

Our Reasonable **WORSHIP**

*And the role and value of
music in our worship*



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Our Reasonable Worship

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The word “**worship**” is a profoundly pregnant word filled with transcendent meaning and weighty implications. Its meaning is sadly limited by its association with the phrase, “praise and worship” which more or less refers to the thirty-minute musical time in a celebration service; where strictly speaking “praise” often refers to the fast, upbeat songs and “worship” refers to softer, slower songs. Of course, the phrase “praise and worship” is not a Biblical term but was coined to describe a certain style of religious music. I, for one, appreciate this style of worship expression but see the adverse effects of using this clichéd term.

Let me nail my sail to the mast right at the get go here. Worship is not just a musical experience; it is a life of devotion and service to God: 24/7 365^{1/4} days of the year! Yet, while worship is not a musical experience, ***music is a precious and profound gift from God that can beautifully and significantly enhance our expressions of worship.*** (That is a sentence worth reading again).

But before we amplify on the role and value of music in our worship, let us take the time to strengthen our grip on the sublime joys and awe-inspiring realities captured in this rather simple seven letter word “**worship**”.

What is worship?

The Hebrew word (*shâchâh*) for “**worship**” pictures one bowing down or prostrating oneself in homage before a Sovereign, implying one’s ***utter reverence for, total submission to and complete dependence on the object of worship.*** Thus it referred essentially to one’s life attitude to and heart disposition towards God. And the first reference to this loaded, pregnant word is unsettling significant.

The first time that the Bible reveals this word for “**worship**” is in the book of origins, Genesis 22:5; the account of Abraham’s sacrificial obedience to God. Having travelled three days to Mount Moriah, Abraham told his servants, “**Stay here with the donkey; [Isaac] and I will go yonder and *worship* and we will come back to you”.**

One need not even hold too strictly to the “law of first mention” – that stresses the importance of the first time a truth is revealed in Scripture – to note the significance of Abraham’s worship and what it reveals to us. In ***utter reverence, total submission and complete dependence on God***, Abraham strapped Isaac to the altar, willing to offer up his son in obedience to God. His faith in God’s character was such that he knew he would return with his son. In amazing confidence, Abraham had declared: “**we will come back to you**”. The writer to the Hebrews explained that he concluded “**that God was able to raise [Isaac] up, even from the dead**” (Hebrews 11:19).

It may sound obvious but the response of this worship – utter reverence for, total submission to and complete dependence on – ***depends on the object of worship***. In the second of the Ten Commandments, God forbade the worship – using the word *shâchâh* – of other gods because He alone is worthy of this devotion and adoration. Thus it is God’s glory, His majesty and sovereignty, which begets such worship.

Because God alone is worthy of true worship; He, in one sense, requires our worship. For those with a clear revelation of His awesomeness, this is not hard to grasp. As the creation, the handiwork of the Creator, we ought to worship Him – without question or negotiation. Thus, I would completely accept if God demanded our worship. Yet, it seems through the pages of Scripture that He does not. He does demand that we do not worship other gods and in this sense He may be demanding our worship by implication. But this is not my reading of the Scriptures. Rather than demanding our worship – which He alone has the right to do – He makes emphatically clear the choices we have and what consequences each choice leads to. And then lets us choose.

Think about it. The Creator of all creation; the Almighty Sovereign of the universe; the Alpha and Omega ... allows us to worship that which is unworthy (having outlined the cost involved), or to worship Him who is so worthy. By nature, as a created being, we will worship; we will choose an object of worship either by default or design. And in this sense we are, by nature, required to worship. But in allowing us to choose, God’s awesome Fatherhood is displayed; wooing us to worship Him, rather than demanding us to.

Why do we worship God? For one, ***He alone is worthy***. But there is a second reason too.

We worship God because ***worship brings absolute delight to God and sublime pleasure to us as worshippers***.

As every parent can attest, our children bring us sublime delight in ways big and small; enjoyment we find difficult to express. And our parental attention and affection, affords them pleasures in meaningful and life-giving ways that is also hard to put into words.

In this same way (but in much higher, broader, wider and deeper dimensions for sure), God delights in us. **“For the Lord takes pleasure in His people”** (Psalm 149:4). And in response to His abundant mercy and unfathomable grace, we discover the blessings and pleasures of adoring God.

