

WHY DO WE SING?
WHY SONG AND SINGING IS CENTRAL IN WORSHIP

SCRIPTURE: SELECTED TEXTS

INTRODUCTION:

With the popular emphasis on worship, specifically through the singing of songs, I want to take a look into God's Word as to why music and singing are so important in our corporate worship.

The question we are addressing this morning is, "Why do we sing?" Why does the Bible encourage us to sing and make music to the Lord? For example:

"Sing to Him a new song; play skillfully on the strings, with loud shouts," (Ps. 33:3).

"Sing praises to God, sing praises! Sing praises to our King, sing praises," (Ps. 47:6)!

"Sing the glory of His name; give to Him glorious praise," (Ps. 66:2)!

"Sing to the LORD, bless His name; tell of His salvation from day to day," (Ps. 96:2).

Have you ever wondered why Moses and Miriam used the gift of song to thank God after crossing the Red Sea?

Or why Mary bursts into song after the angel Gabriel visited her at the start of Luke's gospel?

Or why Revelation paints a picture of a choir of thousands upon thousands of voices joining together in songs of praise? (Rev. 5:9, 11)

Why are we passionately committed to YES! music events? Why are songs and singing such an important aspect of our corporate worship?

I want to give you four reasons why songs and singing are important to our corporate worship.

LESSON:

I. BECAUSE OF THE LARGE NUMBER OF SCRIPTURES THAT FOCUS UPON SONGS AND SINGING

- There are 85 occurrences in the bible where we are directed to sing.
- 176 occurrences, in different forms, of the word sing in the Scriptures.

- 108 occurrences, in different forms, of the word song in the Scriptures.

Seeing that the Scriptures contain over 369 references to singing, we should pay careful attention. God's word is littered with songs of worship from Genesis to Revelation.

In Job 38:7, Job reminds us that when God laid the foundations of the universe, "The morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy." From the very beginning of creation, the angels were present singing the praises of their Creator.

Have you ever wondered why birds sing or why Humpback whales have a song? Repeatedly creation is said to sing before the Lord.

Listen to Psalm 98:8, "Let the rivers clap their hands, let the mountains sing together for joy; let them sing before the Lord, for He comes to judge the earth."

Similarly, Revelation 5:13 says, "Every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea and all that is in them singing: 'To him who sits on the throne and to the lamb be praise and honor and power for ever and ever!'"

Not only man but also the entire creation is called upon to praise God.

From the very beginning of the world God has instilled and implanted in all of His creation a song as Luther wrote, "...nothing is without sound or harmony," (Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 53, p. 322).

And so we see from Scripture that God's Word is filled with songs of worship from Genesis to Revelation (e.g., Ps. 9:2, 11; 18:49; 21:13; 30:4; 33:1-3; 47:6-8; Ps. 100:2; Rev. 5:9; Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16).

There is a second reason why songs and singing are important to our corporate worship.

II. SECOND, BECAUSE OF THE AESTHETIC CONTRIBUTION OF SONGS AND SINGING.

Jack Hayford in his book, *Worship His Majesty*, writes, "Worship may be possible without song, but nothing contributes more to its beauty, majesty, dignity and nobility or to its tenderness and intimacy."

Music and songs have a unique and beautiful way of capturing and portraying the truth of Scripture. For this reason, Martin Luther regarded music as a gift of God's good creation.

He taught that music was to be reclaimed and refined from "perverted minds" by the church in order to "taste with wonder (yet not to comprehend) God's absolute and perfect wisdom in His wondrous work of music."

Creation tells us that God cares about beauty. And music as a part of God's creation possesses a unique ability to portray God's truth in a beautiful way.

Thus, we strive for excellence and beauty in our music not in order to display our greatness. Rather, we strive for it in order to display the beauty and greatness of God, who has given us this art form.

Luther taught this when he wrote, "...when musical learning is added to all this and artistic music which corrects, develops, and refines the natural music, then at last it is possible to taste with wonder (yet not comprehend) God's absolute and perfect wisdom in His wondrous work of music," (*Luther's Works*, vol. 53, p. 324).

