The Role of Singing in Worship

Introduction

Praise him with trumpet sound; praise him with lute and harp! Praise him with tambourine and dance; praise him with strings and pipe! Praise him with clanging cymbals; praise him with loud clashing cymbals! Let everything that breathes praise the LORD! Praise the LORD!

Psalm 150:3–6

Since the time of Abraham, the followers of God have incorporated music in their worship. When the early church began meeting to celebrate the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, they too sang “My soul magnifies the Lord” and “Blessed be the God of Israel.” Christians today have a rich and varied musical heritage, and many take for granted that music will be a part of their worship. However, Christians disagree whether it’s appropriate or necessary to have a sung liturgy, instrumental accompaniment, electric guitars, or a choreographed praise team.

Music is special in worship because it reaches us at deep and emotional levels. Dramatically change the worship music in virtually any congregation, and chances are you will hear some strong emotional reactions. We can witness the power of music by listening to the passion in the opinions expressed by our congregations. As with many fine arts, most of us would never profess to be experts, but we sure know what we like. We have favorite hymns or songs but do not spend time thinking about why they are meaningful to us. Is it the tune? The words? The tempo? Do they remind us of our childhood or a significant religious experience? Or is it some combination of these things? Too often we take our relationship with worship music for granted and think of the music as background or as a side dish to the meat and potatoes of worship, Scripture and sermon. However, music is a vital part of worship. The songs and styles we choose shape our theology, our church culture, and the ways we worship God.

Why Do We Sing at All?

Modern culture has a strange relationship with music—we hear music while we drive, exercise, eat, work, and shop. For many, music is background—something to fill otherwise “dead” space. We take music for granted because it is so abundant, but how did music develop? It seems likely that the first music was vocal—everyone has the instrument required to sing. Musicologists and historians believe that all music, especially vocal music, is an outgrowth of oral communication. Realizing that every culture has some form of music has led to the idea that music developed in our very earliest, primitive ancestors, likely in Africa.¹ The evolutionary reasons for the development of music are unclear. Some scientists believe music developed as a trait to help attract mates (just as many animals, including birds and whales, use their songs to attract mates), while others believe music was a human development to help bind ever-larger societies together. Another hypothesis says that music was an accidental development that has become
overindulged in a society with more and more leisure time.² While we may never know for certain the “purpose” of music, music in all its varied forms has become part of who we are as humans. Paul Westermeyer, in studying music in the Old Testament, has suggested that “music for the ancients was functional . . . organic to and characteristic of human life.”³ This functional aspect of music is still with us, he says: “we dance and pray with music, sing lullabies to our babies, hum, cry, and whistle. We cannot escape our humanity at its deepest level, nor can we escape music’s connection with it.” We sing because we are human.

Why Do We Sing in Worship?

Christians believe that all of life should be poured out in worship to God. Exactly how this worship takes shape varies widely, but for most Christians, music is an important part of worship. In virtually every worship service where there is music, there is congregational song, even when other forms of music (instrumental or choral, for example) may not be permitted. Given how intrinsic music is to us as humans, it’s not surprising music is part of our worship, but what does our song bring to worship? How does singing help deepen our worship? Music deepens our worship because music has the power “to penetrate the mind where other forces fail, breaking down barriers directly and immediately.”⁴ Music can overtake us, it can point beyond itself, and it can communicate emotion; each of these aspects of music’s power is appropriate in worship: we know that God is greater than we are, God is “other,” and worship is our outpouring of thanksgiving and praise for what God has done.

Music can speak about unspeakable events without interfering with them, because it does not inherently call attention to itself. This means that music (whether instrumental or sung by choir or congregation) is appropriate in worship because it avoids what F. Thomas Trotter calls the dilemma of religion: “how to say the unsayable [since] the ways of speaking about unspeakable events intrude upon the appreciation of those events.” Trotter argues that music is able to rise above this problem because “of all the ways of speaking in religion, music exists in time and not space.”⁵

Music is also appropriate in worship because it is open to interpretation. Trotter sees music as “the art most congenial to the imagination [because] it participates in the ‘environment’ of a person’s space without taking up space.”⁶ Frank Burch Brown argues the same thing: “Music lacks the conceptual precision of verbal language.” Brown takes the idea a step further by realizing that music is “both more refined and more powerful than mere words . . . [in] giving voice to the inner and ‘felt’ meaning of thoughts.”⁷ What both Trotter and Brown are saying is that music’s imprecision is what makes it so expressive.