Thus while the Biblical concept of worship is centred on God’s glory; the focus, as far as we are concerned, is principally on the worshipper’s God-centred ***way of life***; living in ***utter reverence, total submission and complete dependence on Him***. It is a life of loving obedience and responsive faith lived in grateful awe of God. And as an overflow of this love and devotion, it certainly includes our ***expressions of worship***; what is truly alive inside our hearts find expression through our adoring words and actions. And thus the Old Testament describes numerous expressions of this way of life; the psalms particularly outlining vocal, musical and physical expressions of personal and corporate adoration to God.

The New Testament then continues this profoundly life-altering realignment of a life around the glory of God.

The Greek word (*latreuō*) captures this concept of worship precisely. In describing the true **“circumcision,”** Paul explains that **“we worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh”** (Philippians 3:3). And to the believers in Rome, Paul used this word in a most profound way.

After outlining the glory, justice and mercy of God for eleven chapters in his epistle to them, he then explains emphatically that **“presenting our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God”** is our **“reasonable”** worship (Romans 12:1). ***Reasonable!*** Not extraordinary; not outstanding; not heroic. Reasonable, just reasonable!

The word **“reasonable”** (Greek: *logikos*) is the word from which we get our word “logical” or “rational”. Paul is saying that it is simply logical – obvious to any rational person – that in the light of God’s glory, our only reasonable response is ***utter reverence, total submission and complete dependence on God***.

In the Old Covenant, the priests offered up animal sacrifices to God; in the New Covenant, ***we are the sacrifices***, our life – our attention and our affection, our devotion and our desires, our needs and our wants, our strengths and our weaknesses, our wrong and our rights – wholly and totally given to Him. “It’s just reasonable,” Paul would counsel.

Worship according to Jesus

Then Jesus Himself ushered in a whole new depth of personal intimacy in worship as He revealed God as Father.

The primary revelation of God in the Old Testament was *Yahweh* (or in its more popular English transliterated form, *Jehovah*), the Covenant God. Although the stress of this word is on God's covenantal nature, it certainly captures the Father-heart of God. Yet Jesus deepened and clarified God's Fatherhood by using the word "**Father**" (Greek: *pater*) as His primary – by far – revelation of God. Jesus' revelation of God the Father positions our identity as children of God and thus woos us into a more personal, intimate relationship with Him (see for example, John 1:12; 14:6-20).

In fact, the word used to describe worship in Jesus' interaction with the Samaritan woman at the well is outstanding. Jesus envisioned "**true worshippers**" who would "**worship the Father in spirit and truth**" (John 4:23).

This Greek word for "**worship**" (*proskuneō*) means, "to kiss toward". It certainly captures and builds on the reverence and submission revealed in the other words for worship, yet it takes it further. In Christ, we don't just bow down before a Sovereign, we don't just prostrate ourselves as a servile peasant; we now kiss God as His child. Yes, we bow down; for sure, we prostrate ourselves – but we now do so in a full revelation of our privilege as a child of God; no longer a slave. Jesus' revelation of the Father made it clear that we worship God, conquered by His love, willingly surrendering to Him in **utter reverence, total submission and complete dependence**.

It is important to stress that this word for worship (*proskuneō*) in no way undermines the honour and respect instilled in the concept of worship by the Hebrew word (*shâchâh*) or the Greek word (*latreuō*). And again, these concepts speak essentially of our heart attitude and disposition of life towards God, before they encourage specific expressions of worship. Of course, I can articulate nice words of affection to God and extravagantly express myself to Him, but it means a hill-of-beans if my heart attitude is self-serving and life disposition is self-oriented.

As Jesus Himself said, quoting the prophet Isaiah: "**These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honour Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me**" (Matthew 15: 8; Isaiah 29:13).

What then have we said in respect of worship?

Worship is a God-centred way of life;

gratefully acknowledging that all of life is a gift from Him to be stewarded on His behalf;

viewing and valuing all of life from His vantage point;

living obediently, moment by moment in joyful dependence on Him;

bringing Him pleasure through our every action, attitude and affection;

freely, regularly and extravagantly expressing our devotion to Him in every number of appropriate ways;

as we enjoy the privilege and pleasure of adoring Him.

Wow! Perhaps you feel overwhelmed by such a description of worship?

Kick-back, relax – this is not a list for the super-holy to achieve and to thereby condemn the rest of us as second-class worshippers. Instead it captures a worshipper's highest aspiration; wherein we learn to turn even our frequent failures into moments in which we acknowledge our need for Him, grateful for His marvellous mercy; and wherein we celebrate His amazing grace when we touch the dizzying heights of intimacy and joy in His life-giving Presence.

