

Corporate Worship Music

“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing songs and hymns and spiritual songs, with thanksgiving in your hearts to God.”

~ COLOSSIANS 3:16

WE BELIEVE that corporate worship music exists to draw the whole congregation into praise of God, that there is form and freedom with respect to the style, that every aspect of the music must always function toward its congregational and worshipful aspects, and that music in the living church must always fuel the mission.

Worship is defined in Scripture as *the whole soul's unadulterated joy in God in all things*. Of course, no one verse says it exactly like this, but a convergence of the following three passages would be sufficient to make the same point—cf. Jn. 4:23-24, Mk. 12:29-30, Rom. 12:1-2. Worship is not something restricted to Sunday morning singing, yet the singing together of the saints is a unique gift given as a kind of weekly crescendo in the whole song of our lives. Music has the power to affect the soul in turning from dumb idols to the living God.¹ When the question is regarding the essence of corporate worship, then we might say that it is the *whole congregation's* unadulterated joy in God in all things. Immediately, we run into difficulties. One is the problem of corporate idolatry. Can I (the individual) not worship God to the fullest simply because so and so sitting next to me is conflicted? Moreover, there are the more prevalent questions regarding style and excellence. How do we settle these scripturally? The Reformed tradition sought to resolve this via the Regulative Principle in the Westminster Confession of Faith:

But the acceptable way of worshiping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshiped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in holy Scripture [Ch. 21, Art. 1].

This basically means that if anything is not clearly prescribed in the Bible, then it is not permissible in corporate worship. The early Lutheran tradition seemed to take the opposite track, permitting anything that was not expressly forbidden. Part of my argument will be that neither view takes the Bible seriously enough. Let me

¹ On the power of music to accomplish this, and of the attending elements of music theory, I will have next to nothing to say since it exceeds my area of expertise. All that is in this paper, as theology, will be sufficient to justify our statement.

repeat that: *Neither the view that we exclude what is not explicitly commanded nor the view that we permit what is not explicitly forbidden represents a high enough view of the Bible.* The Lutheran view is a reductionism because it defines the lowest common denominator of our expressions as the standard, while the reductionism of the Reformed view rests in its attempt to get away from any overarching demands that we may (and ought to) infer. A higher view of Scripture's program for worship would be to *do all that is implicitly demanded*—which would of course include all that which is explicitly commanded. Any other lesser view ignores the weightier matters of the law—in the name of being hard-core, of course! Having said that, I am certain that those framers of the Westminster Confession probably had something closer to mind like what we will uphold here. It has likely been taken in a wooden worship-less fashion in the modern, affluent West where our suburban toys exhaust our passions during the week. At any rate, God can be glorified in the form of traditional Protestantism, the simplicity of southern Baptist worship, or the more contemporary and emotional expressions. Our only goal is to model of our vision after the biggest things in Scripture concerning worship. Now to unpack the above position of our church:

1) ...that corporate worship music exists to draw the whole congregation into praise of God,

One of the most tell-tale signs that there is something wrong with contemporary worship is that this is the word we use for the music set in our Sunday services. *That* is worship, yet nothing else is. Of course, if this is pointed out, we will all say, "Well, of course, all of life is worship!" But our methods betray our real priorities and perspectives. Today, worship music is the ticket to drawing a crowd. Studies show that over 60% of church attendees are women and that an even greater percentage of those women list the "worship *experience*" as their main reason for attending the church that they do. They mean the emotive effect that the songs have on them; and certainly music ought to have an effect on our emotions. However, worship music was not meant to be a pragmatic tool for shallow outreach. This brings us to two extremes that the church tends to live on. On the one hand, there is the contemporary trend toward pragmatism and over-contextualization. On the other hand, there is the overreaction to that trend. We will argue that both take us away from the essence of corporate worship: the one is less like worship and the reaction to it is less corporate. The truth is that the contemporary trend is also antithetical to the corporate dimension, but in a less obvious way.

