

From the Ad Hoc Committee on Music  
Covenant Presbyterian Church, Lakeland, Florida  
June 2023

## Introduction

The service of song, which God has made a part of the worship of his holy house, when properly performed, has power for good over human hearts, promoting our growth and His glory.<sup>1</sup> With that frame in mind, this committee has endeavored to produce a summary of the biblical prescriptions regarding our “sacrifice of praise”<sup>2</sup> laid down in Scripture, along with wise principles for music developed from the wisdom of the Word.

## Divine Prescriptions of Scripture for Song

*We hold above all that the inward and spiritual character of the congregation is of far more importance than the architecture and adornments of the church. We dare not forget the great principle of Scripture, that “man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart.” (1 Sam. xvi. 7.)*

- J.C. Ryle, “Evangelical Religion”

The worship of God is to be ordered only according to His divinely revealed precepts,<sup>3</sup> one of which is that His people are to sing to each other before Him and to Him.<sup>4</sup> The Word of God is a sufficient, authoritative, and useful guide in our singing. Our song must be:

1. **God-oriented and God-glorifying.** All our actions ought to glorify God,<sup>5</sup> not least of which is the joyful privilege of entering His courts with praise.<sup>6</sup> God is both the chief object of our worship<sup>7</sup> and its primary subject,<sup>8</sup> and His primacy must be exemplified throughout our corporate worship in all we say and do.
2. **Spiritual.** It must be from our hearts that we honor God with our lips.<sup>9</sup> The psalmist leads us in thanksgiving with his “whole heart”.<sup>10</sup> We should not confuse this holistic worship with

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<sup>1</sup> Taken from the 1867 minutes of the Old School Northern General Assembly.

<sup>2</sup> Hebrews 13:15 – Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name.

<sup>3</sup> Westminster Confession of Faith 1.6.

<sup>4</sup> Ephesians 5:19 – [Address] one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord. Psalm 69:30 – I will praise the name of God with a song; I will magnify him with thanksgiving.

<sup>5</sup> 1 Corinthians 10:31 – So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.

<sup>6</sup> Psalm 100:4 – Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise! Give thanks to him; bless his name!

<sup>7</sup> Psalm 95:6 – Oh come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!

<sup>8</sup> Psalm 22:22 – I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you.

<sup>9</sup> Matthew 15:7-9 – You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said: “This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.”

<sup>10</sup> Psalm 111:1 – Praise the LORD! I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart, in the company of the upright, in the congregation.

superficial emotivism. Our expressions and emotions in worship ought to be consistent with and drawn from inward and spiritual realities.<sup>11</sup>

3. **True.** Believers worship in spirit and truth.<sup>12</sup> Genuine worship and witness is endangered by any falsehood or obscurity of God's truth,<sup>13</sup> most particularly in His house of prayer.<sup>14</sup> We must give careful attention to offer clear truth through Biblically sound lyrics in our worship.
4. **Offered in reverence and awe.** Even as we are adopted as children into an intimate and even familiar relationship with our Heavenly Father,<sup>15</sup> God's glorious nature compels us to respond in worship with reverence and awe.<sup>16</sup> His throne room is now open to us; this does not diminish His holiness but rather magnifies it. We are united with Christ, but this does not warrant or encourage lightness or carelessness in either lyrics or tunes when praising the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.
5. **Corporate.** The nature of the church's public gathering is plural and participatory.<sup>17</sup> God makes no room for passivity in worship. We ought to give God "the best of both head and heart",<sup>18</sup> according to our varied abilities.<sup>19</sup> Our songs and prayers should resound in the hearts of all as we speak, teach, encourage, and admonish each other,<sup>20</sup> building each other up in our songs as the body of Christ.<sup>21</sup>
6. **Intelligible and well-ordered.** The Apostle Paul instructs us to worship with both spirit and mind.<sup>22</sup> Lyrics must be intelligible both for edification<sup>23</sup> as well as for decency and good order in public worship.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Psalm 108:1 – My heart is steadfast, O God! I will sing and make melody with all my being!

<sup>12</sup> John 4:24 – God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.

<sup>13</sup> Ephesians 4:25 – Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another.

<sup>14</sup> Mark 11:17 – And he was teaching them and saying to them, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a den of robbers."

<sup>15</sup> Romans 8:15 – For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!"

<sup>16</sup> Hebrews 12:28-29 – Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.

<sup>17</sup> Matthew 18:20 – For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them. Cf. Acts 2:42, Col. 3:16.

<sup>18</sup> Matthew Henry's Bible Commentary, Psalm 33 vv 1-11

<sup>19</sup> Romans 12:6 – Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them.

<sup>20</sup> Colossians 3:16 – Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. Also Cf. Eph. 5:19.