I have tried to make it clear that worship captures emphatically what it means to be a follower of Christ, A to Z. Firstly, I hope it has helped you to get a fresh, revitalized grasp of worship. Second, I hope it shows that to limit worship to a musical experience does it a serious disservice and fudges our privilege and responsibility as worshippers.

So what is a better way to describe our communal and corporate adoration of God¹?

¹ What I mean by "communal" and "corporate" adoration, and the difference between the two, will become clear shortly. I trust for now it will be sufficient to say that "communal adoration" refers to the more intimate ministry to the Lord when a family/community of believers meet, while "corporate adoration" refers to ministry to the Lord in larger gatherings of believers.

Ministering to the Lord

The most appropriate Biblical way of describing our adoration of God is the phrase, **“ministering to the Lord”**.

This wonderful Biblical phrase captures the revelation of our priesthood in Christ and the focus of our worship expression; that is, God-ward. (Whereas so much “praise and worship” can be man-ward; that is, focused on me and my needs).

It is oft forgotten that God’s number one prize at Mount Sinai was not to set up a select Levitical priesthood; rather He desired a **“kingdom of priests”** (Exodus 19:5, 6). Yes, God wanted an ***entire nation of priests*** who would know the privilege and pleasure of ministering to Him. Only when His people rejected the invitation to a first-hand relationship with Him, rebuffing the high call of priesthood, God accommodated their unbelief by setting up the Old Covenant priesthood as second prize.

It is important to spotlight in what manner God’s people declined His invitation; for it speaks eerily down the line of human history. In response to God’s unveiling of His glory, the people – unable to compute God’s love and comprehend their privilege – declared to Moses: **“You speak with us, and we will hear you; but let not God speak with us, lest we die”** (Exodus 20:19). Can you hear the same line echoed in every religion since? “Pastor, you get it from God; we’ll get it from you”.

God’s people settled for a second-hand, mediated relationship with God; ***snubbing priesthood for spectatorship***. And ever since, even in the Christian “religion,” sincere believers fill pews as passive spectators to watch “worship leaders” conduct “worship services”. In Christ, God has once again invited us into a first-hand relationship with Himself having now made us a **“kingdom of priests”** through the blood of Christ (Revelation 5:9, 10). We fall so woefully short of our destiny as a **“royal priesthood”** (1 Peter 2:9) when we settle for human mediators – whether they be pastors or worship-leaders – instead of the **“one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus”** (1 Timothy 2:5).

God desired a **“kingdom of priests”** – a nation of priests; ***every*** man, woman and child. The key aspects here are:

- grasping the privilege of a first-hand relationship with God;
- understanding our identity as son-priests to God; and
- laying hold of God’s desire for collective, ***participatory*** adoration.

It is this third aspect – *collective, participatory adoration* – that is the core issue of this article.

It must have been a heavenly disappointment for God to establish one tribe of priests rather than embrace a nation of priests. Yet even in establishing the Old Covenant priesthood, God forever clarified the role of a priest: **"Now take Aaron...that he may minister to Me as priest"** (Exodus 28:1). Did you get that? The primary calling of a priest is not to minister to others, although this will no doubt happen. ***Our primary calling as a priesthood is to minister to God.*** As an overflow of this high call, we are led by His Spirit to minister to others – but this order of "worship" then "service" is revealed throughout Scripture².

This is powerfully evident in Jesus' call to the first disciples. Mark reveals that **"He appointed the twelve, that they might be with Him, and that He might send them out to preach"** (Mark 3:14). Our high calling is first and foremost that we **"might be with Him"** and then as an outcome of this vital union with God, He involves us in the "family business".

Thus when Luke spotlights the gathering of some believers in the city of Antioch as **"ministering to the Lord"** he was not recording an anomaly in early church activity but disclosing the way the early church understood their primary calling (Acts 13:2).

Peter declared that as a holy priesthood, we **"offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ"** (1 Peter 2:5). Yes, as we've stated, a wholehearted surrendered life to God is the essence of our reasonable worship (Romans 12:1). But what are our New Covenant **"spiritual sacrifices"**?

The best explanation is given by the writer to the Hebrew believers: **"by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name"** (Hebrews 13:15).

While ministering to the Lord in the Old Covenant involved animal sacrifice and elaborate ritual observance, designed to emphasis the awesome holiness of God, ministering to the Lord in the New Covenant involves, out of the overflow of lives riveted to the holiness of God, ***grateful praise and expressive adoration.***

I've personally heard worship-leaders refer to Hebrews 13:15 in attempt to wake up a sleepy congregation. "Come on church," they appeal, "shake off that slumber; give God a sacrifice of praise!" This is a bad misunderstanding of this verse. It is not merely an exhortation to crank our emotions into gear so that we sing a little more enthusiastically.