There is a vertical and horizontal dimension to corporate worship. This should be obvious, but apparently it is not. Note that it is **corporate** (horizontal) and **worship** (vertical)—God alone is the object of worship; but because it is corporate, there is a proper, unifying subjective element. It is not a private experience. There is plenty of room in our worship week for that. Here we are coming together as the

assembly. The only difference between the New Covenant people of God and the Old Covenant people of Israel is that we are the true, spiritual temple. Yet even they were called the *ekklesia* called out of the wilderness to worship [cf. Acts 7:38]:

The whole assembly worshiped, and the singers sang, and the trumpeters sounded. All this continued until the burnt offering was finished. When the offering was finished, the king and all who were present with him bowed themselves and worshiped.²

So, the whole idea of the church is of an assembly of individuals called out of the world to worship the one, true God together. Note how the following two passages in the New Testament put together the vertical and horizontal relationships. Paul says that we are to be “addressing **one another** in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody **to the Lord** with your heart” [Eph. 5:19], or, in similar language, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing **one another** in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts **to God**” [Col. 3:16]. So, according to Paul, we are “addressing one another...to the Lord.” Sometimes there are purely vertical dimensions of the song (addressing God directly); and sometimes there are admonitions, praises, or calls to worship. We sing **to God to each other**—not merely in close proximity to each other. We are not an incidental gathering of disembodied Eastern types levitating to our own private sessions with God! Yes our singing to God comes first. He alone is the audience of worship. But this is never a separate idea in Scripture from the worshiping body.

Our definition of corporate worship music as the art of drawing “the whole congregation into praise of God” in the form of song follows directly from our view of Christian Hedonism. If, as Piper says, “God is most glorified in us when we are more satisfied in Him,”³ then this affects the way we understand corporate worship music. Each worshiper is a lens through which everyone else sees God. The lens works when we see truly (objective) and feel duly (subjective), so that the highest theological precision and deepest musical stimulation are required. We have no need to fear that this taste of heaven will be at war with our mission to the lost. Since God is what every soul was made for, something in the unbeliever’s soul will resonate with heartfelt, excellent worship. Conversely, it is natural for an unbeliever to come into our assembly and feel embarrassed for us when we are directionless. It is just as natural for him to stand in awe when we are in one rousing accord. The unbeliever already worships this way when it comes to his idols. The American Christian is the only person on planet earth who doesn’t worship like he means it, and this is the worst of all witnesses. This is why Paul treats intelligibility, order, and warfare together in his chapter on orderly worship [cf. 1 Cor. 14:6-25].

² 2 Chronicles 29:28-29

³ The central maxim to Piper’s *Desiring God* Ministries

If the music sounds like a funeral dirge, it will kill momentum and eventually the whole movement. If the songs are, as Driscoll calls them, “prom songs to Jesus,” the ladies may get along alright, but the men will check out and most will not return. Before anyone responds, “Well, then, those guys need to get over their macho pride!” we may ask how different a more “masculine” tone would be than any other form of contextualization? Or, even more to the point, is it faintly possible that this more vibrant tone may be the norm throughout history, and that our current form of crooning choruses is really the thirty-year-old contextualization? With the question posed like that, the answer becomes clearer. The truth is that in a post-Christian era, Christians are always at least a generation behind the times. We cling on to “contemporary” modes of music, even though they are almost never really contemporary anymore. Most people find most of what churches do musically corny. Not many have the heart to tell them; they simply go elsewhere.

Space permits us from drawing out a full history of the various strands of Evangelicalism as it relates to liturgical development. Suffice it to say that each tradition *does* represent a form or liturgy. We would also argue that each tradition has fashioned their music after the times from which their movement arose, in spite of all of the imagination that this or that group has transcended the times. The Reformed and Presbyterian aesthetic forms come out of the Roman and Anglican moods out of which they (thankfully!) wrestled their more doctrinally faithful churches. The Baptist form of formlessness comes from the desire for simplicity also common in Congregational and Restoration circles. This was the overreaction to everything high-browed in the high-church. And the Pentecostal-Charismatic strands of experiential worship come out of a theology of the Spirit which was itself a subjectivist reaction to the stone-cold “objectivism” of mainline denominations. That does not mean that there is not much from those traditions that should be retained. What it does mean is that the reason why there is much good must be judged by a standard that transcends them all, namely Scripture.

No matter what the exact form, the chief component of corporate worship must be that the act draws attention to the majesty of God for as many people as possible. Failing to see this singular *chief* component as two things in one—vertical (worship) and horizontal (corporate)—is at the heart of every unhelpful practice and unbiblical assumption. Having said that, it still remains to be stated how we understand the Regulative Principle. We *do* think that its language is as operative today as always. Yet how we understand that language—according to that very language—must be determined by what we see in the Bible.

2) ...that there is form and freedom with respect to the style,

If we take the Regulative Principle seriously, we would be singing differently than the norm today. We would also be singing differently than those who most jealously hold to the principle! The reason can be seen most clearly in the first part:

But the acceptable way of worshiping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will...

