

A THIRD TEN WAYS TO IMPROVE YOUR CHURCH'S WORSHIP SERVICE

Almost everyone I ask believes that worship at his or her church needs improvement. Usually the changes they have in mind relate more to the songs that are sung and the style of music preferred than anything else.

As the title indicates, this is the third in a series of articles on ways to improve your church's worship service, and in this article I write about reforming worship music according to the biblical phrase, "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs." For years I quoted, and yet overlooked, some of the most obvious teaching in Scripture about what we're to sing in worship. And from my perspective as one who preaches and teaches in dozens of churches each year, most congregations would be blessed by a fresh look at this and other worship texts.

In addition, I offer some thoughts about "special music," applause, using an overhead projector or PowerPoint vs. hymnals, and more. May it please the Lord to use this article to enhance the worship of Himself and the edification of His people in many local churches.

1. Sing psalms

Stunned. That's how I'd describe my sudden awareness of how I had neglected a clear scriptural command. I'd been involved in the leadership of worship services for more than fifteen years before I realized what many Christians have long understood and entire denominational traditions have known for centuries: God commands us to sing psalms.

The book of Psalms was inspired by God to be the songbook of His people. By giving the Psalms for this purpose it's as if He were saying, "I want you to praise Me; and here are the words I want you to sing." And not only does our New Testament say nothing to indicate that God's New Covenant people do not need to sing the Psalms, it gives us two commands to sing "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs" (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16). Although I had known the words of this triad by memory for decades, I'd never consciously obeyed it by intentionally leading God's people to sing psalms in worship. Now I can hardly plan a worship service without considering how we can sing at least one psalm.

One way to begin psalm singing is to examine the songs your church sings now and identify those that are substantially based upon the words of a psalm. For many this would involve simply looking at the Scripture index in the back of your church's songbook. Then make a conscious effort to sing these psalm-based songs often, reminding the congregation of the commands to sing psalms. *Another way* is to use Isaac Watts' collection of metrical psalms (which can be found in book form or on the internet). These are in the public domain, and so may be used as slides or bulletin

inserts. Almost all of them are in common meter, long meter, or short meter, which means that anyone (even those who can't read music) can match the texts to tunes people already know. For instance, all those in common meter can be sung to nearly any tune in common meter, such as the tune to *Amazing Grace*. You should also be aware that Watts—rightly, in my opinion—interpreted the Psalms in light of Christ and the New Testament and reflects this in his Psalter. A *third option* is to use the resources of publishers like Crown & Covenant who specialize in psalm singing materials. *Finally*, encourage talented people within your church to compose new tunes for the Psalms.

In all cases, when introducing psalm singing into your church's worship, call attention to the texts that instruct us to sing psalms and note how this new music represents a deliberate attempt to obey God. And when you do sing psalms, frequently point out not just the name of the piece, like "As the Deer," but that this is a psalm.

While we can all testify to the blessings we've received by singing other songs, doesn't it make sense that singing the very words God has inspired for us to sing will nourish our souls in a way that nothing else can?

2. If you consider your church's worship style to be historic, make sure you sing hymns and spiritual songs.

By "historic" I'm referring to the growing number of churches who have rediscovered the biblical practice of singing from the book of Psalms. There is a position known as "Exclusive Psalmody" (believing that the Bible limits our worship music to psalms exclusively) with which I respectfully differ. But I'm not speaking here to those who hold this view. I am addressing instead those who have recovered the joy and beauty of psalm singing, yet have overreacted by singing them to the virtual neglect of the hymns and spiritual songs also commanded by Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16. It's just as wrong to abandon the hymns and spiritual songs the Scripture instructs to sing as it is to ignore psalms.

By the way, in your obedient return to psalm singing, don't let your worship service become anachronistic. Church *should* be different from the world, and sometimes this will include singing older tunes that believers have sung for centuries. As I've already noted, the old metrical psalms (such as those by Watts) can be sung to contemporary tunes (provided, of course, that the tune appropriately conveys the spirit of the text). You can even compose new tunes. But it's one thing to sound irrelevant to the world; it's another to sound that way to mature believers.