² Of course, our service is very much part of our worship to God. But it is possible to serve and not worship God; for example, to serve to satisfy our own sense of value or importance instead. And this is my point; true service is an essential overflow of our worship; essentially worship for sure, but an essential *overflow* of worship to be clear.

A **“sacrifice”** was an offering prepared by a priest in fear and trembling, with deliberate attention to detail and sober, intentional resolve to bring pleasure to God. It wasn't a flippant, emotional psych-up to shake off some early morning apathy. It refers to a heart prepared, filled with the glory of God through prayer and meditation, that explodes in thanksgiving and praise.

Besides Hebrews 13:15, another fantastic explanation of our New Covenant **“spiritual sacrifices”** comes from David; way back in the Old Testament. With magnificent clarity, David prays: **“Let my prayer be set before You as incense, the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice”** (Psalm 141:2).

Here David refers to the daily sacrifice of two lambs: one in the morning to dedicate the day to the Lord, and one in the evening to thank God for His faithfulness throughout the day. *David grasped that his expressive adoration would minister to God.* His vocal praise and his hands lifted up – as an expression of worship – were an acceptable spiritual sacrifice to God.

Using this phrase, **“ministering to the Lord”** rather than “praise and worship” is not merely a matter of semantics. “Praise and worship” has become a big money industry and “worship” can become a commodity. Song lyrics and music score have become tremendously complicated, placing overwhelming focus on the expertise of the musician rather than the simple adoration of the worshipper³. I believe that most of those involved are sincere in their desire to worship God and I mean to pass no judgment on any person or ministry. I love communal and corporate adoration and my wife is a gifted facilitator of ministering to the Lord in both settings. But we admit that it is so easy to turn the means into an end itself; and thus, we can turn our “worship” into an idol that robs God of true worship.

Listen to God's scathing reprove through the prophet Isaiah: **“To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices to Me?” says the Lord. ‘I have had enough of burnt offerings... I do not delight in the blood of bulls... Bring no more futile sacrifices... Your appointed feasts My soul hates; they are a trouble to Me, I am weary of bearing them... Even though you make many prayers, I will not hear...’** (Isaiah 1:11-15). Yikes! Talk about wasted worship! God's people went through all the religious motions but their hearts were far from Him. Thus, their Old Covenant “prescribed means” were an offence to God.

³ Of course there is a place, as with all the arts, for expert and gifted expressions of musical score composed to glorify the Creator and Giver of all gifts – but that is another matter. In this case, as with sculpture or painting, the music itself can be used in the exaltation of God as art. We can listen to great music and admire the God-given skill of the musician and be moved with the beauty and power of the music as it reflects the glory of God. Yet in our ministering to the Lord, music is simply a means to serve our communal and corporate worship expression.

The bottom-line is that when it comes to ministering to the Lord, using song as an expression of adoration, we so often revert back to songs that are simple in word and tune, don't we?

For me, using the Biblical phrase to “**minister to the Lord,**”

- places the focus on the Lord where it belongs, not on a certain “style of worship,” the worship-leader or liturgy, nor on the worshipper;
- reminds us of our role as participating priests, not merely watching spectators; and
- encourages a fresh appreciation of other means of worship – such as the Lord’s Supper, Scripture reading and meditation, *acappella* singing, thanksgiving and praise, quietness and listening – rather just music and the over-dependence that this easily begets⁴.

Music in our expression of worship...

We began this article by stating that while worship is not a musical experience; ***music can beautifully facilitate our expression of worship.***

There are an increasing number of voices belittling music and song as a valid means of expressing our worship to God. Largely in reaction, in my opinion, to the “praise and worship” parody and admirably contending for a New Testament church wineskin, they point to the infrequent references to music and song in the New Testament Scriptures.

Personally I too am a proponent of the simple/organic⁵ church wineskin and believe church is essentially found in a family of believers living in covenantal, missional community. A simple/organic church community alive (in the Spirit), in love (with one another) and active (in mission to the world) meets regularly together in His name anticipating the manifest Presence of Jesus in their midst (Matthew 18:20).

⁴ Many believers mistakenly equate the “**anointing**” as the sensation experienced in a good “praise and worship” celebration; and then wonder how to describe the same moving experience they enjoy when they watch a secular band play live or even in watching an inspiring movie. Music has a power to move us; “worship” music and “other” music. Music is without question a gift from God but should not necessarily be equated with the anointing of the Holy Spirit.

