

Singing Praise

The Purpose of Congregational Song

David Gambrell

SINGING PRAISE

Why do we sing in worship? From a theological point of view, there really is only one answer to that question. It's the same rationale one might offer for any number of liturgical actions, elements, and objects—from preaching to processions to projection screens, from blessings to banners to the sharing of bread. The primary reason to do anything at all in worship—indeed, in all of Christian life—is to glorify God.

“Christian liturgy is, first and last, praising, blessing, and thanking God,” writes Don Saliers. “It is a continual speaking of God’s name in gratitude and thankfulness for the self-giving of God to the world.”¹ First and last—from alpha to omega—the theological purpose of worship is praise, giving honor and glory to the Triune God, from whom all blessings flow.

Among the myriad manifestations of praise, singing has a special place. Consider this: of the Hebrew words translated as “praise” in the New Revised Standard Version of the Old Testament, nearly three-quarters of those instances (133 out of 182) are found in the Psalms, the songbook of the Hebrew Bible. Doxology is demonstrated to be a way of life in the psalms, and music is an integral part of that practice of praise: “I will sing to the LORD as long as I live; I will sing praise to my God while I have being” (Psalm 104:33; see also Psalm 146:2). New Testament writings indicate that singing thanks and praise to God has been a hallmark of life in Christian community from the very beginning. As the apostle wrote to the church at Ephesus: “. . . be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making

melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Ephesians 5:18-20; see also Colossians 3:16-17).

Of course, Christians aren't the only ones who sing, and worship isn't the only venue for music in human life. Anthropologists and musicologists have identified a number of social functions of music that transcend cultural and religious settings. A frequently cited list proposed by anthropologist Alan Merriam includes the following: emotional expression, aesthetic enjoyment, entertainment, communication, symbolic representation, physical response, enforcing conformity to social norms, validation of social institutions and religious rituals, contributions to the continuity and stability of culture, and contributions to the integration of society.² Most (if not all) of these social functions are obliquely applicable to what takes place in Christian worship. However, from a theological perspective, none of them rises to the level of music's *primary* purpose—the glorification of God.

In his commentary on Psalm 148, Augustine sought to explain what distinguishes hymns from other uses of music in daily life as well as other (nonmusical) acts of praise; to paraphrase somewhat freely:

Do you know what a hymn is? It's a song of praise to God. If you praise God without singing, it's not a hymn. If you sing without praising God, it's not a hymn. If you praise something else, and not God, although you're singing and praising, it's not a hymn. A hymn then contains these three things: a song, and praise, and God.³

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The commentary on the Service for the Lord's Day in the Presbyterian *Book of Common Worship* (BCW) offers this description of the hymn of praise at the commencement of the liturgy: "The people sing praise to God in a hymn, psalm, or spiritual, which tells of God's greatness, majesty, love, and goodness. Praise is the joyful response to the incomparable gift of God in Jesus Christ, and so is dominant in Christian worship."⁴ Speaking more broadly about the nature of praise in the first movement of the order of worship, the precursor to the BCW makes a similar assertion: "Adoration is the keynote of all true worship, of the creature before the Creator, of the redeemed before the Redeemer. In song and prayer, God is praised."⁵

Hymns may fulfill a number of other functions in the context of the service of worship. They may bring people together, as voices are united in a common act of worship. They may elevate the human spirit through beautiful poetry or stirring harmony. They may help to teach the faith, relating a biblical story or encapsulating some aspect of our theological tradition. They may orient worshipers to the principal themes or Scriptures for the day. They may offer a glimpse into the history of a bygone era or provide a vision of a better world to come. But the primary purpose of liturgical song is to proclaim the praise of the living God.

