

Editorial An Old New Song

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It has always been a characteristic of God's people that they are a singing people. This was Paul's admonition when he commanded Christians in Colossians 3 and Ephesians 5 to sing. Early church father John Chrysostom emphasized the power of singing when he said, "Nothing so arouses the soul, gives it wings, sets it free from earth, releases it from the prison of the body, teaches it to love wisdom, and to condemn all the things of this life, as concordant melody and sacred song."² Ambrose of Milan, a fourth-century pastor known as the Father of Latin Hymnody, said, "A psalm is the blessing of the people, the praise of God, the joy of liberty, the noise of good cheer, and the echo of gladness."³ This emphasis on singing continued on through the middle ages and into the Reformation. Martin Luther said, "We have put this music to the living and holy Word of God in order to sing, praise, and honor it. We want the beautiful art of music to be properly used to serve her dear Creator and his Christians. He is thereby praised and honored and we are made better and stronger in faith when his holy Word is impressed on our hearts by sweet music."⁴ Jonathan Edwards continued this emphasis when he said, "The best, most beautiful, and most perfect way that we have of expressing a sweet concord of mind to each other is by music."⁵

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² Quoted in James W. McKinnon, *Music in Early Christian Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 80.

³ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁴ Martin Luther, "Preface to the *Burial Hymns*," 1542, in Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann, eds., *Luther's Works* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 53:327-28.

⁵ *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1984), 2:619.

Yet God's people have also recognized that we must always look to Scripture to guide us in understanding why we sing in worship and what this singing should be like. There are many places in Scripture that give us principles that should inform our practice of singing in worship, but there is perhaps no better a source of such guidance than the God-inspired collection of songs—the Book of Psalms. This is why, despite the fact that most Christians in church history have written and enjoyed singing newly written songs, all Christians have emphasized Old Testament psalms as the source and standard for all that we sing. One of the psalms that best models why and how God's people should sing is Psalm 96:

Psalm 96

- 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.
- ³ Declare his glory among the nations,
his marvelous works among all the peoples!
- ⁴ For great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised;
he is to be feared above all gods.
- ⁵ For all the gods of the peoples are worthless idols,
but the Lord made the heavens.
- ⁶ Splendor and majesty are before him;
strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.

- ⁷ Ascribe to the Lord, O families of the peoples,
ascribe to the Lord glory and strength!
- ⁸ Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name;
bring an offering, and come into his courts!
- ⁹ Worship the Lord in the splendor of holiness;
tremble before him, all the earth!

- ¹⁰ Say among the nations, "The Lord reigns!
Yes, the world is established; it shall never be moved;
he will judge the peoples with equity."

- ¹¹ Let the heavens be glad,
and let the earth rejoice;

let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
 ¹² let the field exult, and everything in it!
Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy
 ¹³ before the Lord,
for he comes,
 for he comes to judge the earth.
He will judge the world in righteousness,
 and the peoples in his faithfulness. (ESV)

Psalm 96 is a hymn, a song of praise in response to the nature and works of God. A psalm like this serves as a key example of that fact that when we sing to the Lord, we are not *just* making music; we are not *just* doing something pretty or enjoyable. Rather, when we sing to the Lord, profound things are taking place: we are expressing deep affections from our hearts like joy and exultation; we are magnifying God's glory and strength and proclaiming what he has done. Singing helps us express thanksgiving, lament, contrition, praise, confession, grief, love, and so much more.

In fact, singing helps us to express those things to the Lord in ways that would not be possible if we didn't have song. We can and should certainly bless the Lord with simple words, tell of his salvation, declare his glory, and exult him with just words alone. But singing helps us to do all of that in nuanced and expansive ways that words alone cannot capture. Augustine said, "The sound of jubilation signifies that love, born in our heart, that cannot be spoken. And to whom is such jubilation due if not to God; for he is the ineffable One, he Whom no words can define. But if you cannot speak him into words, and yet you cannot remain silent, what else is left to you if not the song of jubilation, the rejoicing of your heart beyond all words, the immense latitude of the joy without limit of syllables."⁶ That's the power of singing.

But also notice that these expressions of our hearts through singing do not exist in a vacuum, nor are they for their own sake. Rather, singing to the Lord is a *response*—a response to who God is and what he has done. We can see this just in the structure of this hymn. David raises a call to express through singing and then reasons for those expressions three times just in the opening few lines,

⁶ Quoted in McKinnon, *Music in Early Christian Literature*, 356.

and the pattern continues for the rest of the psalm. This is important to recognize, because it is a central mark of a good hymn. A good hymn is not *simply* an expression of emotion; it is not even simply expression of emotion directed toward God. Nor is a good hymn simply a recitation of facts about God; it is not simply a collection of correct theological statements. A good hymn contains *both* expressions of appropriate affections directed toward the Lord *and* theological reasons for those expressions. A song that contains only descriptions of emotion can easily devolve into sentimentalism or emotionalism, and a song that contains only statements of theological facts defeats the whole purpose of singing and leads to dry intellectualism. A good hymn avoids these extremes by expressing both the heart's affection toward God and the reasons for those affections, as modeled in Psalm 96.