⁵ Simple/organic church essentially refers to a value-based approach as we contend for a Kingdom-shaped church rather than a church-shaped Kingdom. Also referred to as home church, missional church, relational church or “**church in the house**” (Romans 16:5; 1 Corinthians 16:19; Colossians 4:15 and Philemon 1:2), this value-based approach is best fleshed out in a self-governing family of believers whose communal lifestyle is lived out through their homes; spiritually fathered by parent-leaders or “**elders**” (Acts 20:17, 28; 1 Timothy 3:1-7; 5:17; 1 Peter 5:1-4). When a simple/organic church community meets together to minister to the Lord, we refer to this as their *communal* adoration (Hebrews 10:19-25). When several simple/organic church communities gather together to minister to the Lord, we refer to this as *corporate* adoration.

And in such a meeting we learn to minister to Him as a priesthood and, as an overflow of His Presence, we learn to minister to one another as a brotherhood (Hebrews 10:19-25). In such an intimate and dynamic expression of the priesthood in action, **"each one"** freely contributes for the edification of all (1 Corinthians 14:26). These meetings, which revolve around the manifest Presence of Jesus, are distinctly free from being leadership-*driven* and music-*dependent*⁶. As for me and mine, this is the meat-and-potatoes of the New Covenant life in the Spirit.

And yes, an honest study of the New Testament Scriptures will reveal that the Lord's Supper became the primary means in the early church's ministry to the Lord (Acts 2:42; 1 Corinthians 11:20ff). Sadly, this has also taken on religious form today. To the early church, the Lord's Supper was a substantial feast in which the participants shared and contributed, celebrating the Presence of God; today, it's often a token symbol administered by the clergy in sombre and serious mood. Those pressing out for New Testament pattern and power are correct to urge us to rediscover the raw simplicity and participatory nature of celebrating the Lord's Supper⁷.

However, just because the Lord's Supper became the primary means of worship expression does not negate the validity of music and song. We forget that the Hebrew people were an incredibly festive, music-loving people and that most of the churches that were started in the New Testament were off the back of Messianic Jews⁸.

So let's take a brief look at the role and value of music and song in both the Old and New Testament.

⁶ This is not to say that there is no leadership or that music is not used. First, Biblical leadership refers to parent-leadership; spiritual fathers and mothers who don't seek to direct and control the family of God, doing all the ministry themselves. Rather, serving as examples, they nurture and encourage others to grow as responsible ministers to the Lord and in the world. Second, as far as music dependency is concerned, we amplify on this thought below.

⁷ Please see our free article entitled, "The Lord's Supper – Sombre self-introspection, or Christ-centred celebration" at www.crosswaveglobal.com

⁸ Many early churches derived their origins from the Jews who, having come into a saving knowledge of Christ on Pentecost day, were forced from Jerusalem through persecution (Acts 2:1ff; 8:1ff). Furthermore all but two churches birthed through Paul's ministry started in their city's synagogue. Paul's deliberate strategy was to start in a Jewish synagogue knowing he would find a receptive audience there; and thus, an integral core steeped in the values of Scripture (Acts 13:14; 14:1; 16:13; 17:1, 10, 17; 18:4; 19:8).

Music in the Scriptures...

Little needs to be said here of the value of music and song in the Old Testament; it is a fact without question. From spontaneous outbursts of songs of praise – from the likes of Moses (Exodus 15:1ff) and David (2 Samuel 6:14, 21); to psalms written for individuals and corporate gatherings; to almost four decades of round the clock musical expressions of adoration in David's Tabernacle (see for example, Amos 9:11, 12 and Acts 15:13-18 c. 2 Samuel 6, 7, esp. 6:17 and 1 Chronicles 15-17, esp. 16:37); to the honour and appreciation given to those with God-given gifts in music and song (1 Chronicles 15:16-22); the Old Testament is alive with the sound of music, reflecting the Hebrew peoples' passion and pleasure in music and song.

It is, as mentioned, music and song in the New Testament that is under scrutiny. But before we have a look at these New Testament references, it is important to remember a good rule of integral Bible study.

In Jesus Christ, the New Covenant fulfils the Old Covenant (Matthew 5:17-20). The New Covenant, made possible through the atonement of Jesus Christ, is a covenant of *grace* which ***fulfils*** the redemptive plan of God. In other words, the New Covenant does not do away with the Old Covenant, it ***completes*** it.