So far, so good. God decides how we worship Him; and He kindly lets us in on it, lest we offend Him. However, we avoid the one-dimensional misapplication of the Regulative Principle by simply remembering to take the Word both biblically and systematically. This means that all that is explicitly revealed (biblical) must inform us. It also means that everything that may be properly inferred from *all* of what is revealed (systematic) also commands our worship. In other words, we avoid the death of the Christian heart by resisting the death of the Christian mind. Only anti-intellectualism treats the Bible as some kind of spiritless Ouija Board where we only make it mean what individual sentences can be made to mean in isolation. In this way, traditions have been led to avoid all instruments or emotive expressions or new songs because “there’s no instruments mentioned in the New Testament” or because corporate worship must be “orderly,” or because the Psalms are the only instance of “revealed liturgy.” It never occurs to them that:

Premise 1 – Instruments and affective expressions in the assembly and new songs *are* all commanded elsewhere in Scripture⁴, and;

Premise 2 – Nowhere does the New Testament tell us to forbid everything that is not explicitly mentioned in the New Testament (i.e. breathing, making dinner, laughing, etc.).

Whatever your conclusion to those two premises, it is plainly disobedience to reject a command of Scripture given to the whole people of God that has not been either explicitly or implicitly rescinded in the New Covenant work of Christ. Both the Churches of Christ and many in the Reformed tradition that restrict the usage of the three things mentioned above are in clear disobedience on those points. It is not that their forms are ungodly before God as He sees them in Christ. It is that the act of disobedience *itself* (covered in the blood of Christ, mercifully) is ungodly. We can therefore speak with conviction and charity here. We can say that the rationale behind their forms is manifestly unbiblical; but we can also say that the exercise of their form will glorify God because Christ “is able to make them stand” [Rom. 14:4]. Still, we do maintain that the two Protestant horns of the Regulative Principle dilemma are not really after the truest sense of the text. Hence, the second part of the principle states:

⁴ cf. Ps. 150

that he may not be worshiped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in holy Scripture

There are wrongheaded reasons why people go to these extremes. But we would be bad brothers and even worse worshipers if we did not admit that there are also very godly reasons why people misapply the principle. Sometimes very worthy aims take on very muddled projects. That is because we are finite and sinful. There is a great concern in each generation of Christians that the Lord be revered in the assembly's worship. This is among the highest goals and should never draw the rolling of eyes that it undoubtedly causes in today's irreverent church. The shortest step to dishonoring God in corporate worship is usually by some new innovation. Jeremiah Burroughs classic work, *Gospel Worship* (1646), exposes this natural tendency in man to depreciate the holiness of God in how we worship. Our sin craves every opportunity to recast the object of our worship and commend that to the community. Burroughs sets his treatise against the Old Testament backdrop of Leviticus 10—the incident when God struck dead the sons of Aaron, who served as priests: Nadab and Abihu—for offering strange fire on the altar. The lesson of the story is obvious enough. Said Burroughs:

As God whom we draw nigh to is great, so the duties of God's worship are great duties. They are the greatest things that concern us in this world; and it is a sign of a very carnal heart to slight the duties of God's worship, to account them as little matters. Carnal hearts ordinarily think of the things that concern their business in the world as being great matters.⁵

In other words, this is all so foreign to us because God is still so foreign to us. Burroughs' great work brings up more specific questions for our consideration: First, what is the essence of our personal holiness in corporate worship? Second, how does the musical and lyrical character of our songs induce or detract from this holiness? We are on the wrong track where these questions are not asked.

3) ...that every aspect of the music must always function toward its congregational and worshipful aspects,

Both music itself and the event of corporate singing have "aspects" to them—elements that make them what they are. If one were to remove an element, it would cease to be the same thing. Some of these elements are *essential* to the thing itself; others are more *incidental*, and can vary from form to form. Our first question will be: Which attributes of the science of music and the event of corporate worship music are essential and which are merely incidental?

