The Role of Singing in the Life of the Church

Christianity is a singing faith. It’s one of the chief things followers of Jesus are renowned for, both down through the ages and now all around the world. While the proportion of singing has varied from time to time and from place to place, most churches today devote about a third of their gathering time to congregational singing and invest a considerable amount of time, money, effort, and energy into the musical side of church life.

But why do we sing? What does our singing accomplish? What purposes does it fulfill? According to Scripture, God has both created and called us to sing for three principal reasons: to help us praise, to help us pray, and to help us proclaim. Let’s look at each of these reasons in turn.

1. Singing Helps Us Praise

There’s no escaping the fact that singing is a vital form of praise. Many Scriptures (particularly the psalms) bear this out. Not only do they link praise directly with singing, but they also frequently speak of the vertical and horizontal dimensions of praise, adoration, and declaration, in virtually the same breath. Consider, for example, the opening four verses of Psalm 96:

Oh sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth!

Sing to the LORD, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day. Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples!

For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised; He is to be feared above all gods.

While praise is not reducible to singing, the point of this and other psalms could not be clearer. We sing to the Lord, blessing his name, and we sing of the Lord, declaring his glory. And, of course, we often (if not always) do both at once. For even when we’re singing about the Lord to others, he is present to receive his praise. The importance of singing the praises of God is evident from the number of times it is commanded in Scripture (for example, Ex. 15:21; Ps. 147:1, 7; 149:1, 5; Zeph. 3:14; Zech. 2:10; James 5:13). Admittedly, most of these exhortations are found in the Old Testament, particularly the psalms. But given that the apostle Paul expects and exhorts Christians to sing the psalms (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16), these commands clearly have abiding relevance.

Such commands are necessary, because heartfelt praise doesn’t always come easily to God’s people. In fact, there is an array of forces pitted against us (celestial and terrestrial, external and internal), which seek to deflect us from giving God the praise that is rightfully his and should be given to him in all circumstances—not only with our lives, but also with our lips, not only in speech, but also in song. So unless we are alert to this danger, it’s all too possible to rob God of his praise—perhaps because we fear looking foolish, or we fear what others might think of us, or think of our voice. The result of being ruled by such fears is that we tend to "play it cool," muzzle our gratitude, curb our enthusiasm, and (perhaps) not even connect with the words we’re singing.

Of course, the antidote is not to ignore those around us with little concern for how we affect them. Indeed it is God’s will that we should look out for others and endeavor to worship him only in ways that build them up (1 Cor. 14:19). But...
Christlike concern for my neighbor is a million miles away from a slavish fear of man—a fear that is ultimately idolatrous and self-serving, not God-honoring and others-serving. So, given that it is God’s purpose that we should praise him “with a whole heart” (Ps. 9:1; 86:12; 111:1; 138:1; Eph. 5:19), it is imperative that we regularly remind both ourselves and each other that God truly deserves our praise (Ps. 7:17; 18:3; 147:1), that he repeatedly demands our praise (e.g. Ps. 47), and that he deeply desires our praise.

Such reminders are necessary to ensure that the God who has held back nothing from us, not even his only Son, receives more than the dregs of our attention and the leftovers of our affections. Because he deserves, demands, and desires our whole-hearted praise, it is our highest duty and greatest joy to give it to him.

2. Singing Helps Us Pray

It may not have occurred to us before, but singing is (or at least can be) a form of prayer. The book of Psalms, once again, is our prime example as a large proportion of the psalms are, or contain, prayers (for example, Ps. 3-8, 9-10, 12-13, 16-18). And if there’s one thing we know about the way the psalms functioned in the life of the people of Israel, it is that many of these prayers were sung—as indeed they were intended to be. Moreover, as we’ve already noted, they were also sung by the New Testament churches (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16; James 5:13).

This means, then, that exhortations to sing psalms include commands to sing prayers. The great value of singing our prayers is that the activity of singing helps us to engage with the emotional dimensions of the truths we are saying or the petitions we are praying. In other words, singing plays a critical role in helping us to bridge the gap between the cognitive and affective aspects of our humanity, and (as many of the lament psalms illustrate) in helping us process our emotional pain and so bring us to a point of praise (for example, Ps. 3-7).

Singing the psalms, then, is an immensely powerful thing to do. Not only are we praying as we sing, we are praying divinely inspired words. Singing these words helps us to engage and express not simply the conceptual dimensions of the truths we are articulating, but their emotional dimensions as well.

But, of course, we don’t have to restrict ourselves to just singing and praying psalms. Not only are there other biblical songs (and many other parts of the Bible that can be sung as prayers), but the Scriptures themselves do not restrict us to singing and praying only Scripture. Provided we are singing and praying according to God’s will (as revealed in Scripture), we are on solid ground. Therefore, we should feel free to draw on the rich, historical treasury of musical and liturgical resources developed by former generations to help us in our prayers. This, of course, includes many paraphrastic translations and metrical versions of the psalms, as well as a plethora of hymnals going all the way back to Isaac Watts.

When we are singing we are also praying—whether we realize it or not. We are asking God for things in song, both personally and corporately. However, it’s clearly good for us to be aware of what we’re doing and what we’re saying, to pray and sing with our minds fully engaged (1 Cor. 14:15). So don’t be surprised if next Sunday your service leader introduces a song by saying, “Let us lift our voices together in prayer as we sing this next song,” for often that is exactly what we’re doing.

3. Singing Helps Us Proclaim

As well as being a way of praising and a way of praying, singing is also a way of proclaiming. We touched on this point earlier with regard to the horizontal dimension of praise. My focus here, however, is on singing as a form of mutual edification. For the Scriptures reveal that the life-giving word of Christ is ministered among the people of God not only by Bible reading and biblical preaching, but also by singing “psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs” (Col. 3:16).

Evidently, this does not mean that the sung word should eclipse the spoken word, or that singing should replace the public reading of Scripture and preaching and teaching (1 Tim. 4:13). Neither Jesus nor the apostles preached the gospel by singing it. Therefore, the sung word does not rival the spoken word in the church’s preaching ministry, but is
designed to function as its handmaid and complement.

Nevertheless, the singing of God’s Word (provided it is God’s Word that’s being sung) is a vitally important and a uniquely powerful form of "Word ministry." This fact has not always been adequately appreciated. Indeed, some have regarded congregational singing as little more than a way of getting people’s blood pumping so that they might then listen more attentively to the reading and preaching of the Scripture.

This was not the view of the apostle Paul. He strongly emphasized the teaching function of congregational singing. For as well as praising and praying, when we sing together we are instructing and exhorting one another. This is also clear in Ephesians 5:19 where Paul speaks of our “addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” (cf. Col. 3:15-17).

Such a statement surely makes singing integral to the spiritual life and health of the church. Far from being a leg-stretching exercise before and after the sermon, it is in fact part of the sermon. It’s the part where we all preach—both to ourselves and to each other. And the fact is—and it’s a humbling fact for those of us who are preachers—the songs we sing are often remembered long after our sermons have been forgotten.

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