The Practice of Biblical Worship

How Shall We then Sing? Principles for Sacred Singing
The Sound of Worship

Mid-America Conference on Preaching
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Texts: (Psalm 33:1-5; Psalm 108:1-5; Psalm 144:9)

Psalm 33:1 Rejoice in the LORD, O you righteous! For praise from the upright is beautiful. 2 Praise the LORD with the harp; Make melody to Him with an instrument of ten strings. 3 Sing to Him a new song; Play skillfully with a shout of joy. 4 For the word of the LORD is right, And all His work is done in truth. 5 He loves righteousness and justice; The earth is full of the goodness of the LORD.

Psalm 108:1 A Song. A Psalm of David. O God, my heart is steadfast; I will sing and give praise, even with my glory. 2 Awake, lute and harp! I will awaken the dawn. 3 I will praise You, O LORD, among the peoples, And I will sing praises to You among the nations. 4 For Your mercy is great above the heavens, And Your truth reaches to the clouds. 5 Be exalted, O God, above the heavens, And Your glory above all the earth;

Psalm 144:9 I will sing a new song to You, O God; On a harp of ten strings I will sing praises to You,

Introduction:

This session will focus on the importance of music in corporate worship. That is not to say that our private use of music as believers is unimportant but simply to observe that our discussion in this session will be restricted to the music that we use as a congregation in corporate worship.

As Christians we know that our worship must, at the end of the day, be shaped and governed by Scripture.

Since all discussions on music in corporate worship must eventually be lived out in the life of a particular congregation, this sessions will focus on what that looks like in the congregation I have been assigned by the Chief Shepherd to pastor. It will most certainly look and perhaps feel different from the way it may be done at another congregation or by another pastor-teacher.
However, since our congregation is also part of the larger flock of God, the corporate practices we adopt and embrace do in some small way have impact and influence on the larger body of believers with whom we are fellow members of Christ’s Church.

That is not to say that another congregation’s practices in this area must align with ours or ours with theirs in order to maintain fellowship or to share in profitable, mutual ministry. It is to say that what has been helpful to us as a congregation was gleaned, in part, from the experience and the exegesis of other like-minded ministries and we are the better for it.

One of the biblical responsibilities that those who shepherd God’s church must strive to fulfill is to help their congregations to render praise that is both biblically acceptable and personally authentic. Perhaps there is a better way to express the latter part of this responsibility. What I mean by this statement is that God’s people in every generation are called to remember God’s past works and praise Him for them. However, they are also to render a record of the praise they themselves are rendering to God for His present work among them in their day.

Thankfully, in a day when many are abandoning the rich theological heritage found in the treasure of orthodox hymnody, there are numbers of congregations committed to retaining, learning, and celebrating that treasury of praise to God.

On the other hand, many of those same congregations are doing little to add their own testimony (or that of their generation) of God’s present working for which He is to be praised. It is this latter responsibility to which I desire to direct our attention in this session.

There is an important biblical injunction that occurs numbers of times in the biblical passages related to rendering acceptable worship to God through singing/music which we must obey if we are to render worship that fully accords with the Biblical instruction God has given to His people regarding worship that pleases Him. That particular injunction is to “sing unto the Lord with a new song.”

And it is repeated at least 5x in the OT as a command for God’s people to observe.

Psalm 33:3 Sing to Him a new song; Play skillfully with a shout of joy.
Psalm 96:1 Oh, sing to the LORD a new song! Sing to the LORD, all the earth.
Psalm 98:1 A Psalm. Oh, sing to the LORD a new song! For He has done marvelous things; His right hand and His holy arm have gained Him the victory.
Psalm 149:1 Praise the LORD! Sing to the LORD a new song, And His praise in the assembly of saints.
Isaiah 42:10 Sing to the LORD a new song, And His praise from the ends of the earth, You who go down to the sea, and all that is in it, You coastslands and you inhabitants of them!

(Note – the following references are testimonies or promises that are not commands.)
Psalm 40:3 He has put a new song in my mouth -- Praise to our God; Many will see it and fear, And will trust in the LORD.
Psalm 144:9 I will sing a new song to You, O God; On a harp of ten strings I will sing praises to You,

So – what exactly does it mean to sing a “new” song to the Lord and how are we to go about fulfilling this command from God in ways that please Him by reflecting His character and conform to His Word?

Probably the best place in the OT to consider this is in the opening five verses of the 33rd psalm – a psalm written by David for use in the corporate worship of God’s people in the temple.

I. A Biblical ___________ Upon Us: (Psalm 33:1-5)
Rejoice in the LORD, O you righteous! For praise from the upright is beautiful. 2 Praise the LORD with the harp; Make melody to Him with an instrument of ten strings. 3 Sing to Him a new song; Play skillfully with a shout of joy. 4 For the word of the LORD is right, And all His work is done in truth. 5 He loves righteousness and justice; The earth is full of the goodness of the LORD.