Finally, the simple answer is that we sing in worship because Scripture tells us to. Psalm 96 directs us to “sing to the LORD a new song.” In the letters to the churches at Ephesus and Colossae, Paul tells the believers to sing “psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.” Throughout the Bible, in both the Old and New Testaments, we find accounts of God’s people breaking into song, and we seek to follow this example. We sing because we are commanded to sing but our reasons are deeper than that.

What Is Appropriate Music for Worship?

What is “appropriate” for worship is a question that the church has struggled with since its foundation. During its first millennium, the church permitted only vocal music because of cultural associations surrounding instrumental music—the church feared that instrumental music’s connection with pagan worship could lead the faithful astray. Sometime around 1000 CE, organs were gradually introduced into worship. Since they had no cultural connotations, there was little argument against them. As time progressed, other instruments were permitted in worship. During the sixteenth century, instrumental music was again a hot-button issue. Martin Luther, the father of the Reformation that led to the creation of the Protestant church, took little issue with the instruments that were being used in worship. On the other hand, John Calvin, another Reformation theologian, insisted that only the voice of the congregation was appropriate in worship. While there are churches that even today sing only unaccompanied music, over time, many churches in the Calvinist tradition have come to embrace instrumental music along with congregational song. This means that, for most of the Western church (that is, the Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions), there are three basic types of music included in worship: instrumental music, choral music (sung by choirs, bands, or soloists), and congregational song.
Many Christians believe (or at least agree) that the congregation is the choir, so how we understand the offerings of instrumentalists and choirs (or bands or soloists) can be tricky. It is helpful to remember that such musical offerings are to be just that: offerings. They are gifts of self—time and talents—to God. In light of this, it is important for musical leaders to remember Jesus’ call to be servants—they offer their gifts to God, not to the congregation. While music does not inherently draw attention to itself, if musical offerings are poorly planned (a slow, dreary postlude on Easter, for example), attention can be drawn away from the drama of worship. In such cases, music certainly does point to itself, and can become an idol, taking attention away from God, who is the focus of our worship. When considering choral music, we should also ask whether the choir’s song (or the band’s song, or the soloist’s song) is something that is best sung for the congregation as opposed to by the congregation. A different way to ask this would be “is this song enabling the worship of the congregation or taking something away from them?” Instrumental and choral music are appropriate when they point away from musicians to God and enable the entire body of Christ to worship.

One of the most important things to remember about all music offered to God in worship—whether instrumental, choral, or congregational—is that what we offer to God should always be our best. Much like that dreary Easter postlude, any musical offering that is poorly sung or played because it is underrehearsed or beyond the abilities of the musicians can distract the worshiper from the worship of God. More importantly, offering anything less than our best is an affront to God. Not that this means every singer, instrumentalist, or choir is held to the same musical standards, but it does imply that everyone who offers music in worship should offer their best. For a choir, it may be that a simple hymn sung well and with understanding is better than a difficult anthem sung half-heartedly and with confusion. When it comes to congregational song, it is impossible that one’s “best” is silence—a willingness to sing, even when the songs are unfamiliar, builds up the body of Christ and encourages worship. By singing, especially when we’re not comfortable with a particular song, we are offering our whole selves to God. In those instances where we may be literally unable to sing, we can follow along with the congregation, offering the words of the song as our prayer.

