



Music in Worship¹

Ted Ward

It is difficult to decide who is the more to be pitied, the one who sits stubbornly through every hymn, never venturing to add a sound, or the misguided song leader who assumes that his mission in life is to force every last worshiper to join in. Music in the church is one of the beautiful privileges of worship. Privileges resisted are joys unfulfilled. Privileges forced upon others are meaningless.

Worship is not a passive experience. God expects us to worship him. We know this is so and we do something about it: we organize ourselves, we bring tithes and offerings into the storehouse, we build a suitable place to worship, we call and hire those who should lead us in worship, and we assemble ourselves. Then the chain breaks—we sit passively. God expects worship! The examples of worship in the Bible are consistently *active* experiences.

Musical worship of God is as old as the Scriptures themselves. Among the ways God has established for people to show devotion and obedient love, singing, prayer, and attention to his written Word are given chief place. Most poetic passages in the Bible, which tell of God's magnificent self-revelation in Nature, are identifiable as songs. The greatest prayers of thankfulness are clearly intended to be sung. It can hardly be coincidence that the songbook of the Bible, the book of Psalms, is easily the richest source of information about God. Emphasis upon God draws one's expressions up to their highest form. Beyond the richness of language itself is language cast in music.

Those who seek to worship God do well to participate in singing the great hymns of the church, such as "O God, Our Help in Ages Past," "Great is Thy Faithfulness," and "Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah." When we put ideas like these into actual words of prayer and praise and sing them with voices firm with passionate conviction, we are surely lifting up the name of our God in worship.

Worshipful singing does not have to be "formal" singing or even sober singing. Paul twice refers to singing "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs," (Ephesians 5:19, Colossians 3:16) strongly suggesting that even in the early church there were several basically different forms of church music. In these passages, singing is indicated as an experience to be shared with other believers and yet directed *toward God*. Herein lies the major complaint of serious church musicians against some of the lighter Gospel choruses: they are not very carefully directed toward God.

Each congregation seems to have its favorite songs. (Sometimes these can be counted on one hand.) In some cases, the "favorites" are a reflection of the particular background or experiences of the congregation as a whole. In days past, this was particularly true, especially where small

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congregations, existing in relative isolation with few members coming to or going from the community, lived through so many experiences in common with one another. It was only natural for certain songs to become beloved by all. “I Need Thee Every Hour,” “Jesus Never Fails,” “Now the Day is Over,” and “Let the Lower Lights be Burning” are examples of such songs. They were strong favorites in one place, scarcely sung in another.

Laziness may be a more common reason behind the singing and re-singing of a particular handful of songs. Since we are creatures of habit, we just find it much easier not to try very hard to learn something new. Even our less familiar songs fall into easy disuse. Resistance to new songs is not a unique product of twentieth-century apathy. No less than six Psalms are concerned with the matter of *new* songs. Aside from the “new song” being a reference to the rejoicing of the redeemed, the church musician is inclined to sympathetically conclude that the psalmists of old were also having trouble with congregational laziness! They were inspired to go on record supporting variety and newness in the singing worship.

What about the idea that “I can appreciate the hymns so much more when I just listen?” First, if this were really true—and true for everyone—it would be difficult to decide who is to enjoy this higher privilege. Clearly, we cannot all be listeners. To whom would we listen? Then we need to look at the more basic problem: is listening really as valuable to the worshiper as singing? It would seem from the emphasis upon singing in the Scriptures, especially in the book of Psalms, that singing is a highly preferred means of participation in worship.

The discussion so far has been concerned with singing. This is an intentional reflection of the fact that the Scriptures are much more concerned with singing than with instrumental music. But instruments play an important role in Church music, and the instrumentalists, even more than the singers, are encouraged to be skillful. (A sour singer blends better than a sour organist!) Except for intimate gatherings of people in a small room, or highly trained choirs, singing without the support of an accompanying instrument is a rather discouraging experience. The instrument plays an important part in keeping singers more or less together and, thus, providing a basis for more pleasing sounds to be produced.



That the Word of God encourages “joyful noise” should be of some reassurance to the tone-deaf worshiper who fears his singing must sound like a mistreated moose. If Church music ever becomes so exclusively refined that the untrained and perhaps untalented worshiper is frozen out of participation, we shall have lost the great essence of common worship. Although there is rarely any good reason why a choir cannot sound beautiful, there needs to be particular effort given to making the congregational hymn singing anything but a beautifully coordinated loud noise. Old Testament authority for this view rests squarely in “the musician’s psalm.” (Psalm 150) Even the person whose knowledge of instruments and music history is slight will have no particular difficulty adding these up: singers, trumpets, psalteries, harps, timbrels, strings, organs, and cymbals—high-sounding cymbals—*loud* high-sounding cymbals! Where is the Church today that knows this happy sound?

Ask any American to write out the words of the first verse of our national anthem, and she will begin to hum before she arrives at “the dawn’s early light!” Why? Because the tune is an aid to memory. God in his infinite wisdom emphasizes singing because he knows we will remember better what we can recall with a melody. How powerful songs are to help us remember!

Music must be more than a spectator sport! Americans are great watchers. We watch television, football, baseball, musical performances, and the like. The piano has given way to the hi-fi set as the home's basic musical furniture. Entertainment has become so much an aggressively organized industry, that we find ourselves spending more and more leisure time in the passive role of the observer.

The box social, croquet, spelling bee, family hike, and songfest seem to have followed each other over the hill into history. Yet through watching and listening, we have come to know more about our world than ever before. Surely through watching and listening we can learn, even learn about God. But to grow in personal acquaintance with God, we must engage in worship and fellowship. This means activity!

Each part of the worship service has its contribution to make. Whether formal or informal, liturgical or evangelistic, the worship service consists of prayers, readings, sermons of exposition and exhortation, and music. Certain parts of the worship service seem to be gradually fading away. Especially affected are the activities for worshiper participation. Seasons of prayer, and Scripture and devotional reading seem to be going out of style in some churches. The dominant parts of many services today are the sermon and the singing. (Announcements run a close third!) The sermon engages us as listeners—again the passive activity. But singing, and sometimes *only* singing, provides us with the precious and scarce opportunity for active participation in worship.

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