

## MUSIC IN WORSHIP

### 1. BIBLICAL CONTENT

- **Truth:** Liturgical music must speak truth.
- **Scope:** Liturgical music must draw upon the full range of biblical content for every type of prayer. Music for worship must tell the biblical story in a balanced way.
  - Over-represented themes: Evangelical hymnody tends to stress God's general attributes (holiness, faithfulness, etc.); Jesus' atoning death on the cross; forgiveness of sins; and individual emotional experiences of the heart in relationship with Jesus.
  - Under-represented themes: Modern American hymnody tends to give insufficient stress to creation; Jesus' kingdom/kingship; Jesus' resurrection (many hymns skip straight from the cross to the second coming); Jesus' ascension; covenant; the Lord's Supper (especially with a full Reformed theology of the sacrament); spiritual warfare; the church as corporate community; God's mission; end times as the coming of a renewed creation.

### 2. BIBLICAL LANGUAGE

- **Colossians 3:16:** One major purpose of liturgical music is to cause the word of God to let the word of Christ dwell in us "richly." Therefore, liturgical music must help us sing the Bible and teach us to understand, speak, and pray the language of Scripture.
- **Psalms as norm for Christian worship songs**
  - Biblical song texts are poetry written in a higher register than ordinary prose or common conversation. Biblical songs speak biblical truth in poetic forms that glorify the words (and God!) in a manner elevated above common, everyday uses of language,
  - Christian worship songs ought to be psalm-like in all of these ways. They ought not be "street language." Rather, the texts of Christian hymns should be works of poetry that have beauty and integrity of form. This does not mean that songs for Christian worship must be very long (e.g., Psalm 117 is only a few lines) or as complex as possible. However, Christian liturgical music should provide us with language to express and form our corporate prayer in ways that are deeper, more beautiful, and more profound than we could do on our own.<sup>1</sup> Christian hymnody should stretch us with metaphors and images that plumb the depth and breadth of biblical revelation and the experience of knowing God with form and structure that highlights and intensifies the text to make it memorable and singable.

### 3. SERVING ALL TYPES OF ACTIONS IN WORSHIP

Music is not a separate element of liturgy; rather, it is a mode or manner of performing the different elements of liturgy (praise/thanks, confession of sin, supplication/intercession, etc.). Thus, music must serve the liturgy (not vice versa). This means that the **theological theme** and the form of address (who is speaking to whom about what?) of the text as well as the **emotional tone or "feel"** of the music must match and support its place and function within the liturgy.

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<sup>1</sup> "Where a hymn in a service of worship beckons to the worshiper at his or her best and causes that worshiper to feel or say, 'That is what I wanted to say, but I am grateful to whoever put the words in my mouth,' then it has done its work." (Erik Routley, *Christian Hymns Observed* [Princeton, NJ: Pestige Publications, 1982], 107).

The church's repertoire must contain a balanced variety of songs with themes and tones that can function in the whole array of liturgical elements.

| Major congregational actions in worship   | Emotional tone   |
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| Praise/thanksgiving: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• for entering God's special presence together</li> <li>• for receiving God in baptism</li> <li>• for receiving God's forgiveness</li> <li>• for receiving God's instruction</li> <li>• for receiving God in communion</li> <li>• for being sent in peace and blessing</li> </ul> | Scripture associates God's praise in music with loud music sung to many instruments played loudly and vigorously (e.g., Ps 150; 2 Chron 29–30; Rev 4; 5; 7; 11; 19). <i>This is the most frequently repeated function in corporate worship since it occurs at several places throughout the whole liturgy; thus, it ought to be the dominant tone of worship services as a whole.</i> (Communion is also a time for enjoyment of peace with God, which could also music that evokes a sense of peace, contentment and rest in God's presence.) |
| Confessing and lamenting sin  | Should be meditative/contemplative and somber in expression.<br>Lament may be loud, anguished, or plaintive cries for God's justice and deliverance.   |
| Offering ourselves in renewed commitment and intercession   | May express any number of responses from joyful thanks to serious pleas for God's help.  |
| Professing the faith with creeds  | May adopt a majestic, even solemn, tone since this act is a formal, sung public oath for the purpose of renewing our covenant with God.  |