3. If you consider your church's worship style to be traditional, make sure you sing psalms and spiritual songs.

Admittedly, defining "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs" is like trying to define love. Check twenty commentaries and you'll find twenty different explanations of what these terms mean. Some (the Exclusive Psalmody position) believe this entire phrase refers to Old Testament psalms, while others take none of it to refer to biblical psalms. Many

charismatic Christians believe spiritual songs are something like singing in tongues. Some scholars think all three terms mean basically the same thing, namely songs with religious content as opposed to secular songs.

While exegetical debate about the meaning of Scripture is always important, sooner or later the time arrives to take action and to decide on the music for Sunday. Leaders committed to a biblical basis for what they sing in worship must choose a defensible position on the meaning of these terms and select specific songs accordingly.

To come to a proper interpretation of the phrase we must ask, "What did the Apostle Paul understand 'psalms and hymns and spiritual songs' to mean when he was inspired by God to write these words?" Or to put it another way, "What kind of songs did Paul lead people to sing when he planted churches?" Obviously, he did not think in terms of the very same songs sung in churches today, for except for the Psalms, our worship music was written hundreds of years after Paul died. Still, to be biblical in our worship our songs must conform to the standard of "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs."

I take the phrase "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs" to mean (1) Old Testament *psalms*; (2) *hymns* to or about God; and (3) *songs* about *spiritual* matters, that is, about Christian living and experience. *Psalms* may be sung (or even chanted) word-for-word from the Bible, or they may be put into metrical form for easier singing in one's mother tongue.¹ *Hymns* and *spiritual songs* may be taken directly or adapted from the Bible, but usually are original compositions penned by uninspired writers. Neither the length nor age of the song, nor the style of its tune determines whether it is a hymn or spiritual song. Both hymns and spiritual songs may as short as a couple of lines of text, or many stanzas long. In addition to our older ones, brand new hymns with contemporary-sounding melodies are being written every day, and each Sunday Christians sing spiritual songs that are many centuries old, not just those recently composed. Both hymns and spiritual songs may be designed primarily to express the convictions of the Christian mind or the feelings of the believer's heart, or a combination of the two. Generally speaking, however, hymns are directed Godward; spiritual songs are directed manward (teaching or admonishing either ourselves or others).

So sometimes it's hard to distinguish between a hymn and a spiritual song, because they frequently share many of the same qualities. In fact, good hymns and spiritual songs will often have much in common with psalms, too. That's because many of the Old Testament psalms are not only to or about God (which is the essence of a hymn), but also about the experience of the believer (which is the distinctive of a spiritual song), thus incorporating the distinguishing marks of a psalm, a hymn, and a spiritual song all in one.

In summary, it is the *content* of a song which determines whether it passes the biblical standard for use in worship as a psalm, hymn, or spiritual song. And in all cases, if the lyrics are not taken from Scripture, they must be consistent with the teaching of Scripture. That doesn't mean we should sing truthful words if the melody is bad, and we

certainly should not sing a song with poorly written or theologically weak lyrics just because everyone likes the tune.

I intend to continue my long study of this matter, and am open to instruction by others. But whatever you understand these terms "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs" to mean—and they do mean *something*—clearly all three should be sung in the worship of God. Therefore, if your church stands primarily in the tradition of hymn singing, don't neglect the command to sing psalms and spiritual songs.

Since I wrote about psalm singing earlier, I'll focus here on spiritual songs. Some people seem to believe that spiritual songs are to be equated with contemporary music, and to them anything new is suspect. But remember that the Apostle Paul himself sang spiritual songs, and he commanded the churches to do so as well. Believers ever since have sung about the Christian life, so spiritual songs have been around for more than two thousand years. However, it's almost certain that *all* the spiritual songs Paul sang would have been new in his day. So from the church's beginning Christians have worshiped with spiritual songs that are contemporary.

