

CONGREGATIONAL SONG AT CORNERSTONE

I am confident that song (that is, music set to text) and the act of singing affects the senses of almost every person in evident and generally positive ways. Whether they're fond of music or not, singing impacts human beings emotionally, mentally, even physiologically and certainly spiritually. I'm sure that is why the Scriptures commend it so frequently. (In fact, music is mentioned more than 800 times in the Bible!)

It is also clear that we have been encouraged, even commanded, by God to sing from a spectrum of perspectives. The songs of the Hebrew patriarchs and prophets (Moses, Job, Jonah, Isaiah, Daniel and others) as well as the broad spectrum of song presented in the Psalms show us that God desires us to sing songs that are both theologically sophisticated and deeply emotional. He desires that we respond to Him with our heads as well as our hearts. That is the reason, I'm sure, the followers of Jesus in the New Testament were instructed by Paul to sing psalms, hymns *and* spiritual songs.

The first category encompasses the wide variety of songs found in the collection of the Psalms and those like them (even the songs of Zacharias and Mary in Luke 1 & 2 are based on the Psalms). The second category speaks specifically to highly theological texts, some of which are specific Psalm texts. In fact, there is a whole category of Psalm texts that scholars identify as hymns because they explicitly describe the character and accomplishments of God. Then there are the quintessential hymn texts of the New Testament which constitute theological summaries of God's manifest nature *in* and accomplishments *through* Christ. These passages include John 1:1f, Romans 11:33-36, Philippians 2:5f, Colossians 1:3f, and the songs of Revelation 4 & 5.

Finally, we are commanded to sing spiritual songs which are not nearly as replete with theological content. These are intended to allow the Spirit of God to prompt our praise in a more emotional, personal, testimonial and spontaneous way. In fact, this category can even include our sung prayers - prayed in the moment. Surprisingly enough, many of the texts we have been taught to categorize as "hymns," particularly those of the late-19th through the mid-20th centuries, should *not* be qualified as hymns at all. They are actually spiritual songs and their authors generally categorized them as such in the hymnals of the 19-20th centuries. These "spiritual songs" include such texts as "Abide with me," "Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine," "I love to tell the story," "I Surrender All," "It Is Well with My Soul," "Jesus Paid It All," "Just as I Am," "My Jesus, I love Thee," "The old rugged Cross," "Tis so sweet to trust in Jesus," "When we all get to heaven" and the like.

Many of these "good old hymns" (as they have been incorrectly identified) are none-the-less worthy additions to the repertory of congregational song as they incite us to praise, personal testimony, spiritual sentiment, and soulful yearning. They are the precursors to the spiritual songs of the latter 20th century such as "Because He lives," "Great Is the Lord," "How Great Thou Art" and "Majesty" and more recently, worship songs such as "Blessed Be Your Name," "Forever Reign," "Hosanna!" (Praise Is Rising)," "Made Me Glad," "Mighty to Save," and the like. Songs such as these should be sung in balance with a broad spectrum of historical Christian hymnody as well as settings of the psalms to afford us the best means of worshiping God spiritually, musically, emotionally, doctrinally, biblically and authentically.

The implementation of ALL these categories of song in worship at Cornerstone is intentional on mine and Bob's part. We desire that everyone in the congregation has something they can sink their spiritual teeth into. Every Sunday service features songs, psalms and hymns that are old AND new, simple AND profound, traditional AND contemporary; ALL of which are selected according to their ability to prepare our hearts for the proclamation of the particular Scripture text to be proclaimed that day. We desire above all to complement the preaching of God's Word and faithfully fulfill the instructions of Scripture in challenging the Church to sing her praise to God: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God." Colossians 3:16 (ESV)

I pray this explanation of our philosophy of congregational song in corporate worship is encouraging as well as informative! I would welcome your comments as well as your prayers to enhance congregational singing within the body of believers at Cornerstone!

IN the service of Christ and the Church, Nathan H. Platt