### A word on the value and wisdom of singing a variety musical styles:

- Styles of music will (and ought to) vary throughout the church
  - The absence of specific musical forms in the Bible forces (and frees) the church to employ musical genres indigenous to local cultures.
  - The Bible sanctions the use of the entire spectrum of human instruments for accompanying corporate worship: strings, winds, percussion (Ps 150).
  - Assessing the value and wisdom of any particular musical genre will depend on the particular cultural associations that that music has.
  - Local congregations are constrained by limitations of available musicians, financial resources, history, cultural context, and liturgical experience.
- It is wise for congregational song in worship to include the following sources and styles:

#### (1) Psalms

Psalms and other biblical song texts/canticles must be sung because God commands it (Eph 5:19; Col 3:16). Psalm singing ought to form part of the core of congregational song.

#### (2) Classic Christian hymnody

- **History:** Hymnals contain a wide range of texts and musical forms from a broad sweep of the church's history.
- **Explicitly Christian focus:** Unlike the psalms, Christian hymnody draws upon the fullness of divine revelation in Christ contained in the New Testament.

- **Quality of psalm-like poetic expression:** Apart from the biblical psalms and canticles, the texts of classic forms of Christian hymnody have texts of the greatest theological depth and the highest artistry of poetic expression produced in the history of the church.

### (3) Modern musical forms/styles

- **Wider range of musical and emotional expression:** Congregational song that employs more recent musical styles provides the church with a wider range and palette of forms of emotional and cultural expression than one can find in older musical forms.
  - Medieval and early Reformation hymns do capture some aspects of the “tone” or “feel” of worship quite well. They are especially good at evoking a feeling of regal grandeur, stately majesty, defiant confidence in God’s sovereignty (e.g., “Holy, Holy, Holy” and “A Mighty Fortress”) and serious, contemplative meditation on the depths of human sinfulness and divine redemption (e.g., “O Sacred Head Now Wounded”).
  - Some modern musical styles and forms express other kinds of legitimate responses in very unique ways. For example, black gospel music and other kinds of more recent folk-liturgical music embody exuberant praise in a manner that has a kind of rhythmic vitality and breadth of instrumental accompaniment often lacking in the singing of older hymns and chant.
- **Redeeming modern cultural art forms:** It is important to communicate that God is at work in our own cultural contexts just as he was in earlier centuries. All liturgical music of every era reflects its historical and cultural context; thus, it is good that at least some liturgical music in our day should reflect some of the distinctive musical sounds and styles of our own cultural time and place in a redemptive way.

Becoming mono-stylistic in musical sources (e.g., only classic hymns; only praise-and-worship music; only gospel) or forms of accompaniment (e.g., piano only; guitar only) will constrain the range of a church’s emotional and liturgical palette.

## 4. FACILITATING CONGREGATIONAL PARTICIPATION

Congregational song must be singable by large groups of untrained singers. That imposes some severe constraints upon the complexity of songs for congregational use. If songs are too difficult for such a group to sing in a strong, confident, and unified way, then they should be reserved for a choir only or reserved for another context (e.g., a concert or recital).

- **Melody:** The best and most enduring songs have melodies that are memorable because they strike a fine balance between (1) interesting progression and unpredictability on the one hand, and (2) sufficient repetition and simplicity to facilitate memorization. Songs that lack (2) are usually too complex. Songs that lack (1) are excessively repetitive or uninteresting and quickly lead to boredom.
- **Range of pitch:** Liturgical music for congregational song should ordinarily not exceed an octave in vocal range and should avoid extended sections with notes too high or low for untrained singers to project comfortably.
- **Rhythm:** Songs that are most easily sung by congregations have avoid excessive complexity of rhythm
- **Some repetition and predictability in structure:** Most memorable and enduring worship songs have sufficient internal repetition to be learned with relative ease.