Some of the frequent objections to (like some of the recurrent arguments *for*) singing spiritual songs sound as though they're based more on preference than anything else. Too short to be substantial? Well, the *Doxology* is pretty short. And when I read some of what appear to be songs in Revelation (for example, 4:11; 5:9-10; 5:12; 5:13), their brevity strikes me as very similar to that of many contemporary choruses. If such short songs are worthy of being sung in Heaven, who could argue with singing them in church? In fact, one of the most appealing features of many of the best choruses is that they are taken right from the text of Holy Scripture. Too repetitive? Some of the psalms have a great deal of repetition. Don't forget that the Lord inspired Psalm 136 to repeat, "For His lovingkindness is everlasting" twenty-six times. And if God has been pleased to hear the four creatures around the throne praise Him with the same sentence day and night without ceasing (see Revelation 4:8) then we cannot say that repetition alone makes a song unacceptable to the Lord.

So the debate almost always returns to one about musical *style*. Traditional songs are customarily played to older melodies, and newer compositions tend to reflect more contemporary music. And each of us leans toward one or another of these in our preferences. But if the text is well-written and true to Scripture, and if the music is a good marriage to the text, and the whole is led and played with proper reverence, we should all be willing to sing it regardless of when it was composed.

It's true that much contemporary worship music is shallow in every respect. But it's also true that many older songs are trite and antiquated, with no enduring qualities at all. Neither the older nor the newer should be sung in these cases. And sometimes too much contemporary music is forced upon people by insensitive leaders more interested in relevance than faithfulness or unity. However, we must realize that God has raised up faithful composers and songwriters in every generation, just as He has raised up faithful preachers and theologians in every generation. And as theologians and preachers work

to communicate God's truth in ways that their contemporaries can understand, so our Godly composers and songwriters help us express His unchanging truth in music for our own time. We should not expect to sing only the songs of past generations of Christians any more than we should expect to read only the works of past generations of preachers and theologians. We ought to cherish and preserve the best of their work and add to it with our own.

The Scriptures repeatedly teach us to sing "a new song" (Psalm 33:3; 96:1-2; 98:1; 149:1; Isaiah 42:10) to the Lord. It's also expected that "One generation shall praise Your works to another" (Psalm 145:4). Among the practical results of obedience to these commands should be that as each succeeding generation of Christians sings a new song to the Lord each will contribute its own expressions of devotion to God and increase the church's repertoire of praise.

4. If you consider your church's worship style to be contemporary or blended, make sure you sing psalms and hymns.

Someone has said that when renewal comes to traditional churches they begin singing some contemporary music, and when renewal comes to contemporary churches they begin singing some traditional hymns. I think there's some truth in this, but we should also add that when either of these two experience renewal they will also begin singing psalms. In any case, reforming the worship music of a church requires intentionality and effort. Be explicit about how the changes are an attempt to obey the Scriptures. God's people generally respond well to God's truth when presented in the right spirit.

I recognize that most contemporary churches will likely sing psalms to contemporary tunes. And while some of the old hymn texts can be adapted to newly composed music, don't abandon all the traditional tunes. Some of them simply cannot be excelled. And to those who think standard church music has no appeal to large numbers of people, consider the nearly universal affection for traditional music at Christmas. People in their teens and twenties start singing irresistible old songs by Bing Crosby, Gene Autry, Danny Kaye, as well as long-established Christmas carols. Beloved patriotic music gets the same kind of perennial, widespread response. On occasions like these, even the unchurched recognize that there is a place for timeless, multi-generational music. How much more should the church value its own time-honored musical treasures? How much more should the body of Christ seek to sing music that unites it rather than divides it? And while the day may have come for some outdated pieces to be retired, the best of traditional worship music will endure forever.

More importantly, there can be great benefit in knowing you are singing the same words and melodies that God's people have sung for generations. A sense of the church's endurance and continuity through time is fostered by praising God with the same lyrics and tunes used by our parents, grandparents, or spiritual heroes from long ago.

Furthermore, while we don't want to raise a generation of Christians completely out of touch with its own culture, neither do we want a generation of believers who does not

know "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," or "Holy, Holy, Holy," or "And Can It Be." We will impoverish the next generation of the church if we leave it a body of worship music that is almost all for the moment and give it none for the ages. We should impart to our successors the best of what our spiritual forefathers entrusted to us, as well as pass along the best of our own time.