As we interpret the New Covenant we must avoid starting on the faulty premise that God's principles revealed in the Old Testament are no longer applicable unless the New Testament specifically endorsed it. Rather, we ought to begin with the premise: ***God's truths revealed in the Old Testament are applicable unless the New Testament specifically changed it.***

We cannot simply do away with any truth of Scripture unless the New Testament specifically teaches this; as is the case with the Old Covenant dietary restrictions. Looking back we know that most of the ancient dietary laws were related to health concerns or aimed to avoid confusion with pagan practices. Through numerous passages the New Testament authors remove these restrictions; giving us permission to eat released from the dietary laws.

The question we should ask is: ***Does the New Testament specifically do away with music and song as a valid means through which we can express our worship?*** The answer is: "No, it does not. In fact, it endorses it".

There are, in fact, a number of references in the New Testament to music and song and they appear in a matter-of-fact way, indicating how common it was as part of their practice.

The first reference to song was when Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper (Mark 16:22-25). As a part of this first Supper – in all its wonder and awe – Jesus and the disciples freely and fittingly broke into song (Mark 14:26; also Matthew 26:30).

One of the earliest epistles written was by James. He wrote, **"Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms"** (James 5:13). Singing is so much a part of human nature – and the redeemed human nature for that matter – that James thought it was entirely obvious that if one was feeling cheerful, one ought to offer one's praise to God through song.

As mentioned, these references indicate how common singing was to early believers; how very much part of their devotion music and song was. Furthermore, several Old Testament references are quoted by the New Testament writers alluding to singing in adoration as an accepted and valued practice (for example, Romans 15:19; Hebrews 2:12).

A number of New Testament references to music and song are found in Paul's epistles too. In commenting on the Corinthian believers' gathering together around the Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 11:20), Paul expected singing to be an essential part of their expression of worship. He wrote, **"I will pray with the spirit, and I will also pray with the understanding, and I will sing with the spirit, and I will also sing with the understanding"** (1 Corinthians 14:15). As common and as expected as prayer was to a believers' gathering, so too was singing; both **"with the spirit"** (in tongues, v. 14) and **"with the understanding"** (in his natural language, vv. 16, 19).

It is Paul's comments to both the Ephesian and Colossian believers that are probably the most helpful to us. Beginning with different exhortations to both churches – to the Ephesians, he writes: **"be filled with the Spirit"** (Ephesians 5:18) and to the Colossians, he writes: **"let the word of Christ dwell in you richly"** (Colossians 3:16)⁹ – Paul gives the same instructions: **"speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord"** (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16).

⁹ Paul's exhortations to **"be filled with the Spirit"** (Ephesians 5:18) and to **"let the word of Christ dwell in you richly"** (Colossians 3:16), imply that we gather, with a heart drenched in God, to contribute and participate; rather than hoping the worship leader and music will give us a spiritual fix.

Paul anticipated – as a vital part of a meeting centred on Christ – that **“psalms and hymns and spiritual songs”** would be sung as an expression of our ministry to the Lord. And he specifically mentions **“psalms, hymns and spiritual songs”** to both churches. Without stating the obvious, let us define these three types of songs:

Psalms

Psalms refer to Biblical psalms set to music. Of course, many of the psalms were originally written as songs and whether the early church knew the original choruses or made their own tunes to them, Paul anticipated the singing of Scripture as part of their meetings.

Hymns

Hymns don't refer to 16th century hymnals written by Martin Luther, as good as these hymns may perhaps be; for the first century believers, they weren't written yet! The word **“hymns”** refers to contemporary songs written and composed by first century believers as they captured in music and song the glories of God they experienced.

Spiritual songs

In Hebrew tradition, a spiritual or new song was a spontaneous song sung in response to the glories of God revealed. In ancient times, a **“new song”** arose in response to a battle won, where praise was offered for God's deliverance and favour (Psalm 98:1), or simply in response to a fresh glimpse of God's nature (Psalm 40:3).

The 45th Psalm captures this moment so well; when in awe of God's glory, we burst into a spontaneous song of love and praise. The psalmist writes, **“my heart is overflowing with a good theme...my tongue is the pen of a ready writer”** (Psalm 45:1). And when our human language seems limited in expressing our deepest desire for God, **“singing with the spirit”** is often our only adequate response (1 Corinthians 14:2, 15).

