

Worship (Part One)

“Sing to the Lord a new song”

Reflection 59 in the series “A New World in the Morning”

Good worship, spiritual, heartfelt, and excellent worship, is at the core of all major turning points in the history of the church. The medieval church had its Gregorian chant. The eighteenth-century Wesleyan revival in England had the songs of Charles Wesley, songs we still sing today, like “Jesus, Lover of My Soul,” songs that last, songs that matter, songs that will sustain Christian faith for centuries to come.

So I want to share just a few thoughts on worship, nothing comprehensive, just some matters of the heart and mind I’d like to be sure to emphasize in my last years of ministry. I take as my text the 98th Psalm. It begins with “Sing to the Lord a new song,” as do Psalms 96 and 149.

“Sing to the Lord a new song,
for he has done marvelous things.

...

The Lord has made his salvation known
and revealed his righteousness
to the nations.
He has remembered his love
and his faithfulness to the house of Israel;
all the ends of the earth have seen
the salvation of our God.”

It’s likely that this psalm was composed late in the sixth century BC. The year 539 was an amazing year in the history of Israel and, in fact, in the history of the world. The armies of the Medes and the Persians under Cyrus the Great had captured Babylon bringing that ruthless empire to an end. And now Cyrus began sending exiles back home free to worship God as they chose. The dark years of Babylonian Exile were over. The world was free again. Who could have imagined this? So, “Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things.” And the proper response, according to the psalmist, is:

“Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth,
burst into jubilant song with music;
make music to the Lord with the harp,
with the harp and the sound of singing,
with trumpets and the blast of the ram’s horn
– shout for joy before the Lord, the King.”

And so this psalm reminds us that many of these psalms were first meant to be played and sung in the temple worship at Jerusalem. This one, the 98th, may have been composed for the dedication of the new temple in 516 BC.

And we remember again that “psalms” (a Greek word) meant “songs sung to the accompaniment of a stringed instrument,” which raises the issue of music that is pleasing to God. For me and for our tradition, it raises the issue of a cappella and instrumental music. For visitors to our services, or those who are fairly new to us, that’s what they may first notice about us, that Churches of Christ, along with Eastern Orthodox Churches, are distinguished by being a cappella in our music.

Our position has historically been based on the assumptions that the silence of Scripture is binding and that the New Testament does not specifically authorize the use of instruments in worship. Since the church in the New Testament was, to all appearances, a cappella, we are too. Sometimes our position on this has been, extreme, even hysterical, some claiming even that this is a matter of salvation, that to worship with an organ, say, or any other instrument puts one’s soul at risk of Hell. That is not only hysterical. It is intellectually deeply embarrassing, and it reveals a serious misunderstanding of God, and gospel, and freedom in Christ.

Most of us have learned better over the years. Still we in this place are an a cappella Church of Christ. Proudly. We do it well. We do it wonderfully. Eddie leads us wonderfully. Though imagine this tradition without Eddie. Imagine a cappella done bad. If you travel a bit, you know how bad it can be. Still I enjoy a cappella music, and I believe it is a great gift to believers everywhere. And it’s received as a great gift by our community every year at our A Cappella Christmas Carol Sing-Along. But I also know that praising God through sacred music accompanied by instruments is, as anyone familiar with Handel’s “The Messiah” knows, a great gift too. We have dear, sweet people in our church family now who are never closer to God than when they are playing a piano or a guitar or when they are listening to Christian music on K-Love.

Having said this, the arguments on this issue have always been emotional and cultural. And sectional. If you trace the issue in our own Restoration Movement, you will find that from the 1860s on, that is, from the Civil War on, southern and rural churches rejected the organs in northern and urban churches. Scripture was not the controlling factor. The Civil War divide was the controlling factor, deep-seated Southern resentment of the North.

Now, for all the hundreds of pages that have been written on this subject, the line of reasoning for freedom in using instruments is really a fairly simple one. In many ways, it all comes down to one verse, Ephesians 5:19 – [Check it out] – “Speak to one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord.” Keep your eye on that “make music.” The Greek word translated “make music” is the verb “*psallo*.” *Psalms* is the noun, *psallo* the verb. The meanings of “*psallo*” are multiple and shifting throughout the centuries leading up to the writing of the New Testament. Its original meaning in antiquity was “to pull hair, or to pluck,” and so it came to mean “to strike a musical string or to play a stringed instrument.” In the Septuagint, the third-century BC Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible and the Scriptures used most frequently by early Christians, it meant “to sing with a musical instrument.” By the first century AD it is used to describe “singing” in both the synagogue and the church

though Josephus still used it for “playing the harp” in the story of David in his book *Antiquities* 6.8.2 (c. AD 94).

Now given these evolving, these multiple, meanings, if Paul in, say, Ephesians 5:19 intended for “*psallo*” to specifically exclude the instrument, would it not be most likely that he would have said so? Does not the silence of Scripture here imply that use of the instrument is not Paul’s concern? He feels no need to make any clarification. And this – now follow this carefully here – is borne out by the redundancy (implied by the traditional view) in Ephesians 5:19, “Sing and make music,” literally, “*adontes*” (“singing”) “*kai psallontes*,” “singing” and (well, what exactly?) “singing” again? It’s a redundancy usually covered over by “making music.”

Moreover, the *Odes of Solomon*, a collection of early Christian hymns from the late first and early second century, allude favorably to the use of harps (e.g., 6:1: 7:17: 26:3). So the historical evidence, limited as it is, suggests an early church that was essentially a cappella for some very practical reasons – household gatherings, fear of persecution, the precedent of the synagogue – but not exclusively a cappella. And so a church today being exactly like the church at first in this regard would be largely but not exclusively a cappella. But of course in our world of black-and-white, of either-or, what do we do with this?

Meanwhile, looming over this whole issue is the even larger question of whether the New Testament is appropriately viewed as a law code in light of Paul’s emphatic statements over and over and over again that it is not: in Romans 6:4; 7:6; 10:4; 2 Corinthians 3:1-6, 17, and the whole thrust of Galatians and Colossians 2:6-23. I was raised to think that God was a hard master, that God had a hair-trigger temper, that God’s grace was only for people who were perfect anyway, and that God set before us test after test whereby we might fail. You may recall in Luke 19:22 what happened to the servant who believing God to be a hard master hid his talent. God perhaps does not like hidden, buried or silenced talents.

In fact, it’s our view of God that is at stake here.

– Dale Pauls

Part two (of two) next week