

Is There One Way to Worship?

Scripture Text: Psalm 98

Introduction

Worship! What is it? For some of us, worship is what we do before the preacher starts preaching. It occurs during the first half of our time together on Sunday morning. For some, worship only happens when we feel it, when something like good music moves us. Three weeks ago we looked at Jesus' instruction for worship. We learned that where we worship is not important because wherever the church is, there ought to be worship. We also learned that God is seeking those who will worship Him in spirit and truth. Two weeks ago we looked at a passage when the Israelites were bringing the Ark of the Covenant into the city of Jerusalem and David gave instructions for worship. We learned from the passage that worship includes giving thanks to God, seeking Him, remembering His faithfulness, and telling the world of God's salvation and glory.

Today, we look at another text that gives us more insight on how to worship. This passage is from an unknown psalmist about worshipping God with song and music. In fact this psalm was a basis for Isaac Watts' famous hymn *Joy to the World*. Songs are powerful. Music is powerful. Songs are creative expressions of things that can move us to respond in certain ways. Even the most laid back person may respond emotionally to a certain song or a piece of music. Song and music are also things that have been passionately debated for many years. Music has unfortunately been the cause of strife and division in a church. I recently read an excerpt from a newspaper that objected to the new trends in church music. The following is what one person had to say about it.

There are several reasons for opposing it. One, it's too new. Two, it's often worldly, even blasphemous. The new Christian music is not as pleasant as the more established style. Because there are so many songs, you can't learn them all. It puts too much emphasis on instrumental music rather than Godly lyrics. This new music creates disturbances making people act indecently and disorderly. The preceding generation got along without it. It's a money making scene and some of these new music upstarts are lewd and loose.

Those are some pretty serious charges. It is blasphemous. It does not emphasize Godly lyrics enough. It creates disturbances. It makes people act indecently, even lewd and loose. Does this sound like some of the things you have heard (or even believed) about church music? I have heard some of those accusations, myself. The interesting thing about that letter is that it was written in 1723. That was almost three hundred years ago. It was a letter attacking Isaac Watts, who wrote some of the great hymns we like to sing today like *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross* and *Joy to the World*. Watts led the church by including new songs, what we call hymns, to be used in worship. The older tradition in Watts' generation was based on the poetry of the Bible, mainly the Psalms. Watts introduced poetry that was outside of scripture and began a new era of hymns as others followed him. Many of his contemporaries objected to this, as the letter shows. People objected to the new songs then, just as people object to the new songs now.

Should Worship Be Diverse?

Maybe a question we should ask is this: Does God expect our worship to be the same from one generation to the next? Is there only one way to worship God correctly? Last week, Keith Campbell reminded us of something about worship. Throughout his travels around the world, he has experienced a variety of worship styles. The way the church in Africa worships is not the same as the church in Asia worships. The way the church in Asia worships is not the same as the church in the United States worships. They are different. Keith challenged us to accept this diversity, but, simply acknowledging the various worship styles of different people around the world does not make it right. Just because a thing exists does not mean it should exist. So, is there only one way God expects for us to worship Him? Let us think about it this way: what if there was only one way to worship God with song and music? What if God was honored by only one type of music, or one way of playing music or singing a song? What would that say about God? Would it mean that He has limited Himself or He has limited what brings Him glory from His creation? Would it be putting God in a box, so to speak?

And yet, this is the same God Who created the universe with all of its variety. Look at the plants and animals on the world. There are over eight million different species of plants and animals on this planet, with over six million species on land and over two million species in the oceans. There are mammals. There are birds. There are fish. There are insects. There are trees, bushes, and flowers and much, much more on this planet. God did not have to create all this diversity. He could have just created dogs and cats. Look at humans. There are about ten thousand people groups in the world with different cultures, languages, and ethnicities, and yet they all bear the image of God. Look at the diversity of the Church. There are many different churches in the world with various members. Within each church, there are various ministries, gifts and talents that God has given us for His glory. Do you get a sense that God desires variety? God did not have to create the world with such variety, but He did. Might He desire for us to worship Him with variety? I think He does. I think this passage demonstrates to us that worshipping God ought to be with variety of song and music. Let us look at the passage.