The point here is not, of course, to clinically dissect our ministry to the Lord or to suggest that we must have all three types of songs present in every meeting. Not at all; I am only pointing out that music and song was a viable part of their meetings; highlighting the freedom of expression they enjoyed. Certainly we can safely conclude that Paul's mention of all three types of song meant they enjoyed a wonderful freedom as all could initiate and contribute in song, if so led; rather than this “ministry” being the exclusive domain of a “music conductor” who dominated the proceedings.

Finally, John's breathtaking Revelation of Jesus Christ contains 20 of the most awe-inspiring praise chorals; music and song that can only be described as heavenly (for example, Revelation 4:8, 11; 9, 10, 12, 13). These chorals, exalting the glory and majesty of God, give us fresh, dynamic language to our expressions of worship.

It is from these astounding and otherworldly praise chorals, anticipating our ministry to **"Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb"** in the age to come (Revelation 5:13) – in conjunction with the testimony of the corporate Psalms in the Scriptures – that I believe there is great value in large, corporate gatherings of believers to minister to the Lord in music and song. And it is in these settings that those who are gifted musicians and vocalists can contribute their God-given talents to facilitate corporate ministry to the Lord.

Corporate adoration...

The problem, for me, is that when these celebratory gatherings become the meat-and-potatoes of our church life and experience, believers devolve into spectators and become music-dependent. When, week in and week out, ministry to the Lord becomes watching, depending on and following a skilled music team to "lead" us into God's Presence, musical worship can quickly become another religious form. No matter how contemporary and hip the music may be, the "stage, worship-leader and song-list" can simply deteriorate into a modern day version of the Old Covenant altar-priest-and-sacrifice routine.

Of course, you may not share my opinion on this matter and you are free to disagree¹⁰. However, it is true that many, many believers are music-dependent; not knowing how to minister to the Lord without it. And it is also a fact without question that the thriving early church was not music-dependent; using music as one of several expressions of adoration, rather than needing music as a crutch to worship.

If you're still not convinced, consider this question. What would happen to most churches if their leaders chose to set aside the instruments and songs for three months in an attempt to rediscover ministering to the Lord without "praise and worship"? It wouldn't be pretty for sure; it is not a far stretch of the imagination that many of the believers concerned would leave their spiritual family and join a church down the road with an attitude that says, "I want a church that actually worships!" And the point would be tragically and emphatically missed.

¹⁰ There are many who feel they can overcome the problems related to music-dependence I have outlined in this article while continuing to gather every Sunday for corporate adoration. In fact, I have close friends who hold to this; I respect their integrity and honour the prayerful thought they have put into this. It is my opinion though, and I realise I may be wrong, that if they are able to overcome these challenges; they are the exception not the norm.

It is, in my opinion, important for believers to learn how to minister to the Lord in communal adoration, where the intimacy of the simple/organic community encourages **"each one"** to participate in response to Christ in the midst. Yes, this will involve various expressions of worship – including song – but it won't be music-dependent or leadership-driven. And then for these simple/organic communities – experienced in Spirit-led "communal adoration" – to come together in monthly/quarterly regional or citywide gatherings, giving room for gifted psalmists to facilitate "corporate adoration" in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, will be the cherry on the top for New Covenant worshippers; not an artificial support system for Old Covenant-like spectators¹¹.

A resounding call to worship...

We need to hear the heavenly call to worship, an invitation to first-hand relationship with Father God as we learn to live in the fullness of our privileged priesthood; ***first and foremost as a life wholly given to Him***; secondly, ***as we learn to minister to Him free from form and ritual*** – including the form and ritual of "praise and worship".

And then we also need to acknowledge, affirm and appreciate those whom God gifts as psalmists, musicians and vocalists; who offer their talents to beautifully and powerfully enhance our communal and corporate adoration of God. As they contribute their gifts to our gatherings, we ought to all contribute our faith, our passion and our expressions of outrageous love and devotion to God who alone is so worthy of worship¹².

Thus we minister to Him as a holy and beloved priesthood, moved by His Spirit; most without instruments, some with instruments (and yes, most in tune; some out of tune, for which I apologise) – but all of us in extravagant freedom and unreserved passion.

¹¹ Please see "Some Practical Implications" on pp. 16, 17 if you're interested.

¹² Most of the psalmists, musicians and vocals I know are humble, self-effacing servants who have a genuine desire to contribute their gifts in a way that facilitates communal and corporate adoration. They do not want to be celebrity conductors of music stuck in a congregational formula of "praise and worship". Rather they long to find fresh ways to contribute their talents to facilitate ministry to the Lord; adoration that is enhanced, not restricted, by their contribution. It behoves us to support them, honour them and cheer them on as we all rediscover our privilege as a **"kingdom of priests"** to our God.