⁵ Jeremiah Burroughs, *Gospel Worship* (Soli Deo Gloria, Orlando 2006); p. 53

People will naturally follow excellence. That is because our souls were meant for the Object that designed them. The rest of reality will reflect this, since all of creation was designed to speak of this Object: God [cf. Ps. 19:1]. So we see that souls are drawn to objects of beauty, symmetry, sweetness, serenity, etc. This is true of objects as they are contemplated in the mind; and it is true of objects as they are perceived through the five senses. Getting right to the point, a piano is superior among man-made instruments to lead, since its capacity to strike the total melody of a note rings more true to the musical part of the soul than a guitar. That does not mean that a guitar may not occasionally lead or that the lead singer may not play the guitar when there is no access to the piano. It simply means that it will not have the same effect to lead the maximum number and intensity of voices in the congregation.

And that last point is worth some reflection. Since the leader is leading in congregational singing, he must bear in mind that the group of singers he leads has only one instrument—the voice. That being the case, *his* lead instrument must ultimately be the voice. The leading voice must be clear. If that voice is not clear, there can be no supporting harmony. If some other voice is clear (perhaps someone out in the pews who has an excellent voice), the surrounding people will follow that voice by sheer instinct. Similarly, the song selection must have two planks—thematic and metric—one for doctrinal reinforcement (objective harmony) and the other with an eye toward cultivating everyone’s basic ability to join in with everything they have (subjective harmony). This is the function of a leader.

When we speak of a “function” we are speaking of the artist in his art, or, the servant in his service. The leader in music must develop his craft if he means to excel as a servant of the congregation. Bob Kauflin breaks this down into three components: technique, theory, and taste.⁶ The one refers to the art itself that can be developed over time (*technique*); the second, back to the artist’s view toward the science of music (*theory*); and the final one, a sense of what fits where (*taste*). All three are to be cultivated by the musical worship leader.

We are also assuming here the Westminster distinction between primary and secondary causation—a distinction which effects virtually everything else we think about within the created order. We do not have space to defend it; we comfortably assume it.⁷ Therefore, when we speak of the leader of worship music “leading” into the presence of God, we are not talking about a primary leading (Christ alone did this once for all His people) into the throne-room of grace, since every believer always dwells there. Nor are we worried that such talk will sound like manipulation of either a psychological or cultic variety. The act of drumming up

⁶ cf. Bob Kauflin, *Worship Matters* (Crossway, Wheaton, IL 2008); p. 39

⁷ If anyone would like a good defense of Article ??? of the Westminster Confession—which asserts this distinction—they may read R. C. Sproul, *Truths We Confess: Volume I* (Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, Philipsburg, NJ ???); pp. ????

either the lower spirits or the psyches of crowds fluctuates between mild pragmatism to an all-out witchcraft. The prophets of Baal that cut their wrists on Mount Carmel combined false means with a false spirit. But does it follow that there is *nothing* to “drum up” nor *any* drum to beat? Are we not throwing out the spiritual baby with the demonic bathwater? God created both the mind and the body, and any act of instruction that eliminates the leading of either faculty will not do much instructing. The problem with false worship is not that there is a finite mind communicating with other finite minds, nor that there are bodies moving more or less according to things felt about God. The problem is always that there is a false object of worship. The problem is a defective theology, not an excess of emotion or strategy.

D. A. Carson suggests that we scrap the whole concept of “worship leader” altogether. We can sympathize with his concern, though it is probably not imperative to go that far. His rationale, however, should be taken seriously.

The notion that the worship leader is a lead (model) worshiper accurately communicates how our practice follows our doctrine of Christian Hedonism. However, there is also a danger here. The danger is that if this vertical pursuit of the individual leader does not serve horizontally, then two problems ensue. For those who cannot follow, they simply check out. For those who can follow, their attention is subtly transferred to the one who is worshipping as an isolated experience. The “model” becomes the object. And surely this is a chief factor in all of the showiness of contemporary worship—the “set,” the *prima donna* attitude present in so many who participate.

There is a simple solution to all of that. Place the musicians off to the side and have them sit by their instruments during the sermon. In this way, music can be appropriately used as the sermon closes or even during the closing prayer, without much further ado. People could stand to look at theological words on a screen, but staring up into the eyes of swaying singers—particularly members of the opposite sex—I assure you, does nothing to stir our affections for God. Beyond that, the musicians need to be fed by the word as well. They ought to be sitting down and taking notes while the word (that they are supposedly responding to in their singing!) is being preached the same as everyone else. There is nothing more conducive to the nonsense that currently exists than the full range of instruments, microphones, and wiring, front and center. At the front of the church should be a pulpit, the table for the Lord’s Supper, and, perhaps, a baptismal—Word and Sacrament—but not a prop for some carnival of contemporary carnality under the guise of “worship.” The entire architecture and décor of the sanctuary makes a theological statement, whether we have deliberated over it or not. And while the exact choices may differ slightly, surely the majority of contemporary choices have made some very over-contextualized cultural statements. They have said little

about eternity. This is why the unbeliever is unconvinced. What the sinner needs to encounter in the presence of singing Christians is the presence of God.