**Evaluating a Song**

Frequently we sing the words and tunes of worship with little thought for why they are included in worship—we are more inclined to think, “This is one of my favorites” or “I don’t know this song well,” than “What a powerful expression of God’s love for us” or “That text and tune complemented each other perfectly.” This is unfortunate, because like all forms of prayer, congregational song shapes our belief. The Latin phrase _lex orandi, lex credendi_ (“the law of prayer [is] the law of belief”) has been used since the first centuries of the church to express the idea that the way a person prays (and worships) shapes the way that person believes. For the early church, this was a positive: with the “right way” to pray controlled by a single group, worshipers would learn the “right way” to believe. As worship came to be controlled more and more on a local level, the idea of a single “right way” to believe faded—because how we pray determines how we believe. So what we do and say (and sing) in worship shapes what we believe. Congregational song is inherently _creedal_ (it shapes what we believe) because it “helps us express a believing response in a self-committing way”; but it is also _ecclesial_ (related to the church as a whole), proclaiming a church that is beyond the gathered congregation doing the singing; and, finally, it is _evangelical_, telling the world of “the Christ in us.” The appropriateness of congregational song is important because it shapes what we believe, but how should we understand what makes a song “appropriate”? A congregational song has two features: a text and a tune. To understand if a song is appropriate, we must evaluate the text, the tune, and the connection between the two.

Evaluating the text of a congregational song involves two main criteria. First, is the text theologically sound? We want to make sure that what we sing says what we believe. At first glance, this may seem to run counter to _lex orandi, lex credendi_ above—our prayer shapes our belief, not the other way around. Unlike the early church, the church today has certain codified beliefs (the...
biblical canon, the creeds, and denominational confessions, for instance). In order for our “yes” to be “yes” and our “no” to be “no,” we must carefully consider how the texts we sing interact with our beliefs. Second, is the text vernacular—is it understandable? This goes beyond archaic English to include evaluating theological words. Consider the following: “To God be the glory, great things He hath done / So loved He the world that He gave us His Son, / Who yielded His life an atonement for sin / And opened the life gate that all may go in.” There is a little bit of the quaint English of days gone by—“hath”—but we can get its meaning from context. Even ignoring the overabundance of masculine pronouns, how many members of our church know what “atonement” means? This is not to say that we should not include songs that stretch our vocabulary and our theology, but that we must be aware of them and be ready to explain them.

Of course, the music of congregational song comes from the tune. Evaluating the tune does not have to be the realm of trained musicians—anyone who has sung can say that a tune is too difficult to sing. This difficulty will vary from person to person, but it will likely involve one of the following: the tune is either too high or too low, the range of the tune is too broad, the rhythm is irregular and not easy to follow, or the tempo is too fast or too slow. While someone with no musical training may say things like “I’m not an opera singer” or “I couldn’t catch my breath,” those who lead musically must be able to hear “That was too high for me” or “Slow down!” Again, this is not to imply that we should only sing simple melodies (or ignore harmonies), but that congregations need to be willing to learn (and leaders need to be willing to teach).

We also have to evaluate how the text and tune relate to each other. First, do the text and tune complement each other? It can be very disconcerting when a text does not match a tune. Perhaps this is an upbeat tune for a song of lament, or a slow, meditative tune for a song of joyful praise. In a related sense, does the tune carry the weight of the text? If a text speaks of the majesty of God but the tune is more rollicking than majestic, this can rob the text of its meaning. Second, does the tune have strong associations with a particular text? Such strong associations can limit the use of a tune to one text—perhaps more than any other tune, the tune of “Amazing Grace” is indelibly wedded to its text. This is also important when we consider using familiar popular tunes in worship—will the secular associations overshadow the sacred text?

A Final Note

One final important note is in order here: The above criteria applies to all forms of congregational song, whether traditional or contemporary. We must be careful not to assume that just because we’ve sung a song for many years that the song is appropriate for worship. Likewise, we need to avoid the temptation to sing a new song without regard to what it teaches just because it’s new.

Music is a vital part of our lives and our worship of God. Congregational song is, in the words of an old hymn, one of the ties that binds us together as Christians. We do well to think critically about what we sing and the implications it has on our worship and our beliefs.

About the Writer

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Endnotes

6. Ibid.