A. The __________ to Sing Praise to God (vv 1-2)
B. The __________ for Singing Praise to God (v 1)
C. The __________ of Singing Praise to God (vv 2-3)
D. The __________ of Singing Praise to God (vv 4-5)
E. The __________ of our Song – “New” (v 3)
II. A Working ____________ to Guard Us (Eph 5:19; Col 3:16; 1 Cor 14:15)

While no definition is perfect or fully complete – but here is one that I have found to be particularly helpful in making the choices we have to make for our own congregation here at Brookside:

a. Sacred music is a biblically prescribed means by which God’s people worship the Father in Spirit and truth. Therefore, its elements must be regulated by Scripture alone.

b. The text of the hymn or song must find its source directly in Scripture, or it must clearly and accurately reflect the truth of God’s Word.

c. The lyrics of sacred music must be balanced, reflecting both doctrine and practice; and emphasizing the complete experience of the Christian life. They should be both beautiful in order and meter, and presented in a clear manner.

d. The tune or melody should properly reflect and enhance the meaning of the text. It should involve the believer’s heart engaging the spirit and emotions of the singer. A good tune motivates whole hearted singing unto the Lord.

e. The style should be sacred in its character, reflecting the holiness (separateness) of God’s character. Since the qualities of the Spirit are in direct contradiction to the desires of the flesh, so also the style of music should stand in contrast and opposition to the current, corrupt culture of this present age.

f. That being said, however, music can still reflect the wholesome elements of the cultural setting from which it was written, thereby enhancing its impact when used within that context.

Note: I am indebted to our staff evangelist, Dr. Steve Pettit, for this helpful definition.
III. A Set of Scriptural __________ to Guide Us in choosing Sacred Music

A. It should be text-based in nature in order to impart edification and instruction.

B. It should be theologically and biblically accurate in content and expression.

C. It should be doxological in intent and direction.

D. It should be authentic and accessible – of and by God’s people.

E. It should arouse proper emotions and expressions toward God.

F. It should be distinct from the fallen elements of the surrounding culture or from compromised religious worship both of which it is designed to confront.

G. It should reflect the appropriate parts of the surrounding culture that God has made available to His people for their use and enjoyment to His glory.

H. It should strive both to engage and familiarize the congregation with the past and current hymnody of the church as well as incorporating and preserving fresh and new expressions of praise and worship to God that are in line with the above guidelines.

Note: Although it is true that after time the corporate music of a congregation reflects to some degree the tastes and needs of that congregation, a biblical approach to congregational music is not ultimately determined by either the tastes and traditions of the congregation or by the preferences and orientations of the surrounding culture but rather by the careful application of the biblical principles articulated above.
IV. Clarifying ____________ for Us as a Congregation

A. Like David— we are committed to preserving and rejoicing in the rich biblical and spiritual heritage left to us by God’s people of past ages in their psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs!

For us at Brookside – this means that we don’t just tolerate ancient hymnody – we rejoice in it and are committed to learning it, singing it, and preserving it for our children.

B. Like David – we are equally committed to adding to that rich treasury our own record of fresh, new songs and hymns that come from hearts thankful to God for His present work in our lives – and that desire to leave a testimony in song to tell future generations that God was at work for us in our own generation!

For us at Brookside – this means that at times we will carefully introduce new and fresh songs that may have fresh content or fresh sound but which meet the Biblical principles we have established.

C. We are deeply committed to obey both parts of Christ’s instruction to be in the world but not to be of the world.

For us at Brookside – this means that some in our congregation who may have musical tastes that are too broadly shaped by the fallen parts of culture will need to adjust their tastes by these biblical principles and learn to embrace a more thoroughly biblical approach to sacred music such as the one we are striving for in our congregation.

This also means that some in our congregation who may have musical tastes that are too narrowly shaped by either their background or by hyper-traditionalism will also need to adjust their tastes by these biblical principles and learn to embrace a more thoroughly biblical approach to sacred music such as the one we are striving for in our congregation.
D. \textit{We are thoroughly committed to both the unity of God’s Church and to the individual priesthood of every believer including musical preference within reasonable Biblical parameters.} By no means are we implying that anything goes and all music is equally acceptable to God or appropriate for believers.

It does mean that some people and some churches will draw the line for what is acceptable in sacred music to the right of us or to the left of us. And they do so as individuals or individual congregations that answer to the Lord and not to us.

We are committed and confident that the ground our congregation has staked out on this matter is both biblical and in line with the historical record of sound, orthodox, balanced separatist churches from the Reformation forward. However, we are also committed to being charitable to others who disagree with us and we are not promoting or provoking unnecessary and unbiblical division within or without our congregation over this matter.

\textit{Note: The fact that we may choose to do a song here in a way that is in line with these principles does not mean that we endorse all or any version of that song that might be done in an unacceptable style.}

\textbf{Conclusion:}

- Music matters to God biblically. It has mattered to the Church historically. And it must matter to us personally.

- How we chose our music and set our boundaries corporately and personally is not an unimportant matter in our walk with God privately and as a church.