



THE
Dwell Richly
COURSE

leading others in singing the gospel

2. GATHERING TO SING

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*I will sing the wondrous story
Of the Christ who died for me.
How he left His throne in glory
For the cross of Calvary.¹*

Intro

So how does this understanding of worship shape our gatherings, and particularly our singing?

When we gather, God reminds us of the gospel – who He is and what He’s done for us – and we respond with lives of worship. Our singing is a key God-given means of helping us remember the gospel and respond with heart and mind to the truth about Christ. We have a ministry of the word through which we show others Christ in the power of the Spirit. That understanding transforms everything about how we approach leading others in singing.

Gathering and worship

The whole of our lives – whether scattered or gathered – can be offered to God as worship; every moment in life is a chance to respond in worship to God’s glory revealed in Jesus Christ. When we gather to worship God, we remind each other of the gospel and to respond in adoration and action in a particularly focused way.

We could say, “Going to church to worship is like going to the gym to exercise.”² The gym offers particularly focused and significant times of exercise; even though we’ve been exercising elsewhere throughout the week. In a similar way, church gatherings are particularly focused and significant times of being built up as we worship God together. God calls Christians to gather (and keep gathering, Hebrews 10:25) under the authority of ministers of His word that we might be built up (Ephesians 4). So, it’s not true to simply say “we only worship God when we gather”, or that “worship = singing”. But when we gather, we worship God in focused and significant ways by reminding each other of the gospel and

1 Francis H. Rowley, “I Will Sing the Wondrous Story”, Public Domain.

2 Andrew Towner, *Singing the Gospel*, unpublished.

continuing on in our whole-life response of worship, together.

In that sense, singing together and planting the truth of the gospel deeply in our hearts and minds is a significant part of our worship.

Gathering to remind and respond

Throughout the Bible, we see God gathering His people with at least two key aims.

1. He *reminds* them of who He is, what He's done for them, and of their identity as His people; and
2. He *enables* them to respond in lives of worship.

Old Testament gathering

One example of God gathering His people in the Old Testament is in Joshua 24. God *reminds* them of all He has done for them in their history: faithfully keeping His promises to Abraham, leading them out of slavery in Egypt, and bringing them peace in the Promised Land of their inheritance (v2-13).

God then invites the people to *respond* in worship. He calls them to "choose... whom they will serve" – the LORD, or the idols of the defeated nations (v15). The people respond that they will serve the LORD, because of all He has done for them (v16-18). Joshua impresses upon the people the need for whole-hearted, faithful worship of God, and the people again respond by saying "We will serve the LORD" (v21). Joshua re-affirms God's covenant promises (v25) before dismissing the people to their inheritance (v28).

This pattern of reminder and response comes up again and again as God gathers His people (for example see 2 Kings 23:1–3 and Nehemiah 8–10).³ Most often, God's people respond in prayer and joyful praise to these reminders of who He is and what He has done.

New Testament gathering

This pattern of reminding and responding continues on in the New Testament. When we gather today as the church, we too are *reminded* of who God is and what He's done for us in Jesus, and we begin to *respond* together in lives of worship.

³ For more on this, see Mike Cospers, *Rhythms of Grace* (Illinois: Crossway, 2013), 97.

Central to New Testament gatherings is edification. The word means “to build up”⁴ and was used for “building houses and other structures”.⁵ Edification is something God is doing – building up His church by His Spirit, through His word. In the Old Testament, God built up His people by putting words into the mouths of His prophets;⁶ today, it’s through the mutual ministry of the church to one another. God builds His church by engaging with us through His word and by His Spirit as we remind each other of the gospel, and respond in worship.

Read Ephesians 4:7-13

What has the ascended Jesus given to His church?

What is the aim of the roles listed here?

What is Jesus’ ultimate goal in giving these gifts to the church?

It’s as we remind each other of the gospel and respond in faith together as one body that God builds up His church. As David Peterson says:

When Christians meet together to minister to one another, there is a corporate, spiritual engagement with God, in the Holy Spirit, through his words.⁷

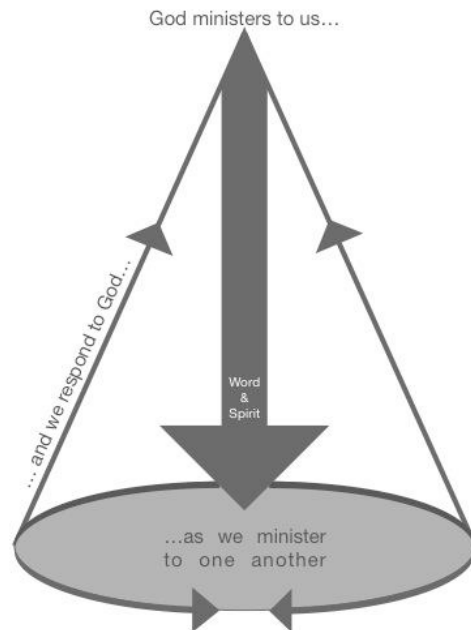
4 The Greek word is *oikodomein*

5 Vaughan Roberts, *True Worship* (Buckinghamshire: Authentic Media, 2002), 45.

6 David Peterson, *Worship in the New Testament in Carson Worship: Adoration and Action* (Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1993), 77.