It has been suggested that we praise God for two reasons. First, we meditate on the majesty and goodness of God, the intricacy and order of creation, the perfection of God's providential care; that contemplation compels us to bless God's name (what Claus Westermann termed "descriptive praise"). Second, we honor God and give thanks for special acts of deliverance and grace, particular manifestations of divine presence and power; this impulse often results in more spontaneous outpourings of devotion (what Westermann called "declarative praise").⁶

In reality, of course, these are but two sides of the same coin, two stanzas of the same song; we praise God because God is God and we are grateful. When we gather for worship, this gratitude erupts

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in joyful music. In the words of the preface to the Sanctus, that quintessential hymn at the heart of Christian liturgy:

Therefore we praise you,
joining our voices with choirs of angels,
with prophets, apostles, and martyrs,
and with all the faithful of every time and
place,
who forever sing to the glory of your name:
Holy, holy, holy Lord . . .⁷

FACILITATING PRAYER

Another way of thinking about the primary purpose of singing in worship is to say that it facilitates participation in prayer. James F. White alludes to this, maintaining that "[t]he chief function of church music is to add a deeper dimension of participation to worship."⁸ This alternative view of the purpose of congregational singing in no way competes with its fundamental theological purpose: singing praise. Praise is one mode of prayer—in fact, the *primary* mode in Christian worship; other modes of prayer include invocation, beseeching, lament, confession, and intercession.⁹ Singing praise and facilitating prayer are complementary purposes, the former theological (focused on God) and the latter liturgical (attending to the work of the people in worship).

As with praise, it certainly is possible to pray without music; but throughout the history of ancient Israel and the Christian church, singing and praying have been partners, hand in hand. John Calvin attests to this in his 1543 introduction to the Genevan Psalter:

As for the public prayers, there are two kinds: the first are made with the word only, the others with song. And this is not a thing invented a short time ago. For from the first origin of the church, this has been so, as appears from the histories. And even Saint Paul speaks not only of praying aloud, but also of singing (Colossians 3:16).¹⁰

Calvin, of course, emphasized the psalms and biblical canticles as exemplary expressions of praise and prayer, and the only satisfactory sources for congregational song. As he wrote in the preface to his 1557 commentary on Psalms: "there is no other book in which we are more perfectly taught the right

manner of praising God, or in which we are more powerfully stirred up to the performance of this exercise of piety.”¹¹ With respect to prayer, Calvin assured his readers that “whatever may serve to encourage us when we are about to pray to God is taught to us in this book” (i.e., the Psalms).¹²

Congregational song encourages or facilitates prayer in a number of ways. The added musical dimensions of melody, rhythm, tempo, timbre, accents, and dynamics imbue prayerful song with a power that surpasses simple speech. Since singing is an embodied act, blending words with music that stirs the spirit and evokes emotional response, liturgical song engages heart, mind, soul,

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and strength in the practice of prayer. Singing provides for communal, collective prayer in a way that eclipses ordinary unison readings—bringing voices together as many, yet one, through the gift of harmony. And since music is an aid to memory, a catchy chorus or haunting melody from Sunday worship often follows us around for the rest of the week, bridging public liturgy and private prayer.

As the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Directory for Worship states in its section on “Music as Prayer”:¹³

Song is a response which engages the whole self in prayer. Song unites the faithful in common prayer wherever they gather for worship whether in church, home, or other special place. The covenant people have always used the gift of song to offer prayer. . . . In addition to psalms the Church in the New Testament sang hymns and spiritual songs. Through the ages and from varied cultures, the church has developed additional musical forms for congregational prayer. Congregations are encouraged to use these diverse musical forms for prayer as well as those which arise out of the musical life of their own cultures.

The varied expressions of music in human life are a rich resource for liturgical prayer. As God’s Word became flesh in Jesus Christ, Christian prayer is always enfleshed in the indigenous rhythms and melodies of the body of Christ in a particular time and place.

FUNCTIONS OF SINGING IN CHRISTIAN LIFE

To return to this essay’s refrain: The primary theological purpose of congregational song is praise; its primary liturgical purpose is facilitating prayer. (Once more, with feeling!) Having emphasized these critical points, it must now be acknowledged that there are several other significant and salutary things that may occur as we glorify God through the gift of song. Among them: (1) encountering the holy, (2) forming faith, (3) nourishing communion, and (4) inspiring action.¹⁴ These phenomena harken back to the social functions of music enumerated by Merriam. Indeed, they are features of the role of music in human life—in this case, *Christian* life. But they are not the *reason* why we sing.

It might be helpful to think of these functions of congregational song as *side effects* of singing praise and facilitating prayer. Calling them “side effects” is not intended to diminish their significance in Christian life and liturgy—only to say that they are not to be *sought after* as main objectives in worship, as though we might be able to produce them through our own endeavors. Divine encounter, Christian formation, spiritual nurture, and the inspiration to act in faith are all gifts of God, not human achievements. When we focus on these things as ends in themselves, worship is distorted—bent to utilitarian aims—and the primary purpose of praise is diluted or derailed. Music becomes a tool for manipulation. However, when we keep the focus on praising God and facilitating the work of the people in worship, good things may happen—and often do.

