclude from the examples and teaching of Scripture that the singing of the canonical Psalms ought to be a significant part of the church's singing.

The value of singing the Psalms

1. The Psalms are inspired, are meant to be sung and are certainly orthodox in their content. Singing Psalms is commanded by God, certain to be pleasing to Him and an excellent way of hiding His Word in our hearts. At the very least the Psalms need to be a central element of the church's singing and must be a model for all that is sung. They are the inspired pattern of praise.
2. The Psalms are songs that are balanced. They balance the declaration of the truth of God and His works with our emotional response. The balance between truth and heartfelt response is delicate and difficult. Songs can be either too informational and doctrinal or too subjective and man-centered.
3. The Psalms provide us with songs that have the full range of appropriate emotional responses to God's work and our situation. In some ages of the church, hymns seemed primarily filled with repentance. In our age they seem primarily filled with joy. The Psalms balance human

confusion, frustration, distress, sorrow and anger with joy, praise, blessedness and thanksgiving.

4. The Psalms remind us that we live in a world of conflict. They impress upon us a Biblical world of thought in which there is an ever-present antithesis between the righteous and the wicked, the godly and the ungodly. (Only two Psalms, I believe, do not make that opposition explicit.) How infrequently that antithesis is found in most hymns.
5. The Psalms remind us that we are the true Israel of God. We have inherited the history, the promises and the status of Israel of old and must identify with that Israel (cf. Ephesians 2-3, Romans 9-11, Hebrews 11-12, 1 Peter 1-2, James 1:1, Galatians 6:16). Especially as we find ourselves in an increasingly polytheistic world, the focused monotheism of the Psalms is valuable for the church.
6. The Psalms are Christocentric. Jesus testified that the Psalms were written about Him (Luke 24:44ff). Luther called the Psalter "*a little Bible*" and found it full of Christ. An ancient saying in the church declares: "*Semper in ore psalmus, semper in corde Christus*" ("always a psalm in the mouth, always Christ in the heart"). The Psalms contain explicit prophecies of Christ (e.g., Psalms 22 and 110). They abound in the types which illumine the person and work of Christ. They open His redemptive work from many perspectives. The church must avoid the tendency of both liberalism and dispensationalism to miss Christ in the Psalms and miss the continuity of Israel in the Old and New Testaments.

Objections to exclusive Psalmody considered.

1. The imprecations of the Psalms reflect a sub-Christian ethical position.

This objection fails to understand the nature of the Biblical imprecations. The imprecations are not the personal prayer of the Christian against personal enemies, but are the prayers of Christ and the church against the enemies of God. They are really no different from the prayers of the church for the return of Christ which will bring both blessing and judgment.

2. The New Testament authorizes the use of uninspired hymns: Colossians 3:16, Ephesians 5:19, 1 Corinthians 14:26 and hymn fragments quoted in the NT.

This objection is not as clear as it may appear.

- a) Neither Colossians 3:16 or Ephesians 5:19 refers unambiguously to public worship or to the free use of uninspired songs in that worship. The words in those verses for song all may refer to canonical psalms.
 - b) 1 Corinthians 14:26, I believe, does refer to songs other than canonical psalms. But these other songs are most likely inspired songs given by the Spirit through Spirit-endued leadership in the early church. (The psalm, teaching, revelation, tongues and interpretation of tongues in this text all seem to me to be divinely inspired. See my article, "Leadership in Worship," *The Outlook*, Dec. 1992, for the argument.) Those inspired songs, however, were not preserved as a part of Scripture for the use of the church universal.
 - c) Fragments of poems do seem to be quoted by Biblical authors at points in the NT. Those fragments cannot with any certainty be seen as songs, much less as songs used in public worship.
3. The Psalms seem strange as to poetic form and flow of thought.

