

# CHRISTIAN STUDIES

## SCHOLARSHIP FOR THE CHURCH

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“The Sacrifice of Praise”  
Strengthening Congregational Singing\*

Jeffrey Peterson

The death of Mitch Miller last year serves as a reminder that, to whatever extent it once was, ours is no longer a singalong society. I’m not sure just when the change came, but it must have been sometime between 1984 and 1998—between the last football game I attended in college and the first varsity basketball game I attended at my children’s school. In the olden days, the game began with the spectators standing and singing the national anthem; now we stand and listen while someone else sings. I made this discovery amidst some mild embarrassment in the fall of 1998, when I joined that evening’s performer in a duet for the first few bars before noticing that I was the only spectator singing. Americans are in the habit of *listening* to music almost everywhere, but birthday parties and meetings of the more overtly patriotic chapters of the Rotary Club are about the only occasions where we still routinely *sing* in groups outside a church building. It is within this cultural

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\*I offer these reflections in appreciation of Allan McNicol, whose work is marked by a concern to preserve and refine the Restorationist vision in dialogue with current scriptural and theological scholarship. I wish also hereby to honor Patricia McNicol, whose ministry as director of the Children’s Chorus at the University Avenue Church of Christ in Austin was a blessing to my children. This essay incorporates remarks delivered at the Pepperdine Bible Lectures, May 6, 2005. I am grateful to Ross Thomson, pulpit minister of the Singing Oaks Church of Christ in Denton, Texas, for comment on the penultimate draft.

milieu that Churches of Christ are reconsidering our longstanding practice of *a cappella* congregational singing.

A friend who teaches at a Christian university relates an anecdote that highlights another concern regarding the singing of our congregations. He was leading a study tour in Germany which included a visit to Wittenberg, where Martin Luther struck the spark that ignited the Reformation by nailing 95 debate propositions to the cathedral door (as intellectuals spoiling for a fight did before the invention of blogs). As the tour bus departed, my friend suggested to the group's song leader that it would be appropriate to sing Luther's hymn "A Mighty Fortress." "I'm sorry," the student replied, "I don't think I know that one." A show of hands confirmed the same for all but a few of these students, most brought up in Churches of Christ. Are our churches missing anything vital if we are unable to sing the great, theologically substantive hymns of the Christian tradition and can praise God only through simple and repetitive praise choruses? And if so, will this loss be hastened or slowed if the praise team becomes a praise band?

I do not believe that the question whether Churches of Christ will continue to sing *a cappella* is the most important question facing our fellowship, and I think the question of what we sing is more important. But the question whether to continue to sing *a cappella* is one of the most *urgent* questions facing our churches; the Latin *urgere* means "to press hard, urge," and for many of our churches, the question is inescapable. Every group of Christians meeting together must of necessity decide how to order their common life. Concretely, this includes doing some things in assemblies and not doing others, and doing each of those things in some way rather than another—at least, on each occasion when a given thing is done. (To seek to be as eclectic as possible and vary worship practices as much as we can from one service to another would itself be to adopt a way of being the church, even if not an advisable one.) In the current cultural climate, churches of the Restoration tradition must decide whether to maintain worship *a cappella* or to adopt a

different practice. That decision will face urban and suburban churches repeatedly within the next decade.

Yet the future of *a cappella* singing is a difficult question to consider dispassionately. The practice was a key element of our churches’ identity throughout the twentieth century, an identifying mark recognized by insiders and outsiders. For much of the twentieth century, Churches of Christ appeared to outsiders as either “the people who worship without instruments” (or “without music,” as sometimes said) or “the people who think they’re the only ones going to heaven,” and sometimes a combination of the two. Indeed, not a few insiders thought that one reason we were the only ones going to heaven had to do with the absence of instruments in our worship.<sup>1</sup>

So we come to this discussion carrying some baggage that’s liable to weigh us down when we try to think it through. Perhaps the heaviest of these burdens is the history of sectarianism to which I’ve just alluded. For much of the last century, many of our churches operated under the assumption that any time we take up any doctrinal question, what is at stake is our ability to remain in fellowship with those who reach a different conclusion (and, ultimately, the eternal salvation of the party in error). Second, and related, is the background of legalism. We have often engaged questions of church doctrine and practice on the tacit assumption that the New Testament is akin to the IRS Code, and we have cast our divine Judge in the role of cosmic Auditor: when judgment comes, God will put on his green eyeshades and go to work looking for a technicality on which to deny us eternal life. That is far from the New Testament gospel of a God who has gone to all lengths to save his errant creatures, even giving up his Son for us.