From a liturgical perspective, it is interesting to note that these four functions of congregational song correspond roughly to the movements of the four-fold order of worship: Gathering (encountering the holy), the Word (forming faith), Eucharist (nourishing communion), and Sending (inspiring action). To try to force these functions into particular places in the order of worship would be to underestimate the complexity of liturgical song and ignore the organic nature of the liturgy; nevertheless, the correlations can be instructive in

considering the functions of congregational song and in selecting music for worship.

In the following reflections on these four functions of congregational song, I will give a brief description of the relationship between singing and Christian life. In each case, I will offer examples of music's corresponding role in daily (secular) human life and will conclude with a personal illustration from liturgical practice. Of course, all of these functions of liturgical song—encountering the holy, forming faith, nourishing communion, inspiring action—ultimately amount to acts of praise, gifts of gratitude, humble human gesturing at the glory of God.

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Encountering the Holy

When song accompanies ritual action, it establishes sacred space and time, and clarifies the nature of the event that is taking place: something holy is happening here. It also serves to name the One who is being praised and glorified—the triune God. Music in worship (particularly at the beginning of the service) opens the human heart to the presence and power of God in a way that evokes thanksgiving and praise, and—as Isaiah experienced—also may provoke the confession of sin. In a manner that is often more effective and convincing than any spoken call to worship, congregational singing communicates the message that God has gathered us for a common purpose and that God's grace inspires our grateful response.

Although it is hardly a fitting analogue for divine encounter, the familiar “Happy Birthday” song has a similar function in common life: It establishes an occasion, sets the tone for celebration, and names the one who is being honored. The national anthem, in its usage as a kind of “opening hymn” for athletic events, offers another example; as the game begins, the combined voices of sports

fans (accompanied by ritual gesture: the removal of hats, hands on hearts) provides a powerful demonstration of presence, support, and solidarity—even transcending team allegiances. It might even be argued that lullabies, such as “Hush, Little Baby,” perform a related function: shepherding the transition from wakefulness to sleep with a song of reassuring presence and peace.

Nothing illustrates the power of liturgical song to establish sacred space and time quite so well as singing hymns in a public place—outside the sheltering walls of the church sanctuary. I discovered this at special prayer services with my colleagues in the Office of Theology and Worship. Occasionally we gather for afternoon prayer in a small conference room among the offices on the second floor of the Presbyterian Center in Louisville. When we begin to sing, heads will pop up out of cubicles; passersby, on their way to the information technology office suite, will slow down to investigate the source of the song. It's obvious that something different, something sacred, is taking place—not a meeting about the budget or a human resources training event. A similar thing happens when a group sings the grace before a meal in a crowded restaurant. “Innocent bystanders” are suddenly aware (occasionally with awkwardness and discomfort, but more often than not with appreciation and delight) that something holy is happening.

Forming Faith

Congregational song contains a rich repository of biblical narrative, theological insight, and guidance for Christian living. Not only does it enlist the mnemonic power of music to imprint scenes from Scripture and impart essential tenets of the faith, it serves to shape Christian identity through the internalization of common songs and stories. Most children of the Reformation don't need to be persuaded of the educational potential of the church's hymnody; if anything, we can be a bit didactic in our “use” of liturgical music (and liturgy in general), emphasizing instruction and neglecting celebration and praise. A renewed focus on singing as doxology *doesn't* mean abandoning this historic strength of our tradition—just keeping the primary purpose of praise in mind and remembering that faith, like music, is a gift from God.

The “Alphabet Song” provides a secular corollary to the role of congregational song in shaping faith and faithfulness. Not only does this musical setting

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of the alphabet assist in the learning of letters and in the memorization of alphabetical order, it instills the social value of literacy to children at a tender and impressionable age. Familiar folk ballads take a more narrative approach but have a similar function in the way they aid memory, share central stories, shape identity, and inculcate communal mores.

