

music to gather by

What's going on when we sing together in church? More than you might realise, says musician and pastor ROB SMITH. And the first thing we have to do is thing through why we're meeting in the first place...

Singing has always been a natural and fitting response to what God has done, is doing and will do in saving his people. The bible is full of examples, like Exodus 15:1; Judges 5; 2 Chronicles 20:20f; Psalms 96 and 147; and in the New Testament, Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16 and James 5:13. Moreover, if the picture we are given in Revelation 5 gives us any indication of what's going on among those who are in the immediate physical presence of the risen Christ, then we can quite reasonably expect that singing will also be a part of our experience of heaven. However, in the face of the widespread confusion that exists in Christian circles today—particularly about the place of music and singing in our gatherings—we have a very real need to return to the Scriptures to make sure we have the mind of Christ on these matters. The place to begin is with the question: What is the purpose of our meeting together?

Why do Christians meet?

When Christians come together our aim, according to the apostle Paul, should be to

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edify each other through loving exercise of the gifts and ministries which the Spirit of Christ has given to us (1 Cor. 14:26). In other words, there is a powerful focus on the “one-anotherness” of our being together. We don't come together to have a *private experience* of communion with God—we can do that at home. We come precisely for the purpose of meeting and being met by others—so that we can minister to each other. Edification (ie. building) is the key word; and the key to edification, as the Bible consistently makes clear, is the Word of God (Acts 20:32; Eph. 4:11-16).

The experience of edification, moreover, is not simply a *horizontal* one; for “where two

or three come together in my name”, says Jesus, “there am I in the midst of them” (Matt. 18:20). In our meeting together, Jesus meets with us. But how does he meet with us? The key thing to understand is that Jesus' presence is a *Spiritual* presence; that is, he is present by his Spirit. How, then, is the Spirit of Jesus encountered?

(i) Firstly, and fundamentally, in the (Scriptural) Word of God;

(ii) but secondly, and contingently, in our faithful serving of each other.

Let me explain what I mean. How do we encounter the Word of Christ, if not through the lips and life of another Christian brother or sister? For example, when a sister stands up and reads the Scriptures to us, the Spirit of Christ, through the Word of Christ, is ministering through her to us. Likewise when we pray for a brother in the congregation, or encourage him, or sing with such enjoyment and enthusiasm that his faith is strengthened, Jesus Christ by his Spirit and through his Word is ministering to him through us. When the preacher faithfully ministers the Word of God and those who hear it repent and believe the gospel, Jesus Christ by his Spirit and through his Word is ministering through him to us. That is what the Bible means by edification, and that is what should be happening in our meetings at every point.

Clearly, then, edification is never something we do purely on the horizontal, apart from Jesus Christ. Rather, it is something we do (and can only do) “in Christ”, “through Christ” and “because of Christ”. In the final analysis, it is in fact something that Christ does through us. After all Jesus did say “I will build (edify) my church” (Matt. 16:18). So as we come together to edify and to be edified, as we share the Word of God together and speak and sing it to each other, Christ himself is ministering to us through others and through us to others. This is clearly something that doesn't happen on your own at home!

Where does music fit in?

Where, then, does music fit in to all of this? In answering this question, it is helpful to think in terms of the three dimensions or aspect involved in the Christian gathering. These can be diagrammed as follows:

Here we see the three dimensions that ought to characterise the Christian gathering: Firstly, God, by his Word and Spirit, ministers to us—this is how he builds/edifies us. Secondly, we respond to God (both personally and corporately) in obedient trust, in faithful prayer and thankful praise. Thirdly, we minister to each other, seeking to edify and strengthen each other in faith, hope and love (which, as we've seen, is also part of God's ministry to and through us). Therefore, everything we do when we meet together should fit somewhere in this three-dimensional process. In fact, most things we do will be engaged in two, or perhaps all three, of these dimensions at the same time (e.g., preaching, prayer, etc).

So where, then, does our singing fit in? The answer is that it fits in (or can fit it) anywhere and everywhere. For when we sing, provided the words of the songs convey the saving truth of God, our songs participate in the ministry of God's Word to us. In addition to this, our songs are part of our responding to God in thankful prayer and praise. But more than that, our songs are also a way of ministering to (ie, encouraging and strengthening) one another. In fact, that's how the New Testament often talks about our singing; through songs we teach and admonish *one another* (Col. 3:16; Eph. 5:19). This last point should not surprise us, for as we have seen, it is the "one-anotherness" of our gathering that is the reason we come together.