4) ...and that music in the living church must always fuel the mission.

Earlier we mentioned in passing Paul's chapter on orderly worship: 1 Corinthians 14. Many things have been debated on this chapter concerning speaking in tongues, and so forth; but however we may all line up on that issue, a much more clear doctrine ought to emerge concerning the *missional thrust* of corporate worship gatherings. Surely everyone ought to agree on this! Strangely, however, the contemporary church behaves as if they have never read it. The chapter begins by knitting together the two issues spoken of in the previous two chapters—spiritual gifts and love—by which the apostle is saying, in effect: OK, now let's talk about what this looks like when we meet as a worshiping body on Sunday!

What it “looks like” may be summarized by dividing Chapter 14 into the following outline:

Paul's Main Thesis: *Love pursues—when we're gathered—a clear word that blesses the believer and convicts the unbeliever.*

- I. Clear Communication Builds the Mission (vv. 2-5, 13-15, 18-19)
- II. Unclear Communication Scatters the Mission (vv. 6-12, 16-17)
- III. The Mission *in* the Church Precedes the Mission *to* the Community (vv. 20-25)
- IV. The Order of Worship is the Order of Everything Else (vv. 26-40)

Should anyone ask what on earth this has to do with music, we reply that worship music is one more form of corporate worship and so all the same principles apply. Time prohibits us from unpacking the application of that chapter in full. The main thing we should derive from it is that the church on mission cannot afford to put people to flight (or to sleep) with its music.

There should be a—minimally—two-to-one ratio of the manly, symmetrical, majestic hymns, preferably placed at the beginning and end (as we tend, psychologically, to retain that which comes first and last); and, for the same reason—minimally—a two-to-one ratio of either male-led vocals or clear harmony from a choir. Both of these have a tendency to work on our souls in ways that their absence would not. The tone and meter inherent to this framework will draw the attention of men up into praise of God and away from the discomforts associated with music that does not do this. The ladies will naturally follow along: *naturally*, that is, according to their real nature. That is because of the operative principle stated above: *The order of worship is the order of everything else.* That means that the temporal order of gender differences and corporate worship will converge here, following (together) the eternal order that they reflect. This is the way reality

works, and so our practice must line up with it, if the effect is to be what it was meant to be.

The female vocalists and emotive reflection inherent to the more reflective (If you call these the “more worshipful” choruses, think about what you are saying about both worship and yourself!) songs would then complement as they are interspersed within the context of the rhythmic, awe-stirring anthems that flank them.

Another mistake made when musicians finally mature to work on this “metric” or “tonal” plank of our song selection is to suppose that the reason people cannot follow a particular rendition of a song is because it is not familiar to them. That is not the point. And that mistake will be crucial, since the solution of such a flawed approach to the problem will invariably be to *make* them familiar with it. The truth is that the rendition is wrong because its notes are universally wrong. There is a right note because there is an Object that it has, more or less, conformed to in eternity. The art of music—no less than everything else in creation—corresponds to a real objective reality whose reflection the song writer or composer has discovered. There is simply a right way to sing every note—namely the note! There may be rare occasions where a reworked song will reflect a similar, better discovery by a future musician. But we would do well to remember that the word “music” descends from the Greco-Roman idea of the *muses*. We know that *they* are not real, yet what inspiration the Greeks thought were disconnected persons, we Christians know to be the objective, knowable attributes of one, true God.

Corporate worship is ultimately a celebration of all that God is for us in Christ. Where the Spirit of the Lord is in this, there is a freedom that will both strive to excel and condescend to allow. There is something unhealthy going on in our souls when we cannot celebrate the grace and glory of God together in this way. All that we have to say about excellence, therefore, is meant for us to do both—excel *and* allow, strive *and* celebrate, bow *and* embrace! It is not meant to exalt our preferences. If everyone among us fashioned worship after his or her own preferences, then it would remain a private worship setting, not corporate. But then we may find that the screen in the front is really a mirror. Therefore, we will humbly study this together, over time, in a context where charity, freedom, and the pursuit of excellence are never divorced from each other. They, like the music we long to make, are a harmony.

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