Third, we approach this question weighed down by the burden of bad arguments. This is related to legalism, but it’s a distinct problem. We bring to the question of church music a history of some embarrassingly weak argu-

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<sup>1</sup> An informative and engaging account of Churches of Christ in the last century, amply illustrating this point, is David Edwin Harrell’s *Churches of Christ in the Twentieth Century: Homer Hailey’s Personal Journey of Faith* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2000).

ments for the practice of *a cappella* singing. Mike Cope has said that as a child he knew that instrumental music was wrong; he wasn't sure why, but he knew it had "something do with gopher wood." It's not an unmixed blessing that Nadab and Abihu are better known in our fellowship than in other sectors of Christendom.<sup>2</sup> This history means that when we talk about the music of the church, we have to overcome embarrassment that we're discussing the subject at all or that there are in fact issues requiring discussion. This is related to the fourth piece of baggage we're toting, which we've only picked up within the last decade or two and which might be called the Doctrine of Ecclesiological Indifferentism. This is the judgment that it really does not matter much what the church does when we come together; having understandably wearied of sectarianism and legalism as a basis for life together, we are pulled to the opposite extreme by the swing of the pendulum. When a practice previously absent from our common worship is proposed, we tend to answer, "Why not?" There being no verse of scripture opposed to a practice, however, does not constitute an argument in its favor.

It may afford perspective to recognize that other communions are also reevaluating their worship practices, even as we reconsider ours.<sup>3</sup> It seems, that argument counts for less in the dawning "post-denominational" era than it did when denominational affiliation was the primary predictor of religious conviction. In the twenty-first century (and perhaps in every century), social trends shape the decisions congregations make about how as a church we will worship God as much as, and perhaps more than, any scriptural or theological argument. Darryl Tippens thus observes that many of the arguments that have been used to support our musical practice "seem to carry far less

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<sup>2</sup> The most intriguing suggestion of this type I recall having heard is that the instrument was introduced into the worship of the church in AD 666; the preacher didn't draw out the lesson, but it seemed clear who was responsible for the introduction (cf. Rev 13:18).

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Day offers an instructive treatment of music in the Catholic Church in America in *Why Catholics Can't Sing: The Culture of Catholicism and the Triumph of Bad Taste* (New York: Crossroad, 1990).

weight than they once did,” and he invites us to consider “other ways to approach the subject.”<sup>4</sup>

As Christians of the Restoration tradition, a starting point for considering our life together that we can perhaps still agree on is a willingness to let the New Testament be our primary teacher regarding discipleship and the corporate life of the church. That, I suggest, is the key intuition at the heart of the Restorationist way of being Christian. This does not require us to hold that first century churches were perfect; a glance at 1 Corinthians or Galatians will show that they were far from it. It is to suggest rather that the aims of the apostles and apostolic teachers codified in the New Testament ought to be our aims for our churches, as well. When Restorationists set about to “do church,” we begin by considering what kind of community the apostles were trying to foster, and how the forms of Christian life and worship they established were intended to further those aims. So what does the New Testament teach us about the purposes music should serve in the life of the church?<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Darryl Tippens, *That’s Why We Sing: Reclaiming the Wonder of Congregational Singing* (Abilene: Leafwood, 2007), 19. The most substantive argument I know for a *cappella* congregational singing is the work of Everett Ferguson, *A Cappella Music in the Public Worship of the Church* (rev. ed.; Abilene: Biblical Research Press, 1972). Ferguson gives due consideration to the lexical argument (1–27), which has often enjoyed pride of place among Restorationists, but I find more significant his demonstration that the considered judgment of the ancient church favored a *cappella* singing in public worship (47–84) and his theological argument that “a *cappella* music is more consistent with the nature of Christian worship” than singing accompanied by instruments (87–96, here 87). The present essay is essentially an expansion on the latter contention.