So, like Luther we do not value music for music's sake or merely for its aesthetic contribution in corporate worship. There is a theological reason that lay behind Luther's passion for music as well as ours.

He believed that the harmonization of sound and theology served a redemptive function. Paul Westermeyer, professor of Church Music at Luther Seminary, writes,

"Luther was not simply fond of music. Luther thought music has a theological reason for being: it is a gift of God, which comes from the "sphere of miraculous audible things," just like the Word of God. Music is unique in that it can carry words. Since words carry the Word of God, music and the word of God are closely related," (*Te Deum: The Church and Music*, pp. 144-145).

This leads to a third reason why songs and singing are important to the church's worship.

III. BECAUSE OF THE INSTRUCTIVE POWER OF SONGS AND SINGING.

A survey taken in USA Today revealed that twenty years after the Beatles, the majority of those surveyed could remember ninety two percent of the Beatles lyrics. Andrew Fletcher, an eighteenth-century Scottish patriot, once stated, "If a man were permitted to make all the ballads, he need not care who should make the laws of a nation."

God created music with this unique power to carry and transmit the Word of God. Because of this unique function, Luther wrote, "We can mention only one point (which experience confirms), namely, that next to the Word of God, music deserves the highest praise," (*Luther's Works*, vol. 53, p. 323).

Twice in the New Testament the Apostle Paul instructs us to sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs to one another for the edification of the church (cf., Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16). The first occurrence is in Ephesians 5:18-19, "¹⁸ ...do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit, ¹⁹ speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord."

The second occurrence is in Colossians 3:16. "Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God."

There are several important observations to note from these two passages.

FIRST, SPIRIT-FILLED CHRISTIANS (CHURCH) SING.

The verb Paul uses in Eph. 5:18, (lit.) "keep on being filled with the Spirit," is followed by a string of participles, which are lost in our English translations. However, these phrases illustrate what it looks like to be filled with the Spirit in practice. The outstanding observation to notice is that 3 of the 5 participles Paul uses have to do with singing.

A second observation is:

SPIRIT-FILLED CHRISTIANS ARE GOSPEL-SATURATED CHRISTIANS.

Colossians 3:16 is essentially identical to Ephesians 5:18. In Colossians 3:16, Paul instructs us to have the "word of Christ" dwelling richly within us, which is the doctrine of the gospel.

Where the doctrine of the gospel dwells richly, there can be found the ministry of the Holy Spirit and thus a singing Christian or church. To have the Word of Christ (the gospel) dwelling richly within you is the way in which you are filled with the Spirit and thus moved in your heart and mind to sing.

Please notice that the Apostle would have the doctrine of the gospel to be familiarly and deeply known to us ("dwell in you richly"). Paul instructs us (3rd use of the law) to have a daily increasing knowledge of the gospel and be thoroughly conversant in its truths.

John Calvin writes,

"For, unquestionably, Paul here addresses men and women of all ranks; nor would he simply have them take a slight taste merely of the word of Christ, but exhorts that it should dwell in them; that is, that it should have a settled abode, and that largely, that they may make it their aim to advance and increase more and more every day," (Calvin's Commentaries, vol. XXI, p. 216).

It is not a virtue to remain ignorant or infantile in our understanding of the word of Christ. Child-like faith is not infantile, ignorant, faith. The apostle Paul, who wrote the book of Romans, possessed child-like faith! We are called to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ (2 Pet. 3:18). Part of the process of sanctification involves the renewal of our minds that have been darkened by sin.

The NT reproaches and rebukes simplistic, infantile understanding as fleshly. The NT holds forth infantile understanding as that which leads to selfishness, lack of love, judgmental spirit, factions, gossip, etc... Such was the case in the Corinthian church.

In 1 Corinthians 3:1, Paul rebukes the Corinthians for their simplistic, infantile thinking in regard to the gospel. In 1 Corinthians 14:20, he exhorts the Corinthians to be mature in their thinking. In evil, he says they were anything but babes. But, in their understanding of the gospel, they were immature.