7 David Peterson, *Engaging with God* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 198.

So, our church gatherings work something like this...⁸



God builds His church as we minister the gospel to one another:

- As we hear God's word preached, God is powerfully present by His Spirit, speaking directly to us through His word.⁹ God builds us up as we're reminded of the gospel and respond in lives of worship.
- As we celebrate the Lord's Supper together, God builds and strengthens His church as we remember that we're united to Jesus in His death, and as we respond by enjoying communion with Him and one another.
- As we sing, we minister the word of Christ to each other, through which God builds up His church in the power of His Holy Spirit. We remind each other of gospel truths and are transformed into the likeness of Jesus to live for Him 24/7 (2 Corinthians 3:18).

⁸ Diagram modified from Peterson, *Ibid.*, 221.

⁹ Martin Luther said: "Let the man who would hear God speak, read Holy Scripture." See *What Luther Says: An Anthology*, vol. 2, ed. Ewald M. Plass (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959), 62. Quoted in Zac Hicks *The Worship Pastor* (Michigan: Zondervan, 2016), 172.

Singing to remind and respond

God uses singing as a key way to *remind* His people of who He is and what He's done, and to help them *respond* in thankful worship. This side of the cross and resurrection of Jesus, Scripture calls us to remind each other of the gospel of our salvation and respond with joy as we sing.

Singing reminds us

The songs of God's people in Scripture are full of reminders of who God is and what he's done for them – especially reminders of His great saving acts (see Psalm 18, 66, 77, 89, 92, 95, 136...). As well as helping God's people remember what God has done for them, the songs of the Bible bring God's work and character to bear on their lives.

God knows our hearts. He knows that without this constant bringing to bear of who He is, His work to save us, and our new identity as His people, we'll forget Him, filling our hearts and minds with other things.

All of us know moments where we have forgotten the truth of the gospel – even today. We forget that God is the source of all joy, so we turn to other things to find it. We forget that God has forgiven our every sin in Christ, so we stay away from Him, thinking He couldn't possibly love us, or trying to make up for our wrongs with good works. We forget that only the sacrifice of Christ can atone for our sin, so we seek to earn God's approval with moral living and Christian service. We need constant reminders of the gospel.

Music makes words memorable. It's why adverts on TV have jingles, and elderly Christians can still remember the truths they sang as children. As Bob Kauflin explains:

Musical elements like rhythm, meter, and rhyme govern and restrict the way we say words and the time it takes to say them. And the more unique, repetitive, or immediately impacting these musical elements are, the easier it is to remember the song.¹⁰

Singing helps us respond

In the Bible, singing is one of the key ways God's people respond to His goodness and rejoice in His acts of salvation. At the dawn of creation, the angels sang for joy to the Creator (Job 38:7). The book of Psalms is the songbook for the people

¹⁰ Bob Kauflin, "Words of Wonder: What Happens When We Sing" in *The Power of Words and the Wonder of God*, p.124-5.

of God. Some express joy and thankfulness in response to His kingly rule; some are deep cries of trust in the midst of anguish. In lots of places in Scripture, we see singing as a joyful response to God's work, especially His salvation.¹¹ Let's look at one in a bit more depth...

Read Exodus 15

What has just happened in the previous chapters?

How do the people respond (15:1)?

What phrases in their song give the sense of joyful celebration?

Music helps us to engage emotionally with the truth of who God is, and what He's done for us. Martin Luther called it "a mistress and governess of... emotions".¹² As Vaughan Roberts says, through singing we can

*express our joy at the wonderful truth that we are already there, in his presence, in Christ. Sometimes songs will help us to express the emotion that we already feel. On other occasions they will begin to trigger emotions, as the music helps us to feel something of the wonder of the truths we're singing about.*¹³

Singing helps us respond to the truth by more deeply engaging our emotions.

Let the word dwell richly in you

Singing together can be a powerful tool to remind us of the gospel – the message of Christ's saving work – and respond with joyful thanksgiving. Singing helps us respond by driving those truths deeply into our hearts and minds, enabling us to live lives of worship. Colossians 3:16 says:

Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts.

This verse, within the whole Bible context of singing, is key for us as music leaders and musicians. Our goal as we lead people in song is to help the gospel dwell richly in the hearts and minds of those we serve. As we hold out God's life-giving word through song, we are "proclaiming [the word of God] through

¹¹ See Judges 5; 1 Chronicles 16; 2 Chronicles 5; Ephesians 5:18-21.

¹² Martin Luther, Preface to Georg Rhau's *Symphoniae Iucundae*

¹³ Vaughan Roberts, *True Worship* (Buckinghamshire: Authentic Media, 2002), 75.

music", as Luther said.¹⁴ Our role is to use music to help God's word dwell richly in those we lead.

Some implications

Seeing our ministry as one of planting the gospel deeply into hearts and minds transforms everything about how we approach singing together. Below are some implications of this for our leading; the following points help us think deeply about how this affects our preparation and leading...