5. Use slides, but don't lose your hymnal.

I was the guest preacher in a church that utilizes PowerPoint to display the lyrics to all the songs. The pastor told me of an incident with his children that changed his perspective about having abandoned the use of hymnals. While on vacation his family attended the church in which he'd been raised. At the beginning of the service the worship leader announced a hymn number and my friend and his wife reached for their respective hymnals. Between them sat their two children, approximately ages five and seven, watching. Recognizing that these books weren't Bibles they pointed to their dad's hymnal and asked sincerely, "What's that?"

"It made me realize," said my friend, "that I don't want to raise children who don't know what a hymnal is."

Using electronic means to display the words of songs has its benefits and conveniences, as I've personally experienced in many places as well as in the church where I'm a member. Still, there's a lot to be said for keeping hymnals in use (as our church also does). A songbook teaches the congregation knowledge about music and church history they wouldn't otherwise learn. I can't read music, but by observation and experience through years of singing from a hymnal (which has the music along with the lyrics, unlike mere words on a screen or handout) I have learned a bit about following a tune up and down, when to hold a note, etc. And when I read at the bottom of the page that the words to the song were written by, say, William Cowper, or another Christian hero, my knowledge of the life out of which the words were forged deepens my experience of singing them. (If a hymnal is unworkable in your situation, of course it's still possible to put the songwriter's name on the screen or the handout with the lyrics.)

We're becoming increasingly illiterate as a society. Retaining the hymnal says something about the value Christians place on books. Using a songbook in worship can also have an influence on the Christian growth and experience of our people outside the walls of the church building, for it's much more likely that our church members will use a hymnal in their family or personal worship if they sometimes use it in congregational worship.

6. Consider congregational prayer in the worship service.

Many churches have a time of congregational prayer sometime during the week, why not on Sunday morning? When the church I pastored in the suburbs of Chicago did this, it often proved to be the best prayer time of the week. Some of our Godliest men and women who were unable to attend on Wednesday night were present on Sundays to

add their spiritual maturity to our prayers. Besides much higher attendance, people were fresher—physically and spiritually—than during the midweek prayer meeting.

Each church setting will have its own logistical challenges for congregational prayer, some of which can be solved by the strategic placement of a few microphones. It may help to ask specific individuals in advance to contribute their prayers in case no one else begins to pray. You may also want to invite people to assume a posture of humility before the Lord—kneeling if possible, standing if not.

A middle ground between having just one person lead in public prayer (though I'm not endorsing the total abandonment of this) and asking all who are willing to pray is to solicit a succession of people to lead in public prayer from either the platform or a microphone located elsewhere in the room.

No one doubts that congregational prayer is a part of healthy church life (see Acts 2:42). And when you think about it, the main difference between the congregational prayer on Sunday morning that I'm advocating and congregational prayer during a midweek meeting is the size of the group. Most midweek prayer meetings also include singing and teaching from God's Word, as in Lord's Day worship. All that remains to be done to accommodate Sunday morning congregational prayer is to arrange it in such a way that everyone can hear.

7. Don't have solo or choral music every Sunday.

Most worship leaders know what it's like to get a Sunday morning phone call with the message that the soloist for that morning won't be able to sing, or to discover shortly before the service that so many choir members are absent that all the preparations for the choral piece are destroyed. Often this results in the music minister or another soloist rushing to their box of accompaniment tracks to find a factory-made backup for singing, "Fill My Cup, Lord," or another old standard for the umpteenth time.

While I believe a biblical case can be made for the singing of a solo or for choral music in worship, unlike congregational singing they are not necessary. The biblical priority clearly rests on congregational singing. Don't feel the pressure to have some sort of "special music" every Sunday. In fact, have it only when there's a specific purpose for the particular song. Otherwise the people may begin to view solo or choral music more as sanctified entertainment and a time where music is sung primarily because there's a customary slot for it in the worship service rather than because it has a definite ministry function that Sunday.

8. Use silence strategically.

Silence is increasingly rare in our culture. Turn the key in the car and the radio jumps to life with the engine and it stays on until the motor is turned off. Restaurants often surround our dining experience with both music and televisions blaring. Outside, cars whoosh by and planes roar overhead. Indoors, computers drone in the background.