<sup>5</sup> While space precludes a full exegetical discussion of each of the relevant texts, good points of entry into interpretation are offered *ad loc.* by (in order of the texts’ appearance here) Jerry L. Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008); Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002); Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians* (Interpretation; Louisville: John Knox, 1997); James Thompson, *Hebrews* (Paideia; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008); Joseph Fitzmyer, *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Anchor Bible 33; New York: Doubleday, 1993); and David E. Aune, *Revelation 1–5* (Word Biblical Commentary 52A; Waco: Word Books, 1997).

From Col 3:16,17 we learn that singing is an element of the church's teaching ministry, an instrument by which the word of God takes up residence in the church's collective consciousness with depth and richness: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God."<sup>6</sup> The specific functions ascribed to the church's singing are teaching and admonishing one another (in the horizontal dimension) and praising God and giving him thanks (in the vertical dimension). The teaching power of the church's singing remains true to our experience, as we learn more of our theology from what is sung in church than from what is said: do we more often find ourselves in the shower on Monday morning repeating sentences from the sermon, or singing one of the songs that we offered to God in the company of the church the day before?<sup>7</sup>

The ethical importance of the church's song is underscored in the similar passage in Eph 5:15–20. Here we find an emphasis on moral conduct, an indication that the songs of the church teach us not only what to believe but also how to live as people who understand the will of the Lord (v. 17). The passage also gives attention to the setting in which the church sings when Paul instructs us, "Do not be drunk with wine but be filled with the Spirit as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs" (v. 18). Paul contrasts drunkenness with inspiration because the church's singing takes place around the table of the Lord.

The first-century church celebrated the Lord's supper as an actual meal, not merely a symbolic one. But the worship gathering didn't end when the meal ended; it continued in a second phase, which ancients called a "symposium," which Paul describes in 1 Corinthians, chapters 12–14.<sup>8</sup> Wine was

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<sup>6</sup> Translations of scripture are modified from the RSV.

<sup>7</sup> The observation is by no means limited to Churches of Christ; I've heard it made most forcefully by a professor in a Presbyterian seminary.

<sup>8</sup> Dennis Smith's book *From Symposium to Eucharist* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003) is informative about the symposium as the cultural framework in which earliest Christian worship developed; my brief reader's guide to the book is that it is right in most of what it says about pagan and Jewish banquets (1–172), and also about

greatly watered down compared with modern table wines, but it was still possible to get drunk, as we recall from 1 Cor 11:21, hence the concern expressed in Ephesians. Paul expresses concern that our singing be a clear witness to the Lord who has redeemed us and that it clearly manifest the presence of the Spirit bestowed on us by Christ (Eph 5:18). A concern for decorum and conduct that reflects favorably on the church is not foreign to the apostolic vision of singing among the people of God.

In 1 Cor 14, Paul devotes attention to the church’s worship in the sung and spoken word and gives a rich perspective on what this worship is to accomplish. The most important terms in the chapter are “edify” and “edification,” describing the effect the words that the church sings and speaks are to have on the Christians who participate (vv. 3–5, 12, 17, 26). The language is drawn from the field of construction; it describes the process of building up, strengthening, and fortifying a structure. In its application to the life of the church by Paul, it does not refer primarily to the production of certain feelings in worshipers (as we sometimes use the English word “edify” to mean) but rather to our being “built up” in faith, hope, and love. “Fortification” might be a better English equivalent for the function of singing Paul has in mind.

This does not mean our singing is divorced from our emotions. Paul is very clear that when we sing both our understanding and our “spirit” are engaged (1 Cor 14:15; cf. Jas 5:13). Paul does not see understanding and feeling as opposed to one another. Rather, our feelings are engaged when we understand the Gospel and the extent of what God has done for us in Christ. We might compare Paul’s doxology after he has concluded his exposition of the Gospel in Rom 11:33–36. The doxology does not confess Paul’s defeat at being able to understand salvation but rather expresses the wonder involved in recognizing the magnitude of what God has done in Christ, “consigning all to sin so that he might have mercy on all” (Rom 11:32).

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Paul (173–217), but wrong in much of what it says about Jesus and the Gospels (188–191, 219–277).

