

Searching Questions February 1, 2011

Why do God's people always sing?

Are you a singer? Is the music an important part of worship for you? Can you think of a particular piece of sacred music or a particular performance of it which was an important spiritual experience for you? What pieces of Christian music move you? Is there a difference between sacred and secular music in its power to move you? What disturbs your experience of God through music in the worship? Do you have a strong inclination or disinclination toward one of the following (and why?): a) traditional hymns, spirituals, contemporary praise and worship music, psalms, taize chant.

God's people have always sung. Besides the psalms which are the songbook of ancient Israel, there are other passages of Scripture which may reflect ancient hymns. Women and men seem to have an equal voice in this type of praise, as many of the songs are named for women.

The song of Miriam (Exodus 15: (1-18), 19-21): ¹⁹ When Pharaoh's horses, chariots and horsemen went into the sea, the LORD brought the waters of the sea back over them, but the Israelites walked through the sea on dry ground. ²⁰ Then Miriam the prophet, Aaron's sister, took a timbrel in her hand, and all the women followed her, with timbrels and dancing. ²¹

Miriam sang to them:

“Sing to the LORD,
for he is highly exalted.

Both horse and driver
he has hurled into the sea.”

The song of Deborah (Judges 5: 1-31): ¹ On that day Deborah and Barak son of Abinoam sang this song:

² “When the princes in Israel take the lead,
when the people willingly offer themselves—
praise the LORD!

³ “Hear this, you kings! Listen, you rulers!
I, even I, will sing to the LORD;
I will praise the LORD, the God of Israel, in song.

⁴ “When you, LORD, went out from Seir,
when you marched from the land of Edom,
the earth shook, the heavens poured,
the clouds poured down water.

⁵ The mountains quaked before the LORD, the One of Sinai,
before the LORD, the God of Israel.

⁶ “In the days of Shamgar son of Anath,
in the days of Jael, the highways were abandoned;
travelers took to winding paths.

⁷ Villagers in Israel would not fight;
they held back until I, Deborah, arose,

until I arose, a mother in Israel.

⁸ God chose new leaders
when war came to the city gates,
but not a shield or spear was seen
among forty thousand in Israel.

(And on it goes, narrating the whole history of the battle to verse 31)

The song or prayer of Hannah (I Samuel 2: 1-10):

¹ Then Hannah prayed and said: “My heart rejoices in the LORD;
in the LORD my horn is lifted high. My mouth boasts over my enemies, for I delight in
your deliverance.

² “There is no one holy like the LORD; there is no one besides you; there is no Rock like our
God.

³ “Do not keep talking so proudly or let your mouth speak such arrogance, for the LORD is a
God who knows, and by him deeds are weighed.

⁴ “The bows of the warriors are broken, but those who stumbled are armed with strength.

⁵ Those who were full hire themselves out for food, but those who were hungry are hungry no
more.

She who was barren has borne seven children, but she who has had many sons pines away.

⁶ “The LORD brings death and makes alive; he brings down to the grave and raises up.

⁷ The LORD sends poverty and wealth; he humbles and he exalts.

⁸ He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap;
he seats them with princes and has them inherit a throne of honor.

“For the foundations of the earth are the LORD’s; on them he has set the world.

⁹ He will guard the feet of his faithful servants, but the wicked will be silenced in the place of
darkness.

“It is not by strength that one prevails;

¹⁰ those who oppose the LORD will be broken. The Most High will thunder from heaven;
the LORD will judge the ends of the earth.

“He will give strength to his king and exalt the horn of his anointed.”

The song of Mary (sometimes ascribed to Elizabeth) (Luke 1: 46-55):

⁴⁶ And Mary said:

“My soul glorifies the Lord

⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

⁴⁸ for he has been mindful
of the humble state of his servant.

From now on all generations will call me blessed,

⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me—
holy is his name.

⁵⁰ His mercy extends to those who fear him,
from generation to generation.

⁵¹ He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

- ⁵² He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.
- ⁵³ He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.
- ⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,
remembering to be merciful
- ⁵⁵ to Abraham and his descendants forever,
just as he promised our ancestors.”