Mobile phones disrupt us in all places. It's common to go from the bed in the morning to the bed at night without a single break in the cacophony of manmade sounds in our ears, and with never a moment to reflect on anything we've heard. We rarely stop, and we're rarely in silence.

If there's one place for intentional silence it's in the worship of the Lord. Pausing to reflect, to enjoy God, to feel the weight of truth, to focus on the presence of the Lord—these are reasons for a meditative silence before God, for the "selah" (the Hebrew word for "pause") enjoined dozens of times in the Psalms.

Plan for silence in worship. There are two types of silence in worship—planned and unplanned. Unplanned silences are usually the awkward moments when the worship leader forgets what's next, or when there's a problem with the sound system, or in general when something goes wrong. Planned silences are those intentional interludes between worship activities for purposes of enhancing worship, for retaining the resonance of a profound moment.

But because people typically assume that silence in church is unplanned (similar to "dead air" on radio or TV), teach your congregation about the importance and beauty of silence in worship. Show them where silence "before the Lord" is commanded in Scripture (Habakkuk 2:20; Zephaniah 1:7; Zechariah 2:13). And then indicate when it will occur in the worship service so they can anticipate it.

So when should silence occur in the service? In an earlier article in this series I spoke of announcing a time of silence at the beginning of worship—after people have had their time of informal fellowship, and after you have announced that worship is about to begin. But you might also find silence to be a powerful way to end the service. I know of several churches where the congregation remains seated after the closing prayer. Then following a full minute of silence music is played to signal the dismissal. When preaching, I conclude my sermon with prayer, and at the end of the prayer I often ask the people to remain silent, considering the truth of the message and how the Lord would have them apply it. Perhaps another place is better for a holy hush in your church's order of service, but whenever it is, clearly there is a time in public worship when it's appropriate to "Be silent before the Lord God!" (Zephaniah 1:7).

9. Allow applause only rarely and spontaneously, not routinely.

Frequent applause during the worship of God has become commonplace in evangelical churches. Some approve it on the basis that applause expresses appreciation for the ministry received through the music and acknowledges the preparation put into the presentation. It's assumed that applause encourages the recipient, and besides, Psalm 47:1 mentions clapping in the context of worship ("O clap your hands, all peoples; shout to God with the voice of joy").

However, wouldn't these same arguments apply to applauding after the sermon? While such a thought would rightly shock some people, nevertheless doesn't the preacher

need encouragement as much as a singer or musician? Shouldn't his preparation be recognized as well? What about applauding after a prayer that ministers to us? Horrors!

Furthermore, what happens if you don't applaud *every* singer or musician? Doesn't that discourage those who compare the silent reception to their ministry with the enthusiastic applause given to someone else? And then if everyone receives applause, doesn't it devolve into a meaningless obligation?

"We're giving thanks to the *Lord* for ministering through the singer or musician!", some will say. Again, why not then give thanks to the Lord by applause after the preacher or the prayer? But even when the applause is intended for the Lord, how does the singer or musician discern that you are not clapping for him or her? If you've never been on the platform and heard applause after your role in public worship, I can testify that it puts you in a very awkward position. Do you acknowledge the applause, or do you ignore it? If you acknowledge it, aren't you calling attention to yourself instead of the Lord? Are you receiving thanks intended for Him? If you ignore it, won't that appear insensitive to those who mean to show appreciation or to encourage you by their applause?

Some endorse frequent applause, saying, "In our culture today clapping is the most common and acceptable way for a group of people to express their appreciation simultaneously. So there's nothing wrong when the church wants to applaud as a way of saying thanks to those singing or playing [even preaching or praying?] on the platform." True, applause is the normal expression of collective gratitude in our culture, but it's also closely associated with performance and entertainment. And when every activity in Sunday morning worship is applauded in the same way as in Saturday night entertainment, it becomes much harder to suppress an atmosphere of entertainment in worship, and harder for worship leaders to keep a performance mentality from gradually creeping onto the platform. What's more, the Bible gives the church another way of expressing appreciation to God and others in worship, a verbal "Amen."

