

Celebrating Presbyterian Worship Part 3. Music

Over these several weeks we have been talking about Presbyterian Worship, and this morning we are looking at the role of music in our worship.

The Book of Order encourages the use of music as “a response which engages the whole self in prayer. Song unites the faithful in common prayer wherever they gather for worship...” Do you think you are praying when you sing a hymn or listen to any other music? The Book of Order says even just “instrumental music may be a form of prayer.” It then warns that “In worship, music is not to be for entertainment or artistic display.” Instead, the sole purpose of music in our worship is prayer. (*Book of Order*, W-2.1003 - W-2.1004)

There are hundreds of references to music in the Bible. The New Testament mentions singing hymns after the Last Supper: Matthew says "When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives." (Matthew 26:30) Paul instructed the Colossians to “with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.” (Colossians 3:16)

Leading up to the Reformation, there was considerable music in the church. The early Christians sang psalms – one order of Monks introduced the practice of continuous psalm singing so that all 150 were sung each week! The use of a cantor with responsive singing between different parts of the choir was developed, and the Gregorian chant became prevalent. Our song, *Of the Father's Love Begotten*, was originally written in Latin in the 4th Century and is still sung to an 11th century Gregorian chant.

Our Presbyterian forefathers thought a great deal about music. One of the changes brought by the Reformation was the return of music to the actual congregation – everyone was expected to sing. That hadn't been the case for many years: If you think of the classic Cathedral design in the Middle Ages, there was a section called the Choir that actually divided the Nave, where the public stood or sat, and the Alter, where the priest and the Bible were located ... music was sung by the choir or the monks more than the people of the congregation.

Martin Luther obviously thought music was essential to worship as he wrote numerous congregational hymns, like *A Mighty Fortress is Our God* which we sing today to a tune he originally composed.

But the Presbyterians, being focused on the Bible's instruction for worship, questioned whether church music should be anything but the Psalms and a few “canticles” - those are the poetic verses appearing elsewhere in the Bible, like the *Magnificat* sung by Mary in the Gospel of Luke. The early Presbyterians rejected any hymns that were *not* direct quotations from the Bible – including even the hymns of Martin Luther. This tradition of psalms is still reflected in our Hymnal – 100 pages are dedicated to the Psalms, and there are 6 different tunes or variations for the 23rd Psalm.

I have this little copy of the New Testament printed in 1835 in Edinburgh, for the Kirk of Scotland – and in the back is the Scottish Psalter of the 150 Psalms. That Psalter was originally published in 1650.

Many of our early theologians argued that the Psalms should be sung *a cappella* and there should be no instruments at all in worship. They associated instruments with the Old Testament and the Roman Catholic church, not the Gospels.

That included John Calvin - he said that “Musical instruments in celebrating the praises of God would be no more suitable than the burning of incense, the lighting of lamps, and the restoration of the other shadows of the law. The Papists therefore, have foolishly borrowed, this, as well as many other things, from the Jews. Men who are fond of outward pomp may delight in that noise; but the simplicity which God recommends to us by the apostles is far more pleasing to him.” (*Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, Vol. I, p. 539)

John Knox described the organ as “a kist (chest) of whistles.” (Of course, back in those days that could have been close to true!)

It wasn't just Presbyterians who had such an opinion of instrumental music in worship. Even John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist church, early on rejected the use of instruments – he said: “I have no objection to instruments of music in our worship, provided they are neither seen nor heard.” (John Wesley, founder of Methodism, quoted in *Adam Clarke's Commentary*, Vol. 4, p. 685)

Today, only a few, relatively small, churches continue this tradition of “exclusive psalmody,” and fewer still have no instruments at all. Instead most Protestant churches have embraced hymns inspired by the Bible and the use of all instruments! Today we use music to center ourselves on God's Word, to interpret scripture, to convey our own prayers, and to express our joy in God's redeeming love. Music is an integral part of our worship – and it is so important that our Book of Order directs that the Pastors select the hymns that we sing. [So, if you ever have an issue with music selections, you know who to talk to!]

Today our Hymnal reflects nearly Two Thousand years of Christian music – from 4th Century texts of the early Christian church to hymns written in the 1990's. So look at the hymns we sing, and the other music in our service. Even if you don't consider yourself a singer, read the text for its inspiration. Using our hymns and music as a form of prayer, we make a joyful noise to the Lord.