

THE IMPORTANCE OF CONGREGATIONAL SONG TO WORSHIP, PART I

DR. ROBERT C. MANN

Resource Library Director, Church Music Institute

Churchgoers experience various kinds of congregational singing. The range can be as contrasting as a lack of involvement, soul, and spirit to song that is inspiring, spiritually stirring, and uplifting. Congregational song can differ in participation, performance, enthusiasm, and spiritual connection.

The most important musical component of a worship service is the song of the congregation. The congregation is the church's choir, and its song conveys the spirit of the church and reflects its spiritual health. Nothing is so effective as congregational singing that is vibrant and inspiring. Congregational song deserves the very best effort of all who participate in worship, and nothing less is acceptable.

The importance of effective congregational song to sustain and energize Christian worship is sometimes overlooked. Congregations don't know what to do to make their singing better. Minimal expectations of congregational singing can produce negligible results that contribute to a diminished or unsuccessful worship experience. Positive rewards can be achieved when congregations are challenged to sing their best.

Why do we have congregational singing in worship? Is it essential to worship? Does it have a Biblical origin? What does the collective repertoire of a congregation have to say about its worship? How would congregational song in your church be evaluated by a visitor, both in *what* is sung and *how*? Does the word of Christ dwell richly in your congregation through the singing of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs?

An important survey on worship practices states 96% of American congregations include congregational singing in worship. (Mark Chavez, *Congregations in America*, Harvard University Press, 2004, Table 5.1, p.132) Obviously, the use of congregational song is widespread. Has congregational singing become so commonplace it is, at times, given little attention?

Christian worship, by definition, is the work of the people. It takes everyone participating to create worship. The congregation is the body of Christ in the world, and the essential purpose of its worship is to glorify God. Other reasons to worship are secondary. When the local congregation gathers, it becomes part of a great cloud of witnesses gathered around the world's altar singing praise to God.

We glorify God in worship because we are told in Psalm 136 that God remembers us. God's steadfast love endures forever. As a congregation, we respond to that love in gratitude and joy.

From earliest accounts in the Old Testament, God's people responded to this love in song, a canon sung between God and God's people. God's purposes are identified and communicated through song, and congregational song is at the heart of worship.

Songs in the Old Testament essentially say, "Praise God," and the congregation's response is "because God has done..." Consider this song of Moses and Miriam, found in Exodus 15:1-21. It begins, "I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea." Praise God because God freed us from Pharaoh's army. Praise God, because.

The Old Testament contains many songs sung by congregations, but the most familiar are those found in the Psalter: 150 psalms, five books of poetry *written for singing in public worship*. Consider this response to God's love found in Psalm 98:

O sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things. *Psalm 98:1 (NRSV)*

In New Testament times, early Christians chose psalms as models for congregational songs used in worship that express God's love through Christ. In Ephesians, chapter 5, we read this instruction:

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. *Ephesians 5:18-19 (NRSV)*

These Biblical statements are only a few of many that show us how essential congregational song is to worship. In addition to the Bible, clergy and theologians throughout the Church's history have stressed the role of the congregation's song. From numerous possibilities, Martin Luther, John Calvin, John and Charles Wesley will be considered.

Martin Luther (1483-1546) is a Reformer who broke from the Roman Catholic Church preaching justification by grace through faith. He concluded Christians are required to sing as a result of humanity's redemption from sin. Music was seen by Luther as a gift of God and, with words, could carry the word of God in a unique way. Luther created opportunities for the congregation to sing hymns by placing durable texts supporting justification by grace with the best tunes of the day, including newly composed tunes. Popular music of the day was not used to set Luther's texts because he thought the texts were compromised by the use of music that was seen as playing to the ignorant and secular culture. In creating the hymn for worship, Luther gave the congregation a song that has continued to the present day.

John Calvin (1509-1564), unlike Luther, was not an ordained priest and didn't have Luther's musical training. Regardless, Calvin had strong feelings about the importance of congregational song in worship. Simply, Calvin saw congregational song as a means of proclaiming the praise of God and, agreeing with Luther, thought music had special powers that needed to be controlled. In this regard, Calvin saw psalms as the only texts that should be sung in worship because their original purpose was to provide congregational song for the worship of God. To this end, Calvin ordered metrical settings of the psalms translated into French to be sung with original melodies in

unison, unaccompanied, by his congregation. This performance practice of unison singing is identical to the way hymns were sung by Luther's congregations.

John (1703-1791) and Charles (1707-1788) Wesley were highly educated Anglican clergy who were converted by deep emotional experiences and forbidden to preach in any church. So, they conducted an itinerant ministry throughout England, converting approximately 100,000 people. Along with fiery preaching, hymn singing played a pivotal role in their ministry. They published 56 hymnbooks during their ministry, and Charles wrote more than 7,000 hymns. The great contribution of the Wesleyan hymn was not only the quantity but also the personal literary style and spiritual content. Wesleyan hymns were all about saving souls, teaching theology, raising the level of devotion, and "free grace."

Many of us are familiar with instructions for congregational singing by John Wesley quoted in the United Methodist Hymnals, 1966 and 1989. What these hymnals regrettably omit is Wesley's preface, his specific reason for singing in worship:

That this part (i.e., the musical part) of Divine Worship may be the more acceptable to God, as well as the more profitable to yourself and others, be careful to observe the following directions..." (John Wesley, *Select Hymns*, 1761)

These words offer the same rationale that J. S. Bach (1685-1750) gave on the title page of his collection of 46 chorale preludes for organ, *Orgelbuchlein*, composed about 1714.