So what, then, are the reasons David gives for singing to the Lord? First, we sing because of the worthiness of God. He *is* great, and therefore he deserves praise (verse 4). In fact, the pagan gods are worthless compared to him (verse 5). Splendor and majesty are before him; strength and beauty are in his sanctuary (verse 6). Glory and strength are due his name (verse 8). He is righteous and faithful (verse 13). In other words, God *is* great, he *is* majestic, he *is* glorious and strong, he *is* righteous and faithful, and therefore he *deserves* expressions of praise, adoration, fear, trembling, and rejoicing.

But not only is God's nature and character worthy, he is also worthy because of what he has done, and David lists many of God's "marvelous works" (verse 3) in this psalm. He saved us (verse 2). He made the heavens (verse 5). He is coming to judge the earth (verse 13). Each of these acts of God *deserves* our response, and so David proclaims such a response.

But there is also another profound reason we sing beyond the worthiness of God. According to David, this singing is not supposed to take place just in isolated conclaves of God's people. Rather, singing is supposed to take place, according to verse 3, "among the nations . . . among all the peoples." Why? Isn't it true that this singing is only for the redeemed people of God? Is it not true that only God's people can worship him? Is it not true that this singing is *to* God and *for* God? Yes, that is true. Only the redeemed people of God can sing these kinds of things, and the primary audience of this singing is God. But we are to do so *among* unbelieving

peoples because as God's people sing to him among the nations – as they bless his name, as they tell of his salvation, as they declare his glory – this serves as a powerful witness to the unbelieving people of the world. It leads to those same people joining in with the praise.

You see, there is nothing more evangelistic than God-centered worship in which we bless his name, we magnify his glory, we delight in his splendor, and we recount his works of creation and salvation. The greatest witness to the unbelieving world is when we faithfully recite the works of the Lord in our worship and respond rightly with our hearts, expressing these things verbally through singing.

So, according to Psalm 96, we sing in worship because it helps us express appropriate heart affection toward God in response to the worthiness of his character and works, which both glorifies him and is a powerful witness to the unbelieving world.

But there is a second reason that we sing that I believe is often forgotten, overlooked, or ignored: *Singing forms us*. This is the power of all art—literature, drama, painting, poetry, and song—they don't *just* allow us to express what we have already personally experienced, they also shape our responses through portraying powerfully formative realities that we may not have even actually experienced for ourselves. This is why we would sing a poem about future realities as if they are happening right now. By singing about all the families of the people praising God, all of creation praising him, and the Lord coming to judge the earth in righteousness and faithfulness—future realities, our hearts are shaped as if we are really experiencing those realities right now. It is more than just an expression of hope that these things will indeed happen; through art, we are making the future momentarily present such that it can form us.

You see, today Christians often recognize the expressive power of singing in worship; we know that songs give us a way to express our hearts to God. But Christians often fail to recognize the formative power of song. Songs both express *and* form. We choose songs to sing in our corporate worship not just because they give us good ways to express what is already in our hearts; we choose good songs that form our expressions, maturing them, growing them, and expanding them in ways that would not necessarily happen naturally. David and the Hebrews sang this song, and we sing

songs like this today so that our singing of God's character and works shapes and forms us into people who live in light of this reality, so that it shapes our hearts and causes us to sing, so that it causes us to sing a new song.

And this brings us full circle, right back to the opening line of the psalm: "Oh sing to the Lord a new song." A new song is a song that rises out of the heart of one who has experienced the Lord's salvation, who has experienced the goodness and greatness of God, and even more specifically, one who sings, who responds, and who worships as if the Lord has come already to judge the world and reign perfectly over all things; he sings as if all the families of the people are already ascribing God the glory due his name, as if the very heavens and earth and seas and fields and trees are singing for joy to him. A new song is a song that expresses right affection toward God in response to who he is and what he has done; it is a song that blesses his name, tells of his salvation from day to day, and declares his glory among the nations. A new song is a song that shapes and forms us, molding our minds and our hearts such that we cannot help but believe and sing, "The Lord reigns! Yes, the world is established; it shall never be moved; he will judge the peoples with equity."

Each of the articles in this volume of *Artistic Theologian* relates to this new song. David Taylor uses the example of psalms like this one to help shape principles for contemporary worship music. John Kimmons Gray explores the theological foundation beneath one of the earliest defenses of singing new hymns by seventeenth-century Baptist pastor and theologian Benjamin Keach. David W. Music reassesses the song collection that perhaps best represents a convergence of old songs and new—Isaac Watts's *Psalms of David Imitated*. Scott N. Callaham considers what it sounds like to sing a new song to the Lord in Chinese, articulating helpful principles for rendering the inspired sentiments of worship in new languages. Finally, David M. Toledo reflects on training leaders of worship in the Master of Arts in Worship program at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

We pray that this volume will help further encourage church leaders, educators, and musicians to sing to the Lord a new song.