

# Reformed Worship: Preparing Our Hearts

## Lesson 14: We Sing a New Song

Cruse: “God has gifted us with song that we might have a fitting way to *praise* Him for His work, *pray* to Him with our deepest needs, and *proclaim* to one another the sanctifying truths of the gospel.”

### Melody with Meaning

- I. All our singing is rooted in the work of our Saviour. The “worship”<sup>1</sup> of song isn’t created by any emotional thrill. It comes from understanding why God is worthy of our praise, 1Cor 14.15
  - A. Undoubtedly, Psalms is the church’s inspired songbook. Rather than containing any new revelation for the church (except Ps 110), it gives voice to the church’s understanding/ believing response to the revelation God has given.
  - B. And in the Psalms we’re repeatedly commanded to sing a new song (Pss 33.3; 40.3; 96.1; 98.1; 144.9; 149.1). In the OT, references to a new song nearly always come in the context of warfare. A new song is a song of victory, sung after God has made all things new by the defeat of the forces of evil, cf. Ex 15. And what is the greatest victory God ever accomplished, the victory toward which all others point? The death of death in the death of Christ. The victory of the empty tomb informs and inspires all Christian singing because its the basis and subject of all heaven’s singing, Rev 5.9; 14.3; 15.3
- II. Hence the primary criterion of Christian song is does it praise Christ. Christian songs should be either *praising* God for what He’s done or who He is in Christ, *praying* to Him in trouble, resting in Christ’s mediation on our behalf, or *proclaiming* the truth of Christ’s Word to one another.
  - A. Praise
    1. Standing before God with the sense of awe and wonder at who He is and what He’s done/ doing/has promised to do, we can’t help but praise Him. Singing in worship is the overflowing of the soul in response to God, Ps 92.1
  - B. Prayer
    1. Calvin, “As for public prayers, there are two kinds: the one consists simply of speech, the other of song.”
    2. When churches design their worship for consumers instead of Christians it’s no surprise that’s it’s almost exclusively upbeat, joyful songs. But that’s not true to life. Life is filled with the minor key, with sin, calamity, distress, and heartache.
    3. When we take our cue from the psalms, we learn that singing is a form of prayer to God and it’s to be filled with more than just anthems of praise. It’s to include cries of lament and petitions for intervention.
    4. The psalms of lament show us that it’s okay to come to God with our troubles, concerns, problems, and worries. The psalter gives us a proper balance of emotive music: praise, adoration, confession, lament, and petition—by which we can see that our singing in corporate worship is part of the covenant conversation with God.
  - C. Proclamation
    1. From what Paul tells us in Col 3.16, we learn that singing is also a means of proclaiming God’s truth to one another. Cruse: “Singing is a part of corporate worship because it shares in that crucial work of the ministry of the Word: teaching God’s soul-saving truth to God’s people.”
    2. John Wesley: “Beware of singing as if you were half dead, or half asleep; but lift up your voice with strength. Be no more afraid of your voice now, nor more ashamed of its being

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<sup>1</sup> I.e. that which makes it worship, acceptable to God.

heard, than when you sung the songs of Satan.... Have an eye to God in every word you sing. Aim at pleasing him more than yourself, or any other creature.... So shall your singing be such as the Lord will approve of here, and reward when he comes in the clouds of heaven.”

- III. Thus we sing not only because we’re commanded, but because the person and work of Christ compels our hearts to sing. We sing because we cannot be silent. Bonhoeffer: “the heart sings because it is overflowing with Christ.”
  - A. Songs acceptable to God are Christ-focused, grounded in the objectivity of His person and work, whether as Creator, Redeemer, or Sanctifier.
  - B. Many Christians today evaluate the merit of a worship service on whether or not it lifts their emotions. This is dangerous. True worship doesn’t happen when we feel good. True worship happens when God comes down in truth and grace and we respond in reverence and awe.
  - C. God calls us to sing because He wants us to pour our hearts out to Him in response to who He is and what He’s done/doing/promised to do. Thus, singing is not primarily with the voice but with the heart. Where the heart is not singing, God is not being praised.

### **Psalms and Hymns**

- I. It goes without saying that *Psalms* is the church’s inspired songbook. It calls us to sing in response to the who and what of God, it teaches us what to sing, how to sing, and serves mercifully as an anatomy of the redeemed soul. The psalter gives us a look into the heart of the believer. And it gives a voice to what’s going on in our heart when we can’t find the words to express it.
- II. So in one way or another the psalms are provided to serve as the backbone of all worship, especially in that they teach us how to respond to both God’s *Word* revelation and God’s *deed* revelation.
  - A. Psalmody vs. hymnody. A few comments:
    - 1. We should appreciate our denomination’s concern, as reflected in our new *Trinity Psalter Hymnal*, that the psalms of the OT be used in our worship.
    - 2. We should appreciate the stringent, Christocentric criteria that’s used in the selection of the hymns chosen for public worship.
    - 3. Consider the following explanations as to why we don’t come down on the side of exclusive psalmody, but are in favor of hymnody as well.
      - a) Because as much as the psalter is an inspired songbook for the church, it’s necessarily a book of its time. Hence, its understanding of the work of redemption is from an OT mindset before the coming and work of Christ.
      - b) Since the church has always sung in response to the who and what of God, it’s appropriate and expected that the church should sing upon the heels of the consummate and final revelation of God in Jesus Christ. In the life of the church, in which singing is commanded by God and compelled by the who and what of God, New Testament hymnody is just as appropriate and expected as OT psalmody.
      - c) Thus there’s the song of Israel in Ex 15, the song of Moses in Dt 32, the song of Mary in Lk 1, the song of the angels in Lk 2, the song of the seraphim in Isa 6, the song of the angels in Rev 5, the songs of the glorified saints in Rev 4, 5, 7, 11, 14, 15, 19, none of which is recorded in the psalms, but all of which are appropriate—and necessary—responses of the people of God to the who and what of God.
      - d) It’s clear from Revelation that our eternal songs won’t be taken verbatim or exclusively from the OT psalter but will necessarily hold content which looks back at the revealed Christ and His finished work. And since we live already in “the Kingdom of God come down” and our earthly worship joins us with heavenly worship (Heb

12), it's right for us to sing of the finished work of Christ—a fact captured so well in the church's hymns.

B. Therefore, these things follow:

1. We sing the psalter because as we do so we show ourselves to be one with the OT church, one in Christ, one in Spirit, one in faith, one in truth, and as we sing we look forward to Christ's Second Coming.
2. It's impossible to sing the psalter itself, and so the NT church has always paraphrased and metered the psalms to make them singable.
3. Taking our lessons from the psalter, we write and sing hymns that are Word-based, Christ-centered, gospel-focused, and reflect what the psalter teaches us are the appropriate responses of believers to the who and what God.
4. The psalms teach us how to respond to God's revelation by giving a voice to our heart's praise, prayers, and petitions to the God who's revealed Himself to us.
5. Thus, it's right to praise God in NT worship with God-honoring hymns because in the coming of Christ God did a new thing, the consummate thing, and the NT church should reflect its understanding of that reality and hope.