In my first year of seminary I recall multiple occasions in which I gave thanks for my lifelong immersion in the church's song through regular participation in worship and musical leadership in the children's and adult choirs. I had an intuitive grasp of Christian doctrine because of all the time I had spent clutching the hymnal and giving voice to its "sound theology." I knew the rough contours of Christian history through the historical hymnody of the church. There were whole chunks of Scripture I carried around in my head and heart because I had learned them as choral anthems or metrical paraphrases of the psalms. I grew to understand and have come to believe that singing in worship is preparation for ministry.

Nourishing Communion

Many have observed that there is a "sacramental" dimension to liturgical song.¹⁵ Singing in worship sometimes can be an embodied experience of God's grace, in which we sense the presence of Christ and the outpouring of the Spirit. Like water, music in worship washes over us, shaping Christian identity and strengthening covenant relationships as voices unite in common song. Like bread and wine, music in worship may feed and even intoxicate us, providing a rich feast of mystery and meaning, and enlivening our celebration in the Spirit. Music—a gift of God for the people of God—nourishes Christian life and nurtures covenant community.

While they are in no way sacramental, musical rounds such as "Row, Row, Row Your Boat" or "Frère Jacques" require communal participation and strengthen relationships among the singers; as voices overlap and blend, singers become aware of an unexpected guest, a mysterious presence: that of harmony. Rounds demonstrate the notion that we are more together than the sum of our parts, and that with the spirit of cooperation we can accomplish with grace and ease something that is impossible for individuals alone. They also evince the fact that unity doesn't require single-minded uniformity, but that beauty and harmony flourish and bloom in polyphony.

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In a recent worship service I found myself captivated by the sign language interpreter; during the choir's anthem, I was watching carefully to see if I could recognize any bits and pieces of the American Sign Language I studied briefly in college. One sign in particular struck me: "harmony." The interpreter brought her hands together with interlaced fingers—a wonderful visual representation of the weaving together of musical parts. It occurred to me that the knitting together of different gifts and abilities in the liturgy is an even deeper dimension of harmony than "mere music," an even more dramatic sign of the advent and incarnation of Christ. When the fullness of humanity flourishes in worship, the grace of God is surely with us. When the wholeness of humanity finds its expression in the diversity of the body of Christ, the Word of God is flesh indeed.

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Inspiring Action

Congregational song (especially near the close of worship) can encourage faithful service and inspire mission and ministry in Christ's name. When it fulfills this function, singing can help to animate our life and work with the presence and power of the risen Christ. It may serve to stir up the gifts of the Spirit, evoking our participation in God's transforming, reconciling action.

In contemporary North American life, work songs aren't as common as they used to be. Perhaps the rhythms of retail sales and data entry don't lend themselves as readily to musical accompaniment. Nevertheless, folk traditions have preserved many of the sea shanties, field hollers, cowboy ballads, and domestic songs that once accompanied daily work, enlivening the performance of a tedious task and coordinating the labors of many hands. Protest songs, again not as prevalent as they once were, are a related genre; they help to sharpen the focus of our resistance against destructive powers and oppressive principalities.

There was a period of time in the church I served as associate pastor and director of music when we ended each worship service with the hymn "Canto de Esperanza" or "Song of Hope" (no. 432 in *The Presbyterian Hymnal*). I soon discovered that this sprightly sending song, with its words in Spanish and English, had begun to spill over into my daily life. Not only did I find myself whistling it while I worked, but the vision of the Christian life in that song began to inform and influence the decisions I made, the way I lived. Was I praying and struggling for peace, singing and sharing joy with all? Was I working for a new world, in faithfulness to Christ's call?

SINGING PRAISE: SOME PROPOSALS

Given these reflections on the theological and liturgical purposes of congregational song and the functions of liturgical music in Christian life, how might we reform and renew the practice of singing in Reformed worship? Here are a few proposals.

Sing the Sanctus. Earlier in this article I referred to the preface to the Sanctus in the Great Thanksgiving, which calls worshipers to join the hymn of the celestial choirs and the chorus of saints "who forever *sing*" to the glory of God's name. Sadly, what often follows is not a glorious song at all but a monotone mumble. If we want to revitalize congregational song in Reformed worship, here's a good place to start: *Sing* the Sanctus! Sing "Holy, holy, holy" as though the six-winged seraphim were standing by with tongues and burning coals in hand. Sing "heaven and earth are full of your glory" with a Spirit-filled voice that seeks to rattle the rafters of the cosmos and shake the foundations of the world. Sing "Hosanna (literally, "save us!") in the highest" like your life depends on it. We are singing the praise of the triune God, on whom all life depends.