Worship with a New Song

It is no secret that when we gather together for worship, we sing songs of praise to God. One of the things the psalmist declares in this passage is for us to sing a *new song*.

Psalm 98:1 ¹ *Oh sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things! His right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him.*

We have already seen the aspect of singing and playing music to worship God. We saw something similar two weeks ago when we looked at the song David gave to Asaph to sing when the Ark of the Covenant was being brought in to the City of Jerusalem (1 Chronicles 16:8-36). There was a great celebration when the Israelites brought the Ark into Jerusalem and it was done with a new song of thanksgiving. Psalm 98 commands us to sing a *new song* to God. The word “new” comes from a Hebrew word that

means...well, new or fresh. We see this concept of newness elsewhere in scripture to describe things that did not exist before. Look at the following passage.

Isaiah 48:6 ⁶ *“You have heard; now see all this; and will you not declare it? From this time forth I announce to you **new things**, hidden things that you have not known.*

Some of those new things have been announced. The gospel is new and it makes us new. God also instructed the prophet Ezekiel to write about our new heart and spirit.

Ezekiel 36:26 ²⁶ *And I will give you a **new heart**, and a **new spirit** I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.*

This new heart and new spirit was not there before. It is a new thing that God has given us in Jesus Christ. Therefore, if we have this new heart and spirit, should we then worship God in a new and different way? Probably! Matthew Henry once wrote that new believers sing a new song, very different from what they had sung before. He wrote, “If the grace of God put a new heart into our breast, it will therewith put a new song into our mouths.” The songs believers sing ought to be new. They ought to be songs never heard before. They should also be songs that spring from a fresh impulse of our heart. As God’s mercy is new every morning, so shall our worship to Him be new and fresh each time. We find this new singing elsewhere in scripture. Look at the following.

Psalms 33:3 ³ *Sing to him a new song; play skillfully on the strings, with loud shouts.*

Psalms 96:1–2 ¹ *Oh sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth! ² Sing to the Lord, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day.*

Psalms 149:1 ¹ *Praise the Lord! Sing to the Lord a new song, his praise in the assembly of the godly!*

If you sing something new, it will be something you have not sung before. We could say, “Sing a new song which the people have not yet heard.” But, that is not the only way to understand this. A *new song* could be a familiar song composed in a new way. It does not mean we cannot use the same songs or words we have used before, but rather these songs should spring from hearts that have experienced something new and fresh about our God and Savior. Worship should always spring from a heart that is fresh with the wonder and glory of God. The same old hymns and spiritual songs may be sung in a fresh way, while those new songs may also spring from the heart of a passionate worshipper. I do not think it is either one or the other, but *both* are true. We should sing with all the skill and passion we have that expresses the creativity God has inspired us to use. Keep in mind, the traditional songs we now sing were once new at some time. One more thing before we move on is about why we should worship God this way. This passage reveals one reason.

Psalm 98:2–3 ² *The Lord has made known his salvation; he has revealed his righteousness in the sight of the nations.* ³ *He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel. All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God.*

Perhaps a reason God desires for us to worship with new song is as verse one says: *He has done marvelous things!* He has brought salvation to the world. He has given His only begotten Son. He has shown salvation to the ends of the world. He has loved us in many and wondrous ways. As such, should we not return praise to Him in many, new and wondrous ways? I think we should. This brings us to the next point in this psalm.

Worship with Musical Variety

Not only should we praise God with new songs (or songs in a fresh way), our singing should be *accompanied* by music. Some may focus on this portion of the psalm. For many people who are musicians, music speaks in a powerful way. Consider this, the first thing we are told to do in this psalm is to sing. How do you sing? You sing with the instrument of your mouth. You sing using words. Words are how God communicates with us. The written Word of God is how God has chosen to reveal Himself and His promises to us. Words are how we communicate with God through our prayers. Words are how we communicate with one another. Words are how we praise God, but they are not the only way to praise God. This psalm, and others, tell us to praise God with a new song *and* a variety of musical instruments. Look at the next few verses of this psalm.

