

## Why Sing?

Originally posted on *Reformation Bible College Blog* | January 16, 2018

Regardless of the genre, complaints abound regarding “the music” in our churches. Yet rarely do I hear the right concerns voiced in these complaints. When a congregant is asked, “What’s wrong with music in worship?,” the common answer is, “It’s not *my* music.” Put simply, music has become an idol to many in our churches. Certainly music deserves honor. Martin Luther famously called it the handmaiden of theology, and praised its merits widely. But we must not idolize it. Augustine faced a similar struggle, “I find it difficult to assign [singing] to its proper place. For sometimes I feel I assign it with more honor than it deserves.”[1] To avoid this pitfall we must answer the fundamental question, “Why do we sing in worship?” Only then will we be able to evaluate what we sing.

Our concept of singing in worship is often blurred due to a faulty concept of singing. Many people assume singing exists solely for creating beauty. Yet, any good singer will tell you that singing is about communication. As one vocalist put it, “The meaning is the life, the light, and the magic in your performance.”[2] The music cannot be separated from the message. Words often take on a deeper significance when sung than when merely spoken. Singing awakens our emotions and brings them alongside the message, allowing us to feel the truth of the lyrics. As Calvin noted, “We know by experience that singing has great force and vigor to move and inflame the hearts of men to invoke and praise God with a more vehement and ardent zeal.”[3]

Singing in worship, however, is not primarily about emotion. Paul Jones provides three actions that help us understand singing: “*Praise, prayer, and proclamation.*”[4] Put another way, when we sing in worship we participate in three actions: doxology, dialogue, and declaration. Doxology is the most obvious action in singing. Scripture provides two reasons for praising God: His character and His actions. Psalm 150:2 instructs us to “Praise him for his mighty deeds” and to “praise him according to his excellent greatness.”

A second action of singing is that of dialogue, or prayer. The Psalms are referred to as the “prayers” of David (Ps. 72:20). Psalm 102 is described as “A prayer of one afflicted” while Psalm 17 contains the simple title “A Prayer of David.” While prayer most certainly can include petition, the main focus is not that we ask God for something but that we talk to Him. The church should not sing merely *about* her Creator and Savior; she should sing *to* Him. The phrase “O LORD” scattered throughout the Psalms should jar us into the realization that our songs directly address our covenant-keeping God.

The final action of singing in worship is declaration, or proclamation. We declare the truths of God to others when we sing. David penned Psalm 60 “for instruction,” while Asaph refers to his song as “my teaching” (Ps. 78:1). Indeed, God used song to remind the Israelites of their covenant with Him, declaring that the song would live unforgotten in their mouths (Deut. 31:19–22). The concept of songs as declaration slightly alters our audience. The congregation not only sings to God but also to each other. Thus, one of the outcomes of

being filled with the Spirit is to address “*one another* in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody *to the Lord*” (Eph. 5:19, emphasis added).

Once we understand the concepts of meaning and emotion in songs and grasp these three actions of singing in worship, we can better discern why we sing. We lift our voices, joining emotion and truth, to extol God for His character and actions and to proclaim these truths to others. The concept of “my music” as typically understood has no place in the church, for we do not sing for ourselves but for others and to God.

---

*Tim Pierce is a junior student at [Reformation Bible College](#).*

[1] Augustine, *Confessions*, 10.33.49.

[2] Shirlee Emmons and Ama Thomas, *Power Performance for Singers: Transcending the Barriers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 204.

[3] John Calvin, “Preface to the Genevan Psalter.”

[4] Paul Jones, *What is Worship Music?* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2010), 7, 37.