

The Songs we sing in worship – does the Bible lay down some principles?

Much is said about the regulative principle for worship, with which all who call themselves serious and faithful students of the Word of God must agree. As someone puts it, *“We must worship the only God only as He commanded!”* That is in essence the Second Commandment.

There is a principle regarding worship singing called the “floodgate” principle. In the strictest sense of the word this argument goes like this: If we do not sing Psalms only, we open the floodgate to all forms of music that might not answer the principles of regulative principle.

Let us earnestly look at the Word of God and answer some serious questions about what we sing in worship. To answer these questions we need to understand that the bridge between the Old and New Testament worship is Jesus Christ. He was the reason for worship in the Old Testament and He is the reason for worship in the New Testament. The Old is fulfilled in the New.

When we understand that the Old was the shadow of what was promised for the New, and that the New is the fulfilment of what was promised in the Old, we must see the connection between the Old and the New. And with this connection it becomes very important for us to understand that the very same principles for worship which figured in the Old are also figuring in the New. We cannot look at the Old and say there is nothing said about worship for us in the Old Testament that applies to us who live after the sacrificial death and atonement of Jesus Christ. The Bible is a unity, but indeed there is development from the shadow to the real. So what is said about worship in the Old applies for worship in the New with the difference that we apply the same principles but now in the light of its fulfilment in the Jesus Christ.

We can worship God only as He instituted

This is the first and important principle. Now, we don’t have priests and Levites and singers and gate keepers, and of course, a temple anymore. All of these were fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

But having said that, does it mean that a Chapter like 1 Chronicles 25 has nothing to say for the church of Jesus Christ in our day? No, that’s where so many make a mistake. And where this mistake is made, we must agree that the “floodgate” principle is indeed something we must keep in mind. If we do not understand the principles correctly, we can apply it incorrectly – and that’s when we open the floodgates. And I am afraid, in most churches referring to themselves as “contemporary”, the floodgates have been opened.

Henry Grunwald in Time magazine of 30 March 1992 writes:

“The mainstream churches have tried in various ways to adapt themselves to a secular age... The major Protestant denominations also increasingly emphasized social activism and tried to dilute dogma to accommodate 20th century rationality and diversity. But none of these reforms is arresting the sharp decline of the mainstream churches. Why not? The answer seems to be that while orthodox religion can be stifling, liberal religion can be empty. Many people seem to want a faith that is rigorous and demanding.”

David, the inspired musician of God

I disagree with the translation of the first verse of 1Chron 25 as if David worked together with the commanders of the army. Indeed, the word used for leaders here may in some cases even refer to princes, but interestingly four uses have to do with the work of the Levites in the tent of meeting (Num 4:23; 8:24).

Count all the men from thirty to fifty years of age who come to serve in the work at the Tent of Meeting. (Numbers 4:23, 8:24)

From amongst these men David appointed the rulers, or leaders or princes.

David, as a man of enormous musical and poetical talent worked together with these men ordained by God to regulate the worship. No doubt service for the LORD is seen as involving total dedication and careful regimentation, and since God is LORD of hosts and also a God of order and not disorder, enthroned between the cherubim housed inside the tent of meeting, work associated with the tent may be considered spiritual war. Hence, these leaders were also seen as commanders of war.

But these people were not just any people and the ministry of their task was not just left to them to decide how and what they should do.

Singing is a form of Word proclamation

When verse 1 refers to the singers who had to prophecy, the meaning is clear from the rest of the Scriptures: singing is proclamation of God's will. And the emphasis does not lie on the individual, or even the congregation: it is focused on God and his mighty deeds of creation, mercy, love, righteousness, judgment and greatness.

This is the principle we have to put before the floodgate: singing is proclamation, it is Gospel in song. It therefore must meet the principle of Biblical theology. Singing is dogma sung. It is not a sentimental reference to my need, saturated in individualism as we hear today. If what is sung cannot stand up against the doctrine and dogma of the Bible, it is nothing less than idolatry.

It is therefore safe to say that the church have to sing Psalms. We are negligent in this matter. Psalms are the purest example of praise. Unfortunately we don't hear it much sung today, at least not in the Presbyterian Church, apart from a few which broadly refer to the Psalms. Perhaps we need a fresh translation of the Psalter for singing in worship.

But Psalms are not the only to be sung. As we hear from Ephesians 5 there are also hymns and spiritual songs. There are two major words used in the Old Testament for songs. The one of course is a psalm and in general it refers to the collection of what is contained in the Bible as the book of Psalms. There is another word also which by contrast is not confined to the Psalter and within the Psalter itself is used both as a title and content.

One such a reference is found in 1Chron 15:16:

David told the leaders of the Levites to appoint their brothers as singers to sing joyful songs, accompanied by musical instruments: lyres, harps and cymbals. (1 Chronicles 15:16)

Another example of singing that was not necessarily limited to Psalms is found in 2Chron 29:27

Hezekiah gave the order to sacrifice the burnt offering on the altar. As the offering began, singing to the Lord began also, accompanied by trumpets and the instruments of David king of Israel. (2 Chronicles 29:27)

To guard the floodgate is to have songs based on passages from the Scriptures. Some call them paraphrases. We are in need of more of these.

Singing is service to God

The word used in 1Chron 25 for service is known through the Scriptures as service in the presence of God. The Greek word here is what we know in English as *liturgy*. The main principle here is even the musicians and

singers performed a very important ministry to compliment all the elements known as worship of God. They could not do it if they wished. Even in this regard we read:

These are the men David put in charge of the music in the house of the Lord after the ark came to rest there. They performed their duties according to the regulations laid down for them. (1 Chronicles 6:31-32)

Singing and music is not something standing on its own feet within worship. The contemporary idea that a Worship Team does the singing, while the minister preaches the Word, as if the ministry of the Word and prayers are not part of the worship of the congregation, is foreign to the Bible and early church history. Song leaders are part of the sum of what happens during worship and should operate under the leadership of the minister who is called to lead the congregation in worship.