Sing the psalms. This is a landmark of the Reformed liturgical tradition that is, at least in some parts of the church, in a serious state of disrepair. We're still quite fond of psalms, to be sure. They are the subject of Bible studies, resources for personal prayer, a treasury for calls to worship and responsive readings, employed as Scripture

lessons (often replacing the appointed Old Testament passage for the day, rather than serving as a musical response to it), and even used as texts for preaching; but in many congregations they are seldom sung.¹⁶ This is, at best, a missed opportunity; at worst it may be an indication of the atrophy of the ancient and essential Judeo-Christian practice of singing praise. As the Presbyterian Directory for Worship avers: “Psalms were created to be sung by the faithful as their response to God. Though they may be read responsively or in unison, their full power comes to expression when they are sung.”¹⁷

Sing *Shema*. In other words, sing with all your being. The *Shema* (Hebrew for “hear”) or Great Commandment enjoins us to glorify God in a holistic, all-encompassing way: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (Deuteronomy 6:4-5; see also Matthew 22:37, Mark 12:29-30, and Luke 10:27). Paul makes a similar point in his letter to the church at Corinth: “I will sing praise with the spirit, but I will sing praise with the mind also” (1 Corinthians 14:15). Singing praise to God requires every resource we have, every gift we have been given. Vital and effective congregational song represents the confluence of passionate performance (heart), theological integrity (mind), spiritual depth (soul), and embodied effort (strength).

Guiding questions. When selecting and preparing music for worship, consider these questions: First, how does this song glorify God? How does it facilitate prayer? If the answers to these questions aren’t readily apparent, it may be necessary to re-evaluate whether this song is really appropriate for worship. Second, what functions does the song address in Christian life? Does it seek to encounter the holy, form faith, nourish communion, or inspire action (or some combination of the four)? Your responses to these questions may help to determine the best placement of the song in the order of worship.

REHEARSING FOR CHRIST’S REALM

Singing in worship is for the sake of God, for the glory of God alone. As we sing with joyful thanksgiving for the saving grace and steadfast love of the triune God, we listen with eager anticipation for the reverberations of a new creation, the crescendo of Christ’s coming realm. In that sense, our singing here and now is a rehearsal for that great day when we may join the eternal hymn of praise that echoes around God’s throne, the harmony of earth and heaven at the consummation of all things:

After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, “Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!” And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, singing, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen. (Revelation 7:9-12)

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Notes

1. Don E. Saliers, *Worship as Theology: Foretaste of Glory Divine* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994), 118.
2. Alan P. Merriam, *The Anthropology of Music* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 219-227.
3. www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf108.ii.CXLVIII.html. Accessed March 5, 2010.
4. Theology and Worship Ministry Unit for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 35.
5. Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *The Service for the Lord's Day: Supplemental Liturgical Resource 1* (Louisville, KY: Westminster Press, 1984), 16.
6. Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1981).
7. *Book of Common Worship*, 70.
8. James F. White, *Introduction to Christian Worship, 3rd ed., revised and expanded* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000), 112.
9. Saliers, 85-136.
10. As quoted in Elsie Anne McKee, ed. and trans., *John Calvin: Writings on Pastoral Piety* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2001), 94.
11. Ibid, 57-58.
12. Ibid., 56.
13. Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Book of Order, 2007-2009*, Directory for Worship (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly), W-2.1003.
14. For another approach, see Brian Wren's *Praying Twice: The Music and Words of Congregational Song* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2000) 84-97; Wren identifies seven "hallmarks" of congregational song: that it is corporate, corporeal, inclusive, creedal, ecclesial, inspirational, and evangelical.
15. Kathleen Harmon's recent work, *The Mystery We Celebrate, the Song We Sing: A Theology of Liturgical Music* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2008), makes a compelling case that music in worship enacts our participation in the paschal mystery.
16. In a 2005 Presbyterian Panel survey on hymnals, seventy-seven percent of pastors reported that their congregations sing the psalms "less than once a month" (thirty-seven percent) or "never" (forty percent). www.pcusa.org/research/panel/reports/0805repfinal.pdf. Accessed March 6, 2010.
17. Directory for Worship, W-2.1003.