<sup>21</sup> Ephesians 4:15-16 – [We] are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, [...] when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

<sup>22</sup> 1 Corinthians 14:15 – What am I to do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will pray with my mind also; I will sing praise with my spirit, but I will sing with my mind also.

<sup>23</sup> Ephesians 5:18-21

<sup>24</sup> 1 Corinthians 14:40 – But all things should be done decently and in order.

## Principles of Wisdom for Song

*But because he [the Lord] did not will in outward discipline and ceremonies to prescribe in detail what we ought to do (because he foresaw that this depended upon the state of the times, and he did not deem one form suitable for all ages), here we must take refuge in those general rules which he has given, that whatever the necessity of the church will require for order and decorum should be tested against these.*

*- John Calvin, Institutes IV.x.30*

God's Word offers not only direct prescriptions, but also many clear principles to guide us in our worship. In accordance with the wisdom of the Word, these principles help direct us in our song:

1. **Fitness of location, timing, and intention.**<sup>25</sup> Our songs ought to be suited to their proper location and purpose in our liturgy: if the context calls for adoration, then a song of praise; if gratitude, then a song of thanksgiving; if remembrance, then a song of reflection. Similarly, our ordered songs should complement the specific text or theme that is expounded and proclaimed on a given week.<sup>26</sup> Our praise is responsive to God's condescending and covenantal grace,<sup>27</sup> and, when ordered, should offer a befitting response to its liturgical context.
2. **Fitness for growth.**<sup>28</sup> Our songs ought to be chosen with the intention to help the congregation grow in spiritual maturity as they sing. This is done through the intentional repetition of excellent songs<sup>29</sup> and in the occasional careful introduction of new songs.
3. **Fitness of musical setting.** Our songs' musical settings ought to adorn the lyrics they support.<sup>30</sup> Just as lyrics should encourage true thoughts that are in harmony with God's Word, musical harmony should bolster and magnify that truth. Ill-fitting musical settings will distract from or obscure the truth. If we are to praise God with our whole being,<sup>31</sup> we should seek the consonance of music and text.
4. **Singability.**<sup>32</sup> Songs should be learnable by the average congregant through weekly Sabbath worship. If the lyrics are muddled by obscure terminology, if the rhythm of the song is exceedingly complex, if the pitch is set far above or below the typical range of the human voice, then the responsibility of the congregation to participate in corporate worship is unnecessarily

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<sup>25</sup> Romans 12:15 – Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.

<sup>26</sup> Proverbs 25:11 – A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver.

<sup>27</sup> Westminster Confession of Faith 7.1.

<sup>28</sup> Hebrews 6:1 – Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God.

<sup>29</sup> Deuteronomy 6:6-9 – And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

<sup>30</sup> Psalm 49:4 – I will incline my ear to a proverb; I will solve my riddle to the music of the lyre.

<sup>31</sup> Psalm 103:1 – Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name!

<sup>32</sup> Psalm 95:2 – Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!

compromised. A concern for singability is not at odds with a concern for excellence<sup>33</sup> in both poetry and melody, as many timeless Christian songs have so clearly demonstrated.

5. **Inspiration.**<sup>34</sup> God's Word gives us the proper language to return to Him in our praises. He has also given us inspired songs in the Psalms. All our worship must be entirely reliant on this divine inspiration if we desire to avoid error and give God the glory due His name.<sup>35</sup>
6. **Diversity of content.** If the whole counsel of God is present in our preaching,<sup>36</sup> we should not neglect that whole counsel when we lift our voices before Him. As the Psalms so aptly illustrate, we can properly bring our varied human experiences and emotions to bear in worship. Even more importantly, every aspect of God's character and works can be an appropriate focus for our songs. It is God's truth, and not the world's pressures or demands, that must shape the diverse content of our song.<sup>37</sup>
7. **Patrimony.** Christians in every age and nation have brought forward excellent praises for their Lord and King. Their witness echoes through the halls of history and spurs us on as we run our races.<sup>38</sup> Songs that draw from this ancient and global heritage, both in music and in lyrics, are reminders of the abiding connection we have in Christ with believers in every age. Carrying on their songs together with our own reminds us both of their past faithfulness and our anticipated heavenly reunion with them.<sup>39</sup> We are blessed by learning to follow in the steps of the faithful witnesses who have gone before us.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> 1 Chronicles 15:22 – Chenaniah, leader of the Levites in music, should direct the music, for he understood it.

<sup>34</sup> Proverbs 30:5-6 – Every word of God proves true; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him. Do not add to his words, lest he rebuke you and you be found a liar.

<sup>35</sup> Psalm 29:2 – Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness.

<sup>36</sup> Acts 20:27 – For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.

<sup>37</sup> Psalm 96:3 – Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples!

<sup>38</sup> Hebrews 12:1-2 – Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

<sup>39</sup> 1 Thessalonians 5:11 – Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.

<sup>40</sup> 1 Corinthians 11:1 – Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.