Music ministry is pastoral

Instead of thinking of our primary role as being musicians, we need to give prayerful attention to how our ministry is primarily a pastoral one. This doesn't mean that our role is equal to the pastors and elders of our churches, or that we carry the same authority! But it does mean we have significant opportunities to shepherd people in our church family towards Christ as we sing. This ministry must be tightly married to the role of the church leadership as a whole. We should consider carefully the high standards those who minister God's word are called to (Titus 1:5-9; 1 Timothy 3:1-13). We must pray for God's wisdom to lead His people wisely, and make the most of this privileged opportunity.

With great power comes great responsibility

Singing is powerful and has immense capacity to be a significant means of God's grace to those we lead. That means we need to think carefully about what we're singing. Music can drive wrong truths into people's hearts and minds just as powerfully as right ones! We need to consider carefully the words we're singing: are they telling us the truth about Christ and His gospel?

Across our church's range of songs, we want to make sure we have a balanced diet: not over-emphasising some aspects of God's character (e.g. His love) and under-emphasising others (e.g. His justice). We have a wonderful opportunity to nourish our church family with the gospel; we need to think carefully about what we're feeding them.

Good music puts the gospel in focus

Skilfully-led music won't draw attention to itself, either by being distractingly poor or by drawing focus away from the gospel. We want people to behold Christ

¹⁴ Luther, Preface to Georg Rhau's *Symphoniae lucundae*

as we sing: *His* work can save people; *His* Spirit transforms lives; *His* words are those of eternal life. We want to invest in and use our creative skill to throw light onto the gospel without making ourselves the centre of attention. John Piper calls this “undistracting excellence”:

*We will try to sing and play and pray and preach in such a way that people’s attention will not be diverted from the substance by shoddy ministry nor by excessive finesse, elegance, or refinement. Natural, undistracting excellence will let the truth and beauty of God shine through.*¹⁵

This affects everything about how we lead. In later sections, we’ll begin to consider: how can we play, sing and craft a song arrangement in a way that will bring the gospel into focus? How can a link between songs be an opportunity to enlarge the congregation’s vision of Christ? How can even things like tempo and key affect the congregation’s ability to focus on the truth of the gospel?

For now, this means our goal is to enable and support singing. We’re not aiming at quality for the sake of performance, but rather to help God’s people sing to remind each other of, and respond together to, God and His gospel. We give ourselves fully to this task not for our own glory, but because Christ is worthy and we desire nothing more than for people to see Him clearly and respond and rejoice rightly.

Music should appropriately move our emotions

We long for the gospel to dwell in people richly, and so our music should capture the emotions of the truths we’re singing. Whether it’s contrite confession, joyful celebration, the sobriety of judgement or reverent awe, the music needs to reflect the tone of the words. We can help people “feel” the truth.

At the same time, we shouldn’t strive for emotional impact that isn’t driven by the gospel. We can leave people simply chasing an emotional high, or confused and lacking assurance if they don’t find it.

A helpful summary of this would be: “We need to be moved by *truth*, and we need to be *moved* by truth.”¹⁶ In other words, we want being reminded of the truth of the gospel to be the thing that moves people – not using music alone to provoke a reaction. But we want the gospel to impact our minds *and* our hearts. Music can help us respond rightly in our emotions to the truth of the gospel.

¹⁵ John Piper, *What Unites Us in Worship*: <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/what-unites-us-in-worship-at-bethlehem> [Accessed 16 Jan 2019]

¹⁶ Andrew Towner, *Singing the Gospel*, unpublished.

Theology without doxology (praise) is cold and dead orthodoxy; we learn truth but are unmoved by it. Doxology without theology is idolatry as our emotional response is prized above the truth. Theology leading to doxology is powerful and appropriate as the truth of God's word dwells in us richly as we sing together.

Summary

God gathers His people to remind them of the gospel: who God is and what He's done for us in Jesus. His people then respond to His revelation with lives of worship. As we sing the gospel we behold Christ, the Holy Spirit is at work, transforming us into Christ's likeness. Singing is a significant, God-given means of reminding each other of that gospel and helping us respond emotionally to the truth about Christ. Our goal as music leaders is to let the gospel dwell richly in the hearts and minds of those we lead, and that changes everything about how we approach leading others in singing.

Questions

- What would change about your view of Sunday services if you were more conscious that God gathers His people to remind them of the gospel, that they might respond in worship?
- What psalms, hymns and songs particularly help you to remember the gospel and respond with heart and mind?
- What other specific implications about how we prepare and lead music in church flow from understanding singing as a gospel ministry?

Things to read and listen to

1. David Peterson, "Worship in the New Testament" in Carson *Worship: Adoration and Action*¹⁷
2. Mike Cospers, *Rhythms of Grace*¹⁸
3. Bob Kauflin, "Words of Wonder: What Happens When We Sing" in *The Power of Words and the Wonder of God*¹⁹

¹⁷ (Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1993)

¹⁸ (Illinois: Crossway, 2013). (Especially the chapter 'Worship as Spiritual Formation', pp.91-104.)

¹⁹ Available free from <http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/words-of-wonder-what-happens-when-we-sing>

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