Psalm 98:4–6 ⁴ *Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises!* ⁵ *Sing praises to the Lord with the lyre, with the lyre and the sound of melody!* ⁶ *With trumpets and the sound of the horn make a joyful noise before the King, the Lord!*

Notice the style of music mentioned here. This style of worship is not traditional or contemporary. It is a “joyful noise”. This worship should be active, enthusiastic, and noisy. When was the last time you left a worship service saying it was a loud, joyful noise? I wonder what the church said when people started bringing drums and guitars into the worship service? The way I see it, they were following scripture. Like singing a new song with variety, we also see the instruction to use many instruments throughout scripture. Several other passages of scripture include a variety of musical instruments. Look at the following psalms.

Psalm 33:2 ² *Give thanks to the Lord with the lyre; make melody to him with the harp of ten strings!*

Psalm 47, a psalm written by the Sons of Korah, includes claps and trumpets.

Psalm 47:1, 5–6 ¹ *Clap your hands, all peoples! Shout to God with loud songs of joy!* ⁵ *God has gone up with a shout, the Lord with the sound of a trumpet.* ⁶ *Sing praises to God, sing praises! Sing praises to our King, sing praises!*

Psalm 149 includes lyres, tambourines, and dancing (Oh my!).

Psalm 149:3–4 ³ *Let them praise his name with dancing, making melody to him with tambourine and lyre!* ⁴ *For the Lord takes pleasure in his people; he adorns the humble with salvation.*

Yes, dancing is an appropriate expression of worship. Just ask King David. Then, if you jump to the very next and last psalm of the Bible, Psalm 150 reads:

Psalm 150:3–6 ³ *Praise him with trumpet sound; praise him with lute and harp!* ⁴ *Praise him with tambourine and dance; praise him with strings and pipe!* ⁵ *Praise him with sounding cymbals; praise him with loud clashing cymbals!* ⁶ *Let everything that has breath praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!*

God gives us many ways to praise Him with music. The point I think God is telling us is that there is not just one way to worship Him. There is not just one way that church ought to sing and play music for God. We ought to praise Him with all the gifts and talents and variety of instruments and lyrics we can. God is not confined to a particular way of worship. As long as it is with spirit and with truth, we can and should worship Him. I do not think it is a matter of having traditional style worship or contemporary style worship. I think it is about worship that is from the heart. Worship focuses on Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, no matter how it is done. Worship does not focus on our own personal preferences or how we want it to be done. Worship expresses the totality of our being — loving God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength. In essence, worship is showing just how worthy God is to receive all of the various ways we can give Him praise. So, how many ways can you worship God?

Conclusion

In closing, God is a God of variety. As such, our worship should be diverse as well. It does not mean we forget the way previous generations worshipped. It also does not mean we avoid seeking new ways to worship God. It means that we ought to express our praise to God in as many different words and musical styles that He has given us. This is something we have to do. We must find new ways to worship God. The Bible and human history shows us that cultures change. People change. Styles change. The way we worship changes. God, however, does not change. The Gospel does not change. This psalm encourages us to use new songs and musical variety in order to celebrate the salvation God has given us. It is a call for us to praise God for the marvelous things He has done, but there is another reason. Look at the last verses.

Psalm 98:7–9 ⁷ *Let the sea roar, and all that fills it; the world and those who dwell in it!* ⁸ *Let the rivers clap their hands; let the hills sing for joy together* ⁹ *before the Lord, for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity.*

Another reason we praise God in this way is in anticipation of Jesus' coming. Jesus, our Lord, is coming to rule the world with righteousness. How appropriate is this for the season of Advent. Not only do God's people sing praises to God while they wait for Him, His creation does as well. God is the Creator of all creation, and all of creation joins with us in praise. As Isaac Watts' hymn *Joy to the World* says, surely heaven and nature sings the glory of God with us. It declares the coming of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, the one we worship. Worship is not about what we receive. Worship is about what we give! Worship is not about us. Worship is about Jesus Christ! When we leave...we should not say that was a great band, or great music, or a great preacher or a great message. We should leave saying, "Jesus is a great Savior!" Thanks be to God. Amen!