Singing and music is part and parcel of worship with the proclamation of the written Word in the centre. Singing is a way to help God's people respond to the expounded Word. Let's apply this principle: because the minister is called to faithfully preach the Word of God and to faithfully administer the sacraments, the music must equally be a faithful expression of Biblical worship and doctrine. Because Bible exposition is important, singing flowing from it is equally important: Both must meet principles laid down in the Word of God: both are elements of the Worship of the living God.

It speaks for itself then, that music and singing was never meant to make those who attend feel welcome, or to tickle their heart strings so they may be emotionally hyped up. Music is a ministry ordained by God to assist His people to sing His praises.

Musicians in worship are skilful people

Once again 1Chron 25:1 helps us. And this is where the contemporary music in some churches fails dismally. These days every man and his dog are welcome to write, compose and play music. Never or hardly ever is the musical quality, or the theological and doctrinal correctness approved. Some lyrics cannot stand the test of the Scriptures. The melodies are not always exemplary of skilled composers. The language sometimes is hopeless and in more than one instance the repetition of basic chords and very shallow words make up what is presented as worship. This is not good enough. Listen to this verse:

Kenaniah the head Levite was in charge of the singing; that was his responsibility because he was skilful at it. (1 Chronicles 15:22)

Are we not supposed to give to God only our best? Is it good enough to sing a song because someone felt it was some revelation to him or her? Even our Rejoice! Hymn-book does not always meet the standard, but let's at least look at the musical, poetical and linguistic quality of the majority of the hymns. When it comes to spiritual songs, which in general today are understood as choruses, about all these principles fly out the door.

Spiritual songs in the contemporary context have in some ways become a sort of a "spiritual hit parade": there is the expectation to constantly have something new. And before the new has really become part of the repertoire, there is a yearning for a new "hit". The result is that many church-goers mumble along, because they can't really sing it and fully interpret the words. In some cases this fact is not recognised, because the "worship team" with the microphones and the amplified instruments cannot hear the rest of the church sing!

Nehemiah remarked:

For long ago, in the days of David and Asaph, there had been directors for the singers and for the songs of praise and thanksgiving to God. (Nehemiah 12:46)

Suitable instruments

The question is, “What is a suitable instrument?” It is indeed not an easy question to answer. But it seems to me that the Bible gives us some direction. Only certain instruments were used in public worship. Over and over again we read of harps, stringed instruments, cymbals, trumpets, flutes, lutes, and tambourines.

Heman and Jeduthun were responsible for the sounding of the trumpets and cymbals and for the playing of the other instruments for sacred song. The sons of Jeduthun were stationed at the gate. (1 Chronicles 16:42)

The phrase in Ephesians 5 “to make melody” refers to songs with melody and harmony. And this principle was understood by the church for many a century, until the arrival of a certain style accompanied by certain instruments where rhythm began to override melody and harmony.

The commonality between the instruments listed for worship in the OT is its sweetness of sound, with perhaps the tambourine the exception. In some instances the word for tambourine may also be understood as the clinging of little bells. Fact is we do not really know what the tambourine or even the cymbal of the Bible actually looked like.

We of course remember the calming influence of the harp music on a disturbed Saul. The lyre was something similar, while flute and trumpets are known for its ability to lead the melody. And according to the number of people set apart for this ministry, we deduce that it was quite a large group of flutists, harpists and trumpeters.

But the interesting exclusion from this list is the drum. In fact nowhere in the Scripture do we read of drums. Not even with the destruction of Jericho was it mentioned. Why then does it play such an important part in contemporary worship?

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*“The idea that certain rhythm patterns or sequences serve as conduits for spiritual energies, linking individual human consciousness with the gods, is basic to traditional African religions, and to African-derived religions throughout the Americas. And whether we’re speaking historically or musicologically, the fundamental riffs, licks, bass figures, and drum rhythms that make rock and roll can ultimately be traced back to African music of a primarily spiritual or ritual nature. In a sense, rock and roll is a kind of Ævoodoo’ . . .” (Palmer, *Rock & Roll, An Unruly History*, p. 53)*

It makes one wonder about what Moses heard when he came down from the mountain. He thought there was war going on, but he discovered the real reason for what sounded like war:

It is not the sound of victory, it is not the sound of defeat; it is the sound of singing that I hear. (Exodus 32:18)

The drum was a very common instrument in Egypt and the lands surrounding Israel. Now freshly arrived out of Egypt, they worshipped the gods of Egypt and no doubt they used the instruments of the Egyptians.

Did the Lord forget to include the drum as instrument for worship, or is there perhaps another reason?

Conclusion

To conclude, let’s lay down the principles:

1. The regulative principle: we need to worship the correct God the correct way. Anything else is idolatry.

2. Music is Word proclamation; it must be faithful to the message of the Bible. Anything else is idolatry. It must include psalm-singing, but I argue, not exclusively. We need more Scripture paraphrases. Spiritual songs (choruses) may be simple, but it must still be true to doctrine.
3. Music and song is a ministry in the sanctuary focussed upon the God of hosts. If it is directed at the worshipper in the first instance, it is nothing short of idolatry.
4. Music and song in the church must meet high standards. It is the domain of skilled people who is gifted to write, compose and accompany God's people to respond to his grace and exalt his Name. However, the standard must always keep in mind that it is congregational singing. High standard doesn't mean unsingable melodies.
5. There is a difference between solo songs and congregational singing. Not any good-sounding song is good for congregational singing.
6. Songs must be reflect theology and must also be of high linguistic standard.