Some Practical Implications

Let me share some practical thoughts here; admittedly these are my personal opinions, yet I trust they provoke thought and encourage dialogue. (I certainly don't see them as the final word on the subject).

(1) We ought to "celebrate" less.

By "celebrate" I refer to the term most churches use of their weekly "worship **celebration**" which typically involves x amount of musical "praise and worship" and then x amount of time for preaching/teaching. (Other "necessary extras" are thrown into the mix; such as offerings, announcements and a ministry/prayer time of course).

Although we hate to admit it, this is our contemporary liturgy and an expression of the "praise and worship" parody I have outlined in this article.

What I am saying is that we ought to hold these "worship celebrations" less frequently; and encourage simple/organic church communities to meet to minister to the Lord more frequently. These simple church meetings are our *staple diet*; corporate gatherings are our *luxury extra*. [And for the record, **communal adoration** – as simple/organic church communities minister to the Lord – **is filled with plenty of celebration**; in case you think I'm against celebrating].

And this is not just because I believe our Biblically normative church-life experience should involve the simple/organic church meeting – and that corporate gatherings in larger groups be less frequent – but I'm convinced that only by "celebrating less" will we break our music dependence and be delivered from our liturgical formulas.

(2) In **communal adoration**, we ought to incorporate music wisely.

As mentioned in this article, as a simple/organic church community meets to minister to the Lord, musical instruments are just one of several means to express our worship. The Lord's Supper, Scripture reading and meditation, singing *acappella*, thanksgiving and praise, silence and listening, etc. etc. are all valid means to minister to the Lord.

When a musician does contribute his instrument as part of the communal adoration, he should do so in a way that does not dominate or "direct" the meeting. A discerning musician will use her instrument at appropriate times to enhance the communal adoration; putting her instrument down when it is inappropriate, giving others the space to make their contribution. In other words, our communal adoration should not be dependent on musical instruments, but can benefit from their contribution at appropriate times.

(3) In *corporate adoration*, we ought to gather at times for the express purpose of ministering to God.

When we do gather for corporate adoration we should come together for the sole purpose of ministering to God; rather than using “music and song” simply as a warm-up act before the preaching or teaching takes place. Of course, the prophetic Word may sound forth; yes, Scripture may be read (and appropriate comments from it made); and for sure, we anticipate that God will respond and minister to us, directly and through one another. But just as there is a wonderful blessing when we set aside times solely for the public teaching of the Scriptures, there is tremendous value in setting time aside for the express purpose of corporate adoration; without the restriction and time constraint of a full programme of items.

(4) In *corporate adoration*, we ought to incorporate other means of worship expression.

By this I mean we should avoid falling into the trap of running through a “song list”.

Rather,

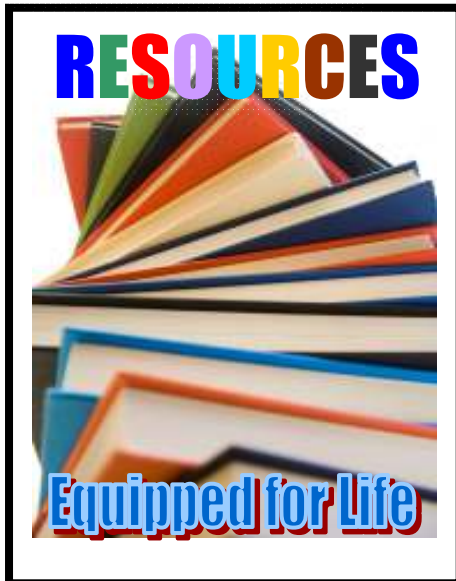
- anticipating Spirit-led moments of silence;
- expecting times of free worship (both in our natural tongue and in heavenly tongues);
- awaiting appropriate readings of Scripture and declarations of prophecy;
- allowing for times of “audience” prompted responses (where the musicians and vocalists are open and sensitive to the other worshippers);
- encouraging responses of intercessory prayer for the city and the nations;
- facilitating prayer and ministry as the Spirit leads (both to individuals and in smaller groups); and
- perhaps making the Lord’s Supper available (arranged as an extravagant feast of course);

we worship God, without one eye on the clock and the other on the next item of the agenda. Free from a “song list,” we make “space” for God to manifest Himself in an atmosphere of adoring praise and agenda-less reverence.

This article is part of a series entitled:

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