In 1 Cor 14:13–17 we see a concern for clarity in the meaning of the church’s song, expressed in Paul’s concern for how an unbeliever will respond to it. We also note in these verses (esp. v. 15) that there is little difference between the church’s singing and the church’s prayer. Luke’s account of Paul and Silas “praying and singing hymns to God” (Acts 16:25 RSV) suggests the same.<sup>9</sup> The music of the church is the church engaged in corporate prayer. The concern for clarity reappears in vv. 23–25, in which Paul expresses the concern that the words spoken and sung in the church’s worship clearly state the need that the Gospel meets. These words are to manifest the presence in our worship of the Creator and Redeemer God of Israel, for the words in which Paul envisions an unbeliever responding to the church’s worship are drawn from Isa 45:14: “Truly God is among you.”

In its brief reference to the church’s music, the letter to the Hebrews similarly presents Christian singing as “a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name” (Heb 13:15). Running through the New Testament references to the church’s singing, then, we find a priority given to verbal expression as a means of articulating the church’s faith and challenging the church to live in conformity with its confession. Further, New Testament passages often regarded by scholars as quotations from early Christian hymns (e.g., Phil 2:5–11; Col 1:15–18; John 1:1–18) are among the most substantive and challenging statements in the New Testament concerning Christ and his significance.<sup>10</sup> It is instructive to compare our repertoire of songs and see how they measure up.

In the climactic passage of Paul’s letter to the Romans, the church’s song is presented as uniting the church in praise of God (Rom 15:5,6). In this way

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<sup>9</sup> The association between praying and singing is even closer in Greek than in English, in which “praying” represents a participle modifying the main verb for singing; the sense is captured by the Darby translation, “at midnight Paul and Silas, in praying, were praising God with singing” (blueletterbible.com, accessed 10 March 2011).

<sup>10</sup> See for example Oscar Cullman, *The Earliest Christian Confessions* (London: Lutterworth, [1949]); Jack T. Sanders, *The New Testament Christological Hymns: Their Historical Religious Background* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971).

the music of the church anticipates the eschatological worship around the throne of God previewed in Rev 4–5, which resounds throughout all creation (Rev 5:8–14). In light of Paul’s prayer and John’s vision, it is a great irony that music has provided the occasion for conflict in the history of our Restoration movement, as it threatens presently in Churches of Christ.<sup>11</sup>

If we take our cues from the New Testament, the primary questions we will ask about the church’s music are how well it grounds us in the Christian faith and how adequately it equips us to live the Christian life. *A cappella* congregational singing, besides maintaining the contemporary church in continuity with the practice of the early church, focuses us on the words of the songs we offer to God and so accords with the teaching role that the New Testament ascribes to music in the life of the church.

For that role to be fulfilled, we must of course sing songs that have the capacity to teach us what God has done for us in Christ and how we should live in response. From the perspective of the New Testament on the church’s music, it represents a loss to our churches if, for example, “This Is How We Overcome” serves our churches not as a complement to “A Mighty Fortress” but as a replacement for it.<sup>12</sup> Even doctrinally substantive songs of recent vintage (e.g., “In Christ Alone”) tend to emphasize the individual’s experience of faith and to neglect the corporate context of discipleship. This is not to suggest that there was a golden age of music in Churches of Christ from which we’ve now fallen away, so we must return to Mitch Miller’s heyday to regain it. “Mansions Over the Hilltop,” as meaningful as it may have been to people who lived through the Great Depression, is no great primer in the

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<sup>11</sup> Wendell Willis is instructive as to how disagreements over music in Churches of Christ in recent decades parallel arguments that led to separation from Disciples of Christ a century and more ago (“The Sociological Factors in the Music-in-Worship Controversy,” *Restoration Quarterly* 38 [1996]: 194–203), the fundamental issue being “the character and purposes of worship, especially music in worship” (202).

<sup>12</sup> Tastes of course vary, and there is room within the body of Christ for charitable differences of opinion over the merits of different songs. Strictly on the question of theological substance, however, there is no reasonable dispute about the merits of the two songs mentioned.

Christian faith. It may be that as a communion we have not done as well as we suppose at giving voice to the riches of the Christian faith in song; that is no reason not to try to do better in the future.