This observation is true as far as it goes. Those familiar with hymns are accustomed to a flow of thought and poetic form that is common to the western world. In such a world the Psalms do seem strange. But since the Psalms are inspired by God we should expend the effort to appreciate why they have the form they do and what we can learn from them. (We must resist the common tendency in church music only to like the familiar because it is familiar! That tendency is found among the devotees of every kind of church music.) Indeed the very strange-

ness of the Psalms may speak of our need for them. Perhaps John Updike captured this thought when he wrote of "fingertips sensitized by the sandpaper of an abrasive creed" (*A Month of Sundays*, p. 136).

4. The singing of metrical psalms is not the singing of the real canonical Psalms.

A good metrical version of the Psalms not only gives a very close translation of the Psalms, but also seeks to translate Hebrew poetry into a western poetic form. To communicate something of poetic form along with verbal translation is a strength of the metrical psalms.

5. We do not have inspired tunes with which to sing the Psalms.

Indeed we do not have inspired tunes. God has left His people free to compose tunes from various cultural and historical settings to support the singing of the Psalms. Two criteria would seem to provide adequate safeguards for the church in writing and choosing tunes: first, song tunes should be appropriate to the content of the Psalms, and second, they should be singable by a congregation without the help of musical instruments.

6. The Psalms are not sufficiently Christocentric.

The elaboration of this objection suggests that at each stage of the history of redemption in the OT (e.g., establishment of the Mosaic economy, the celebration of the Davidic kingship and the exile), new songs were added to the canon. It is most likely then, that at the most important development of the history of redemption – the actual revelation of the Savior – that new songs would accompany the new covenant in Jesus. The objection argues that we should obviously celebrate the name and work of the Savior in the most explicit terms. This objection is surely the most significant and weighty of any against exclusive psalmody. Several responses might be offered.

- a) This objection as stated is abstract and speculative, a fault in Reformed theological reflection. Only Scripture can tell us what songs are needed to celebrate the new covenant. Many elements in the worship of the church will be explicitly new covenant: some Bible readings, some blessings, sermons, prayers, sacraments. Must all be? The service as a whole must be explicitly new covenant, but must every element? Only the Scripture itself can answer that question.
- b) The Psalms are not a full and explicit statement and celebration of the old covenant. Many aspects of Israel's history, law and sacrifices are not mentioned in the psalms. Key institutions like the Sabbath and the prophetic office are almost entirely absent. One could not really reconstruct the Mosaic economy from the evidence in the Psalter alone. Clearly the Psalms did not seek to carry the whole character of the old covenant.
- c) The inspired songs of the new covenant, such as the ones that we have in the Book of Revelation are no more explicitly Christocentric than the Psalms. The name of Jesus is not used and He is called the Lamb (Revelation 5 and 19), the Christ (Revelation 11) and God and King (Revelation 15). These are all titles found in the OT. The distinction between the old song of creation and the new song of redemption, found in the Book of the Revelation (chs. 4 and 5), is a distinction taken over from the Psalter (Psalms 40:3, 96:1, 98:1, 149:1). The Psalter abounds in the new songs of redemption.
- d) The titles and types used of Christ in the OT generally and in the Psalter particularly do not veil Him, but in fact reveal Him, explaining who He is and what He has done. (Titles and types such as: Lord, shepherd, king, priest, sacrifice and temple.) Without the rich background of the OT religion we would not understand the person and work of Christ as fully as we do. Indeed those titles and types are not fully comprehensible until the coming of Jesus. In that sense the Psalter belongs more to the new covenant than to the old. In that sense the Psalter is more useful for the NT church than it was for the old covenant people.

Opinions will probably continue to differ on the persuasiveness of the arguments for the exclusive use of the Psalms for singing in public worship. I hope that these reflections on the value of the Psalms, however, will encourage all Christians to much greater use of the Psalms. My own experience has been that the more I sing them, the more I love them and the more I sense the completeness of their religious expression of the praise to God. In the music wars that beset the church today the Psalms are little discussed or appreciated. Surely it is ironic that those who love the Bible, seem often uninterested in singing it (and learning it in that way). We do need the Psalms for our spiritual wellbeing.

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