There are many other examples in Scripture of times when people burst forth with this kind of Spirit-inspired song or prayer: Zechariah upon the birth of his son (Luke 1: 68-79), Hezekiah upon his recovery from grave illness (Isaiah 38), Jonah in his great distress in the belly of the fish (Jonah 2: 1-9). The psalms are the greatest collection of scriptural songs, mostly by David, they: ascribe praise and thanksgiving to the Lord, narrate the mighty deeds of God in the history of Israel, express a prayer for the institutions of Israel (the monarchy, the temple, the holy city), express a lament, express a confession, express the state of the soul, express a vengeful wish toward one’s enemies, and embody wisdom/witness to or teach a moral. Many of the psalms are headed “for the director of music”. As Nehemiah explains, this was an important position in ancient Israel: “For long ago, in the days of David and Asaph, there had been directors for the musicians and for the songs of praise and thanksgiving to God” (Nehemiah 12. 46), a tradition which he reinstates...with stipend! (the people must set aside a portion for the upkeep of the music director and the temple gatekeepers, just as they do for the Levites – the priests who presided at the altar v. 47). Nehemiah is written following the exile, and it is one of the fullest descriptions we get of the role of music in Israel’s worship: ²⁷ *At the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem, the Levites were sought out from where they lived and were brought to Jerusalem to celebrate joyfully the dedication with songs of thanksgiving and with the music of cymbals, harps and lyres.* ²⁸ *The musicians also were brought together from the region around Jerusalem—from the villages of the Netophathites,* ²⁹ *from Beth Gilgal, and from the area of Geba and Azmaveth, for the musicians had built villages for themselves around Jerusalem....I also assigned two large choirs to give thanks,* ³⁵ *as well as some priests with trumpets, and...with musical instruments prescribed by David the man of God.* ⁴⁰ *The two choirs that gave thanks then took their places in the house of God; the choirs sang under the direction of Jezrahiah.* ⁴³ *And on that day they offered great sacrifices, rejoicing because God had given them great joy. The women and children also rejoiced. The sound of rejoicing in Jerusalem could be heard far away.* Clearly being back in their own land makes God’s people full of song, whereas Psalm 137 describes them sitting by the rivers of Babylon (ie. in exile) with their harps hung up, being asked for a song by the Babylonians, and refusing to sing one.

There is also a book in the Bible called “the Song of Songs” or “Song of Solomon” which is a love song, full of praise and rapture at the perfections of the beloved. Like his father David, Solomon was a great writer of songs. Its says in I Kings 4.32 that Solomon’s songs numbered 1005. In the New Testament, scholars believe that there are certain parts of Paul’s letters which are quotations from hymns used in the early church, eg. Philippians 2: 5-11, II Timothy 2: 11-13. In Paul’s letter to the Colossians, chapter 3 he says: ¹⁵ *Let the peace of Christ rule in your*

hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. ¹⁶ *Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom **through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts.*** ¹⁷ *And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”* The book of Revelation is full of songs: songs of victory and songs of praise. The singing there is done by both glorified men and by angels. The “Trisagion” (Holy, Holy, Holy) seems to be a familiar angelic theme, mentioned both in Isaiah’s vision (Isaiah chapter 6) and in Revelation chapter 4. In Rev. 5 the 24 elders and 4 living creatures, pictured with harps, sing this “new song” to the lamb: “*You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation.*” ¹⁰ *You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth.”* And “*Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!*” Then all creation joins the song: “¹³ *“To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!”*. There is similar “new songs” in Rev. 14 and 15.

So what can we take from the above survey of the kind of role singing plays in Scripture and is there an analogy with the way we use music in our worship life today?

When are songs sung?

By whom are they sung?

What sort of things are expressed in songs?

What do you understand to be the distinction between Paul’s three categories of singing: “psalms, hymns and spiritual songs?”

What kind of instrumentation is used with the singing? (see I Chronicles 13.8, Psalm 150)

What is the relation between songs and the Spirit?