It also needs to be said that music and singing open up possibilities for many (if not all) of the members of the body to participate in various ways. For example, those with skills on various instruments can use their gifts for the benefit of others, and all who can sing can employ their voices to the same end. But service of one another is the goal. Thus, there is a world of difference between the 'worship consumer', who uses the presence, voices and musical skill of other Christians in order to have a privatised experience of God, and the

person who 'comes to church' with the conscious and deliberate aim of seeking to be Christ to others, and so sings or plays (or possibly doesn't sing or play!) so that other members of the body may be edified.

When will music work best?

In light of these perspectives we can say the following about when music and singing will work best (ie. accomplish God's goal) in our gatherings:

Firstly, they will work best *when music is the servant of the Word of God, not an end in itself*. As we have seen, the goal is edification.

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This means that instrumental music (which may have its uses) will be of less value than songs, which have the potential to convey the Word of God. However, as the most direct channels through which the Word of God comes to us are the preaching and reading of the Scriptures, it will also mean that our singing must not detract from, be in conflict with or be split-off from the reading and preaching of the Word of God. Music is a very beautiful servant, but (as too many churches have discovered) a very destructive master! Whilst spontaneity and freedom are important, there is a need for careful, prayerful planning and reflection as to the content of our songs and their place in our meetings.

Secondly, it follows from this that singing will work best *when the words of the songs are true and helpfully expressed*. That a song has a good tune is not enough. If the words are erroneous, incomprehensible or easily open to misunderstanding, then it is more of a hindrance to the work of God than a help. Far too many contemporary songs are unhelpful in this regard, and some even heretical! This calls for gentle discernment and (sometimes) ruthlessness. It may also mean that some songs can only be sung with an explanation as to what they do (and don't) mean.

Thirdly, singing works best when the music is *appropriate, enjoyable, memorable and singable*. That a song has good words is not always enough either. If the tune is un-singable or

doesn't fit with the mood of the song, then the usefulness of the song is greatly diminished. Many good sets of words, need new tunes written to them. When good words and a good tune come together, a song is more enjoyable to sing and its truth more easily grasped and remembered.

Fourthly, singing works best *when it is creatively employed in the various dimensions of our gatherings*. It is to our loss that a tradition has developed which has restricted our understanding of singing to our response to God—usually spoken of in terms of 'worship' and/or 'praise'. Worse, in many peoples' minds 'worship' and 'praise' have

come to be synonymous with singing. We need to rediscover the biblical (and much bigger) notions of worship and praise, and likewise the way in which our songs participate in God's ministry to us and our ministry to others. This will surely open up new horizons for the usefulness of our songs.

Fifthly, our songs work best *when their accompaniment is competently and sensitively played*. One of the tensions in Christian ministry is the noble desire to 'give everyone a go' and yet the practical need to only use the best people up front. Each congregation needs to work this out in terms of what gifts God has placed in their midst and what responsibilities they have to develop the abilities of musical members of the congregation. Whilst we should avoid a perfectionist mind set, some degree of competence and musical sensibility is a necessary prerequisite to service.

Finally, our songs work best *when the musicians and song leaders are humble and dedicated servants*. Because the church is a body and a family, arrogance and self-centredness (particularly in those who lead) is often contagious. Musical gifts have a way of tantalising the human ego, causing many musicians to fall into the trap self-service. This simply needs to be guarded against and rebuked when present.

Conclusion

The ability to sing and make music is one of God's great gifts to humanity. Songs can lift our hearts, stir our emotions and bind us together like few other things can. Thus, Christian songs are a natural and fitting vehicle (even if not always an indispensable one) for accomplishing God's work in us when we come together. As we have seen, the purpose of our gatherings is not to do what we could do on our own at home (spend time in private reflection and prayer), but to build or edify each other, to admonish and encourage one another, to corporately draw near to God in prayer and praise, and together to be involved in the giving and receiving of the ministry of the Word of God.

All of this highlights the need for sensitive yet purposive leadership. Like an orchestra, the gifts given to the body need coordinating so that they might work in harmony and so combine to fulfil the God-ordained purpose of our gatherings—mutual edification. Such edification is clearly a vital part of our worship of God, a worship which embraces all of life, but in the context of our meeting together is expressed in our ministry to one another. So: "Let the word of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God" (Col. 3:16).

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