They were as he says in Ephesians 4:14, "children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes."

Why does Paul exhort us to let the doctrine of the gospel dwell richly within us? As we have already noted, it is by means of the gospel that the Spirit is put into action in our lives. In 2 Corinthians 3:8, Paul speaks of the gospel as the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

Listen to Titus 3:5-6, "⁵ He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to His own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, ⁶ whom He poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior..."

A third observation is that:

OUR SINGING IS TO BE ADDRESSED "TO ONE ANOTHER."

We tend to assume that the songs we sing must only be addressed to God. This is no doubt very important. But, it is also important to note here how Paul tells us that we are also to sing to "one another."

We sing because we are instructed to teach, admonish and speak to one another the Word of Christ through songs. Through the songs that we sing, Paul says we are to impart truth (teaching) and even warn against and correct doctrinal error (admonish).

This brings us back to the point we are emphasizing which is, Paul is establishing a direct relationship between the teaching of God's Word, particularly the gospel, and singing.

When seen in this way, music and singing in corporate worship must not be viewed as a "crowd gathering technique" or the "warm up" or "preparation" time for preaching. Music and singing is not extracurricular.

According to Paul, one of our foremost concerns in music and singing must be to bring the "word of Christ" fully to bear upon the listener's soul.

We must aim to see that our lyrics and melodies assist believers in gaining a better understanding of the text.

The sudden bursting forth of the Lutheran chorale is one of the most thrilling chapters in the history of the Reformation (see Luther's Works, vol. 53, p. 191).

Martin Luther constantly sought out poets who could write new hymns for the church's worship. The reason is because one of his chief concerns was to bring the word of Christ fully to bear upon the listener's soul.

So for example, in his lament over the Latin Mass, he wrote,

"I also wish that we had as many songs as possible in the vernacular which the people could sing during mass...But poets are wanting among us, or not yet known, who could compose evangelical and spiritual songs, as Paul calls them [Col. 3:16], worthy to be used in the church of God," (*Luther's Works*, vol. 53, p. 36).

He also wrote statements such as:

"God has the Gospel preached through the medium of music."

"...the fathers and prophets wanted nothing else to be associated with the Word of God as music. Therefore we have so many hymns and Psalms where message and music join to move the listener's soul."

"Music and notes...do help gain a better understanding of the text."

Music and singing then serves a very important role within the church's corporate worship. Among other things, songs and singing are intended to drive the doctrine of the gospel deeper and deeper into our hearts so that the result is that it dwells richly within us.

Music and singing then play an indispensable role in corporate worship. A fourth reason songs and singing are central in corporate worship is:

IV. BECAUSE OF THE ALL-ENCOMPASSING ACTIVITY REQUIRED BY SONGS AND SINGING.

Music and singing remind us that God wants to be worshipped with both our minds and affections (in spirit and truth; i.e., our entire being).

The phrase, "in your hearts" at the end of Colossians 3:16 captures this point. By this phrase, Paul is not speaking of silent worship in contrast to "with your voices" (Peter T. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, p. 120). Rather, this phrase refers to a man's entire being. "Man should not only praise God with his lips. The entire man should be filled with songs of praise," (Peter T. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, p. 210).

When the word of Christ (i.e., the gospel) dwells richly in us, our entire being will be filled with songs of praise. Informed minds create inflamed hearts, which result in our whole being singing unto God.

True, reverent worship doesn't consist just with silent, internal singing or merely with external sounds with our voices. To be sure, the heart goes before the tongue. But, our hearts as well as our voices are to be moved with songs of praise and thanksgiving toward one another and to God.

Having the "word of Christ" richly dwelling within us not only informs our minds but also inflames our affections.

Martin Luther wrote, "...the gift of language combined with the gift of song was only given to man to let him know that he should praise God with both word and music, namely, by proclaiming [the Word of God] through music and by providing sweet melodies with words," (*Luther's Works, vol. 53, pp. 323-324*).