To the honor of the most high God alone, to the neighbor, that he may learn from it

Both statements identify *why we worship*: *to glorify God and teach the neighbor*. These are precisely the directions of the Great Commandment: *to love God with all our heart and mind and our neighbor as ourselves*. The statements of Bach and Wesley confirm Luther's precept of the importance of congregational song and relate its source to the Great Commandment.

To review, we have read scriptures from the Old and New Testaments identifying the reason for congregational song in worship. With representative statements from theologians through the 18th century, the purpose of worship and the importance of congregational song to historical worship have been affirmed. Now, let's identify statements on this topic from theologians to see if these viewpoints are carried into the 21st century.

The first writer to consider is Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945), eminent Lutheran theologian in Germany during WW II.

It is the voice of the church that is heard in singing together. It is not I who sing, but the church. [Singing together] must enable us to recognize our small community as a member of the great Christian church on earth and must help us willingly and joyfully to take our place in the song of the church with our singing, be it feeble or good. (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together Prayerbook of the Bible*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 5, edited by Gerhard Ludwig Muller and Albrecht Schonherr, English edition by Geoffrey B. Kelly, translated by Daniel W. Bloesch and James H. Burtness, Fortress Press, 2005, page 68)

Bonhoeffer says we don't participate in worship as individuals or as a community of disciples. We are part of the universal church gathered with other believers around the world in worship that includes congregational singing. Bonhoeffer declares the congregation should willingly (without coercion) and joyfully join in singing the church's *continuing song* with past, present, and future saints. Notice a person can't use the excuse of not being a very good singer to opt out of participating. Bonhoeffer is convinced the blessing is in the participation.

Another statement on this subject comes from Karl Barth (1886-1968), prominent theologian of the 20th century. Barth wrote 13 volumes of instructions to the church. We see again the use of the word "community" (congregation).

The Christian community sings...the community that does not sing is not the community ...it can be at best a troubled community which is not sure of its cause and of whose ministry and witness there can be no great expectation. (Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, IV, Part Three, Second Half*, English translation by G.W. Bromiley, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1961, page 867)

Barth says if a congregation does not sing or has a poor singing witness, it suggests an ineffective spirit of purpose. Such a church has lost its way spiritually along with its sense of identity and has little hope for survival. Barth goes on to say vigorous congregational singing is essential to worship. Using performers to entertain a congregation is no substitute for congregational singing. Barth says each congregation must find its **own** song, music that identifies it historically and as a group of believers. If a church sings music that is not its own song, music that is inauthentic to them, that group has also lost its way and has little hope of survival.

Finally, let's consider an opinion from a contemporary theologian that describes his perception of worship. The writer is Oliver O'Donovan (b.1945), an ordained Anglican priest and Professor of Christian Ethics and Practical Theology in the School of Divinity, New College, Edinburgh.

The conception of worship as magnified personal self-expression, a large screen projection of the "I," obstructs the formation of the community by depriving lay members of the congregation of their proper ownership of the words of prayer. If the primary material for common reflection, replacing hymns and prayers that can be learned, possessed and used by every worshipper, comes to be the spontaneous feelings of the minister and the autobiographies of selected model Christians, there is no room for the interaction of community and individual to develop. (Oliver O'Donovan, *Self, World, and Time: Ethics as Theology Volume 1*, William B. Eerdmans, 2013, pp. 64-65)

O'Donovan says if the ownership of hymns and prayers acquired as accumulated wisdom of centuries of Christians is removed from worship and replaced with newly written and unevaluated materials of an individual or small group, here's what happens:

- the person in the pew is diminished as a worshipper
- the worshipper is overwhelmed by the sentiments, moods, narratives and reactions of the individuals leading worship
- the worshipper is forced into a relationship with the agendas of the leaders instead of being free to worship God and seek out submersion in time tested truths of the faith

Worship cannot be a vehicle for exaggerated self-expression of the individual. Components of worship are Biblical wisdom, liturgies, prayers, creeds, psalms, and hymns created by Christians for thousands of years that are the possession of all believers. If these common canons of the faith are eliminated from the conscious, active use of the believers, believers are suspended from these truths, and historical connections with past and present saints are destroyed. It is more than presumptuous of worship leaders to do away with core elements and replace them with materials that haven't been vetted and authenticated beyond self-evaluation. We then miss the wisdom of the community and the chance to develop as individuals within that community.

Let's summarize what history has taught us about congregational song.

- God's story is described in Old and New Testament through song.
- Psalmists praise God because God has done marvelous things. (Psalm 98:1)
- Theologians through the 18th century concur that worship fulfills the Great Commandment. Luther, Calvin, and the Wesleys passionately and effectively introduced the use of psalms and hymns in worship. They wrote or had others create psalms and hymns for worship, music for the congregation to sing that established a precedent through the present day.
- Hymn texts conveyed Biblical truths, and tunes accompanying them supported the text's integrity.
- Dynamic, sincere, and joyful singing by congregations is required and essential to the worship experience as demanded by contemporary theologians.
- Churches without effective congregational singing show a lack of spirituality and witness.
- When the accumulated music, prayers, and liturgies offered by centuries of Christians are ignored and replaced by substitutes without proper evaluation, the worshipper is forced into a relationship with the personal agendas of those presenting worship and the worship experienced is diminished.

Part II of this essay on congregational song will discuss the use of hymns in worship, the principal congregational song.