What is the relation between songs and angels/the praise-life of heaven?

But...there is also a tradition of negativity toward music in the church.

Satan began as an angel and from the description of him in Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28, some Christians infer that he was a director of music in the worship of heaven before his fall. Isaiah 14.11 says “thy pomp is brought down to the grave, the noise of thy viols (a viol is a stringed instrument).... Ezekiel 28: 13b says “the workmanship of thy timbrels, and of thy pipes was prepared in the day that thou wast created.” The image is of a cherub who has pipes and timbrels (musical instruments) somehow as part of him. Certain (mostly Pentecostal) churches infer from this that Satan is still trying to corrupt the church or corrupt the young through the vehicle of music.

What are some other, not so nice ways, in which music can be used?

Martin Luther: Luther was a writer of hymns and understood the power of music. Being loathed to “let the devil have all the good tunes” he would take a drinking song from the tavern

and set sacred lyrics to it. However, he was against the idea of having choirs in churches, saying that that was where the devil resided. The attitude toward music was different in Reformation era Switzerland. Zwingli disallowed the use of music in church, feeling that it appealed only to the emotions. Calvin's line on church music, observed by Presbyterians up till the 1800s, was that only canonical words (bible texts, such as the psalms set to music) should be used in public worship. He commissioned the writing of a Genevan psalter. We still have some of these tunes in our hymnbook. Queen Elizabeth I of England, thought the Genevan psalter scandalous because the tunes were so dancy. The Scottish psalter ironed out a lot of the syncopation. Its psalm paraphrases were set to LM or CM tunes that could be used interchangeably with different texts. Among those conservative Presbyterians and other groups from the time of the Reformation (eg. the Mennonites) who spurned instrumental accompaniment, a value around singing accapella and in harmony has been developed. For these communities there is a deep sense of interdependence and being the body of Christ together experienced when the psalms are sung. The organ has only been a standard instrument of church music since the 1800s. When the organ was first introduced to churches there were sermons preached against it, calling it "the devil's instrument." Generally speaking, Anglicans have embraced hymnody and have given some real leadership to hymns and songs of praise being written in English, but C. S. Lewis was one Anglican who was very negative toward music. He had the same suspicion of it as some of the Reformed at the time of the reformation: that it engaged the emotions without engaging the heart with the Word of God. Today it is a minority of Christians who worship in the way we would consider standard: organ, choir, congregational hymn singing. Much more common are praise bands, using a variety of instruments, and the instruments of the global church (drums, other percussion etc.)

Personally I think singing is important as I see worship as a dialogue between God's speech and human responding speech. Sometimes words are not enough to embody the response we want to make to God –sometimes we "cannot keep from singing." BUT all of the true praise song of Scripture is directed at God. This is NOT what I experience a lot of the time in the church. We evaluate choirs based on how pleasing they are to our ear, and music directors get into "performance" mode. The point is that the praise should not be directed toward the "audience" as in a performance, but should lead the congregation's praise directed toward God. Sometimes the reasons we have for "loving" a particular hymn are not because it is what we want to say to God, but because it just "feels so good" singing it. There are some examples of truly terrible theology which are seductive because they are set to good tunes. So...all in all, I think we need music in the church, but I think we need to exercise great discernment and circumspection when it comes to how we use music.

Look in the hymnbook at the hymns which are about singing: "When in our music God is glorified" "I cannot keep from singing" "The singer and the song." What do they say about why God's people always sing?

Questions for reflection:

Do your favourite hymns fit into the “song of praise” or the “sung prayer” genre? What does this say about your spirituality? Do they have a particular location in Scripture that lies behind them?

Thinking about the good and the bad worship experiences you have had with music, what would you say are the pitfalls the church has to be careful of in using the gift of music responsibly, and what would be lost if we had to worship with the spoken word only?

How can we subordinate musical taste, and level of musical ability – two things which are divisive in the church, to the power music has to bring about a sense of solidarity/unity, and interdependence?

Are you aware of hymn-writers/sacred music composers? Who do you think are some of the best? Why?