

A Philosophy of Worship and Music in the Church

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Worship is an activity in which all human beings engage. It is the adoration and esteem given to some one or some thing, manifested in thoughts, actions, and time given to that particular object of worship. That God should be worshiped is His Divine command to all creation, and it is thus the goal and end of all existence. Therefore, worship involves all of life; nothing said, thought, or done is out of the realm of the worship of God. Worship, for believers, is then not only an act engaged in on Sundays. It is a way of life.

Biblically, it is clear that there is no more central an expression of our salvation in Christ than participation in corporate worship. The repeated message of Exodus 3-10 is that God's people are redeemed for the purpose of gathering together in worship of Him (3:12, 18; 5:1, 3, 8; 7:16; 8:1, 20, 25-29; 9:1, 13; 10:3, 7-11, 24-27). There exist many necessary outworkings of salvation (social action, mission, etc.), but they are all both penultimate (they are never the *final* expression of one's faith as they are means to the end of worship) and temporary (they will cease when Christ comes and ushers in the New Heavens and New Earth). Corporate worship is the ultimate and lasting expression of redemption (note that even the great commission is given in the context of the worship of Christ [Matt 28.17-20]).

Corporate worship should be both God-centered and God-directed. A useful metaphor is the notion of dialogue, in that God has initiated with His people (cf. Ex. 24, esp. v. 1) and His people are to respond to Him in worship. Scripture, especially in the Psalms, defines this response well. We worship the Lord because of who He is (cf. Pss 136; 148) and because of what He does (cf. Pss 98:1; 18; 136; Rom 12:1). Because corporate worship is a liturgical walk through this dialogue, it is fitting that God's initiation be represented in the hearing of the Word read, preached, and sung. At the same time, our response to God's initiation displays the full array of human reaction, which can be summarized as a balance of both reverence and celebration (we see such a contrast in the first and second halves of Ps 95; Ps 2:11). So corporate worship should, at times, assume the posture of reverence, awe, and submission (Rev 4-5; cf. the etymology of the Greek and Hebrew words for worship). At other times, corporate worship is celebratory, elated, and exciting (2 Sam 6:14-16; Pss 146-150). Not only does corporate worship involve the full gamut of human expression, it involves every facet of the human person: body and soul (Deut 6:5; Matt 22:34-38; Rom 12:1-2), intellect and emotions.

A particular way Christ's Church, from its inception, has expressed its worship corporately is through music, particularly in congregational singing. Music is, historically and theologically, a central part of the Church's corporate worship. With regards to musical style in corporate worship, while I am an aesthetic objectivist (i.e., there exist objective criteria by which we can judge whether a piece of music is more or less beautiful than another), there is a place in the corporate setting for a wide range of musical styles. Our privileged context in 21st century America allows us to experience and be exposed to a wide range of musical cultural styles, and if at all possible these should be reflected in the Church's corporate worship (within certain bounds of reason and intelligibility). A proper expression, then, of the American metropolitan Church's worship is *unity* (Eph 4; John 17:20-26) *in diversity*. This diversity is one of peoples and cultures (Gal 3:28-29; Col 3:11), musical instruments (Ps 150:3-5), and types of songs (Col 3:16).

In congregational singing, the text and the music should play complementary roles, with the text always as the final determining point. In other words, the music is always subservient to the text in congregational song, because a necessary condition of worship is intelligibility (John 4:24; 1 Cor 14, esp. vv. 23-40). This does not exclude the music from being complex, so long as it complements, frames, and enriches the text it surrounds. The text of a given song should be theologically accurate, God-centered, gospel-informed, and coherent and logical in thought. This does not mean that a song cannot be simple; this does mean that a song cannot be simplistic. All of these combine to inform the criteria for what make a "good" congregational song: sing-ability (a melodic line which is not overly difficult to sing), musical complementarity (accompaniment which enhances rather than distracts from the text), theological precision (a message presenting doctrine consonant with the Scripture's), and logical coherence (a set of words which make sense and present a unified message). Church music, in general, should be executed with the utmost quality and integrity. This involves skillful playing (Ps 33:3b), creativity and freshness (Ps 33:3a; 40:3a; 96:1; 149:1b), and stylistic diversity (Ps 150). Each church's situation and resources are different, and therefore these goals are to be understood within the context of any given situation.