One practical benefit of *a cappella* singing is that it tends to strengthen a congregation's ability to praise God and edify one another in song, in the process impressing the words on our consciousness. For those reared in an *a cappella* milieu, it is a striking experience to attend a service in a communion that uses an organ or other accompaniment and notice that scarcely anyone in the assembly is singing. The increased use of amplification in our churches can lead to a technically *a cappella* version of the same phenomenon; it only takes a few trained and amplified voices to fill a worship center with beautiful sound. With discretion and in moderation, this practice may well serve as an adornment to a congregation's worship. If it becomes the mainstay, however, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the congregation's leaders have (despite their best intentions) permitted the song service to be transformed into a concert.

Church leaders who see the value of a vibrant tradition of congregational singing and wish to strengthen this rather than weaken it would do well to give attention to the practical effects of the way the church's worship in song is conducted. Amid the constant press of short-term decisions that must be made to keep a congregation operating from Sunday to Sunday, ministers and elders concerned to strengthen congregational singing must especially work to bear in mind the long-term effects a given practice may have if adopted as a congregational norm. This consideration extends even to the way worship spaces are furnished and appointed. Many churches could enhance their singing, and incidentally reduce the need to rely on amplification, through such mundane reforms as removing carpeting from the worship center or replacing sound-absorbing acoustic tile with a more resonant surface.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> John L. Bell cites the button distributed by GIA Publications with the slogan "Carpet Bedrooms, Not Churches" (*The Singing Thing: A Case for Congregational Song* [Chicago: GIA Publications, 2000], 125.) See also *Acoustics for Liturgy: A*

Those of us involved in the church’s teaching ministry should consider how we can best encourage and strengthen the congregational singing of hymns that can deepen the faith of the churches we serve, and here there are some encouraging signs. Pepperdine University has recently inaugurated “The Ascending Voice,” a triennial conference celebrating *a cappella* sacred music throughout Christendom.<sup>14</sup> My colleague Mark Shipp is overseeing a project to make the Book of Psalms accessible for congregational singing, published under the auspices of Abilene Christian University.<sup>15</sup> Universities and seminaries could make a further contribution through the formation of Institutes of Congregational Singing, bringing together persons with musical and theological expertise to provide the resources needed to sustain a contemporary *a cappella* tradition of substance and beauty. The spread of information technology means that the work of such institutes could be made available to churches in the remotest hamlets with a much smaller capital investment than the production of a hymnbook requires.<sup>16</sup> What should be clear is that *a cappella* congregational singing in Churches of Christ will not survive as a practice worthy of preservation by accident. Intentionality and deliberateness will be needed to sustain the kind of—music ministry—the New Testament describes in the culture in which we seek by God’s grace to embody the faith he has entrusted to us.

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*Collection of Articles of the Hymn Society in the U.S. and Canada* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1991).

<sup>14</sup> See Mark Storer, “Pepperdine to hold second triennial Ascending Voice Symposium,” 6 March 2010 (<http://www.vcstar.com/news/2010/may/06/pepperdine-to-hold-second-triennial-ascending>, accessed 10 March 2011).

<sup>15</sup> *Timeless: Ancient Psalms for the Church Today* (Abilene: ACU Press, forthcoming).

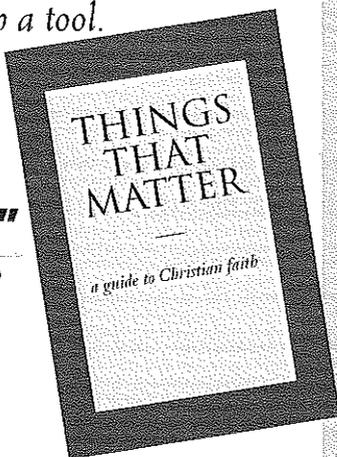
<sup>16</sup> One existing resource useful for acquainting oneself with texts and tunes not featured on Christian radio is the “Net Hymnal” (<http://www.cyberhymnal.org>). GIA Publications also offers a selection of resources valuable for enhancing congregational singing ([http://www.giamusic.com/sacred\\_music/](http://www.giamusic.com/sacred_music/)).

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