In the majority of the dozen or so Scripture references to applause, the clapping is done not an act of celebration, but as an act of derision (as in Lamentations 2:15). And yet there may be times in worship when spontaneous applause is irrepressible and appropriate. For example, in the church where I'm a member, if the pastor preached on "The Lord will provide" and announced at the end of the sermon that an anonymous gift of several million dollars had been given to the church enabling us to buy our own building, you can be sure there would be an eruption of Godward applause and other impulsive expressions of joy and celebration. Beyond such unusual times, however, it's more appropriate to express appreciation, agreement, and encouragement verbally, as with the biblical "Amen."

What if clapping is already customary in your church? Express your understanding of the good intentions behind much of the applause, and your affirmation of the Christian desire to express gratitude and encouragement. Then explain the difficulties and dangers associated with applause in worship as well as the biblical alternative. Kindly ask them to stop applauding and to begin saying, "Amen." Mention that some will surely

forget and a smattering of applause will occasionally begin, but ask in advance that the rest not join in. Almost no one can applaud week after week when no one else does. If you discover that you have a few such people in your church, you can speak with them privately. Soon the applause will fade away.

10. Allow only believers to lead believers in worship.

Since only those who have the Holy Spirit (that is, believers in Christ) *can* "worship in spirit and truth" (John 4:24), only believers should be given leadership roles in worship. How can an unbeliever lead a believer to "worship in spirit and truth" when an unbeliever is incapable of such worship? Regardless of whether the leadership role is perceived as great or small, no unrepentant enemy of God—no matter how likable or how talented—should lead in the worship of God. The one who cannot truly worship cannot lead in true worship.

While this obviously debars unconverted people from singing a solo or leading the congregational singing, this standard also prohibits unbelievers from singing in the choir or playing an instrument, for these are worship leadership roles too, even if secondary to other positions. Better to do without that voice, that instrument, or that skill, even if it means having someone less competent or having to sing without accompaniment than to give the impression that God's people cannot worship Him well without the help of unbelievers. And should it come to this, it's even better to risk that the person will be offended and stop coming to church than to offend God by giving worship leadership positions to the unconverted.

The more difficult application of this in many churches will be with the children's choir or other involvement in worship by young, unconverted children. Because they are so cute and because the parents love to see them singing ("performing" might be a more appropriate word), this can be an emotional issue. Remember, however, that our worship is the worship of *God*, and anything that distracts us from God has no place in worship. One way to accommodate the children's role without compromising your conscience or disrupting the congregation's focus on God is to have the children sing at the very beginning, before worship actually starts. This arrangement also allows them to scatter to their seats afterwards with less disturbance than if done during the worship service. By the way, when introducing a presentation by children, to counteract people's tendency to applaud anything done by little ones, you might mention in advance that while we do want to affirm them when they've finished, we want to do so verbally rather than by applauding. The place for children to display their skills or learning is not during the time we're to focus exclusively on the Lord.

¹ Once we rearrange the text into a metrical format we are no longer singing the text of that particular translation exactly. But we do this to make the text fit into the musical structures most of us are familiar with, in other words, to make a psalm more "singable" in our own language. For example, most of us are accustomed to learning and singing lyrics that rhyme at the end of every line or two. But once we translate the Psalms into our mother tongue, and then rearrange the words in a way that conforms with

our lyrical styles, some aspects of the Hebrew poetry are lost to us. As a comparison, take any short rhyming poem or the words of any popular song you know, translate them into another language, and you can see how much of the poetic structure is lost. God commands us to sing the Psalms, and unless we learn Hebrew (and we do not think God expects that of everyone) we must sing them in our own language. (Remember that when Paul taught the Gentiles to sing "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs" he would have taught them from the Septuagint, that is, from the Greek translation of the Old Testament, so that they would have been singing in a language known to them, not Hebrew.) To sing the Psalms in our own tongue we must find some way to make them singable, and most choose to do that by putting the words in a metrical form, as Isaac Watts did. But others prefer to learn some form of chant or to compose their own tunes for the Psalms so that they can sing them as they appear in their Bible. In whatever way you choose to sing the Psalms, *do choose* to sing the Psalms.

If you'd like to suggest additional ways to improve worship for Don to consider for a possible future article, please email him at Don@BiblicalSpirituality.org

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