When the "word of Christ" dwells richly within us, the Holy Spirit generates strong affection/emotion in our entire being, which overflows into psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.

This is the beauty of singing and songs. Music joins praise to proclamation.

In his essay, "The Problem of Praise in the Psalms," C.S.Lewis wrote:

"I had never noticed that all enjoyment spontaneously overflows into praise unless . . . shyness or the fear of boring others is deliberately brought in to check it. The world rings with praise – lovers praising their mistresses, readers their favourite poet, walkers praising the countryside, players praising their favourite game – praise of weather, wines, dishes, actors, motors, horses, colleges, countries, historical personages, children, flowers, mountains, rare stamps, rare beetles, even sometimes politicians or scholars. . . . Except where intolerably adverse circumstances interfere, *praise almost seems to be inner health made audible*. . . . I had not noticed either that just as men spontaneously praise whatever they value, so they spontaneously urge us to join them in praising it: 'Isn't she lovely? Wasn't it glorious? Don't you think that magnificent?' The Psalmists in telling everyone to praise God are doing what all men do when they speak of what they care about. My whole, more general, difficulty about the praise of God depended on my absurdly denying to us, as regards the supremely Valuable, what we delight to do, what indeed we can't help doing, about everything else we value," (emphasis mine).

The Christian's praise of God should be just as natural as fans praising their favorite sports team. Singing and praise are natural for a heart richly indwelt by the "word of Christ." Singing and praise are as Lewis notes "*inner health made audible*."

We should be so excited about who God is and what He has done for us that we want to praise Him and tell others. Thus, the Psalmist in Psalm 96:2 says, “Sing to the LORD, bless His name; tell of His salvation from day to day.”

The “word of Christ” draws out from our hearts joyful praise and intense delight. Enjoyment and praise of that which delights our hearts is the way God made us.

We can’t help but praise and rejoice in what most delights our hearts. Further, our praise of God is hindered if it is never expressed in joyful song and celebration. Westermeyer writes, “Bold, vigorous rejoicing tells the story of God’s victory and our deliverance. The battle is won in Christ, and we sing with jubilation,” (*Te Deum*, p. 147).

When a war is won and peace ensues and soldiers come home, it would be quite unnatural for both the soldiers arriving on the boat and the families awaiting their loved ones to be standing stoic or sorrowful.

Rather, when the boat arrives in port, the band is playing, flags are waiving, the crowd is cheering, lovers are kissing, children are hugging, families and friends are dancing and the ticker-tape parade is in full swing!

The praise is not merely the expression of their delight but also the completion of it as C.S. Lewis went on to write, “we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation.”

REFLECTION:

It is clear from Colossians 3:16 and Ephesians 5:18 that music awakens by the Gospel.

Walter Marshall wrote, “In the Old Testament, God filled the temple with music and musicians- as well as now in the church. This is to show how Christ speaks in the gospel, that ‘His joy may abide in you, and that your joy may be full’ (John 15:11),” (*The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification*, p. 124).

Songs and singing have a way of drawing out from within us what is really inside us, when the “word of Christ” is dwelling richly within us. Music and singing are one of the most natural ways of expressing what is inside us.

The good news of Christ’s deliverance tunes our heart to sing. Christ has purchased a great salvation for us. And of those, Paul says, in whom the “word of Christ” richly dwells, are compelled (i.e., gospel-driven) to sing!

The Gospel gives rise to strong, powerful affections for Christ. This good news creates an invisible explosion in the soul. And it is music that assists the church in giving sounding form to this invisible explosion!

Music and singing play a valuable role in aiding believers to give joyful expression for and delight in the victory of Christ's great salvation. These are powerful and important gifts the Lord has given the church to corporately celebrate and express the victory Christ has won.

Martin Luther wrote, "For God has cheered our hearts and minds through His dear Son, whom He gave for us to redeem us from sin, death and the devil. He who believes this earnestly cannot be quiet about it. But he must gladly and willingly sing."

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