

Musical Instruments in the Worship Service (1)

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Questions regarding the role of musical instruments in the worship service continue to come up in discussions about church life. As heirs of John Calvin, Reformed believers find themselves in a slightly awkward position. Calvin was opposed to the use of musical instruments in worship. Many of his followers, however, have come to embrace the church organ and various other instruments as welcome additions to congregational worship.

In the Canadian Reformed tradition we see a movement towards allowing a variety of musical instruments in the worship service. In many congregations the piano is used alongside the organ. Some congregations have gone further and allow small ensembles (piano, guitar, flute, etc.) to accompany congregational singing. The Fellowship Canadian Reformed Church in Burlington took the initiative to organize a conference on this topic (held at Oct 24-25, 2014). What follows is a revised version of my presentation at the conference.

The worship service

To begin with, something about terminology: We need to distinguish between worship and worship service. What does it mean to *worship*? A common definition (found at Wikipedia): To worship is to show reverence and adoration for a deity. In our case this would be: To show reverence and adoration to God. It is important to note that worship, strictly speaking, is a one-way movement. It is something that people bring to God. He is the receiving party.

A Christian *worship service*, however, is a two-way movement. It is not just one party bringing or doing something to the other. Both parties are ministering to one another. As much as the congregation brings reverence and adoration to God, God also ministers to his people as they are gathered together. This vice-versa aspect is often called the “dialogue” aspect of the worship service. In our Reformed tradition we typically use the word “covenantal.”

Here is a working definition: A worship service is a form of covenantal fellowship by which God ministers to his people and the congregation responds to God.

If you think of the elements of the worship service, it is easy to see how this plays out. God ministers to his people through the reading of the Word, the sermon, the sacraments, the greeting and the blessings. The congregation responds to God through confession of sin, profession of faith, prayer, singing, and freewill offerings.

It is important to recognize this unique, two-way character of the worship service. It sets a worship service apart from other meetings of Christian believers. For example, compare a worship service with a praise & worship evening or a choir concert. At a P&W evening people get together to sing God’s praises. At a choir concert we listen to the choir performing Christian

music. Such events may be wonderful, glorifying to God and edifying to the participants but there is no proclamation of the Word of God and there are no sacraments.

The worship service is in a different category: the Lord speaks to the congregation through Word and sacraments. The Spirit uses these “means of grace” to work repentance and faith in our hearts (Lord’s Day 25). The congregation responds in various ways (singing, praying, profession the Christian faith, etc.).

One consequence is that the role of musicians during the worship service is less prominent than during a P&W evening or a choir concert. During the sermon, to mention just one aspect, the accompanist joins the congregation in listening to the proclamation of the Word of God. That is part of the beauty of being a church accompanist: You are in the worship service as someone who needs to hear the gospel proclaimed to you, just like everyone else.

By saying that the worship service is a two-way movement between the Lord and his people, we have not yet fully defined what is going on. There is a secondary aspect that needs to be mentioned. As believers we do not just minister to the Lord, we also minister to one another. We do not just go to church to meet the Lord, we also go there to meet our fellow believers. This comes out in some parts of the liturgy, for example, when we sit around the table for the Lord’s Supper, when we profess our faith together, when we exhort one another through some of the Psalms, and when we bring the needs of the congregation before the Lord in prayer.

In sum, we define the worship service first of all as a form of covenantal fellowship between God and his people (the vertical aspect), secondly, as a form of fellowship between God’s people as they worship God together (the horizontal aspect).

Pitfalls

This definition will help us to avoid some pitfalls. Let me mention two examples. One pitfall is that the goal of the worship service would be to stir the religious feelings of the worshipers. This view has been quite popular during the last few centuries. It goes back to an influential German theologian with the name of Friedrich Schleiermacher (early 19th century) who taught that the essence of religion is intuition and feeling. Along these lines, the goal of a worship service would be that the participants have a religious experience, that they would be touched deep down, emotionally. As a result, liturgical choices are made with this goal in mind: the kind of text the minister will choose for his sermon, the kind of songs that will be sung, the kind of music that will be played before, during and after the service, etc. It all depends on whether these things will intensify the religious experience.

Do not get me wrong. I’m not saying that there is no place for feelings and emotions during the worship service. On the contrary! But to say that the goal of the worship service is to stir the religious emotions of the believers – there is no Biblical basis for this. It is a truncated understanding of the goal of the worship service.

A second pitfall, more common in the Reformed tradition, is the idea that the main part of the service is the sermon. As long as we have a good sermon, it's okay. The rest of the service is not that important. After all, you go to church in order "to be fed." Of course, there is something legitimate to this view. The apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 14 that everything should be done for the edification of the church. Nevertheless, the edification of the believers is not the only goal of the worship service. It is equally important that God's goodness and majesty should be acknowledged. This is the recurring call in the book of Psalms. "Sing to the LORD because He is good. Sing to the LORD a new song for He has done marvelous things" (Ps. 98). It is fitting that the congregation should sing God's praises for his works of creation and redemption and sanctification.

Temple and synagogue

So far we have established a basic understanding of the worship service. There is another foundational aspect that we need to discuss: In what phase of redemptive history do we live right now and what kind of worship is fitting in this time? Basically the question is: What is essential to the worship of the Christian church according to the New Testament?

This is an important question because people sometimes use arguments based on OT worship and apply them to NT worship without considering if this is legitimate. For example, you might hear someone argue that King David introduced the use of musical instruments in the temple service. Now, if it was okay to use instruments in temple worship, how could it be wrong to use instruments in the church today? However, someone else might argue that musical instruments were part of temple worship, and since temple worship has been abolished in the new covenant, it follows that the use of instruments has been abolished as well. In order to get some clarity in these matters, we need to reflect on the question whether music and singing were aspects that are continued or discontinued in the new covenant.

This is not the place to give an overview of the historical development of worship from Genesis to Revelation.¹ But we do need to consider the difference between worship in the old covenant and the new. In Israel, worship centered around the temple in Jerusalem. That is where the LORD dwelled among his people. That is where God's people went to worship him. That is where the ministry of reconciliation was performed by the priests and where the Levites were singing and making music to praise the LORD.

After the return from exile a new phenomenon emerged in Israel: synagogue worship. It was a sober form of worship: a gathering of God's people, with an emphasis on the reading and explanation of the Scriptures and prayer – no sacrifices, no musical instruments. There was some singing in the synagogues but not the exuberant kind of singing that you would encounter in the temple worship. In the synagogues you would hear *chanting*, a subdued form of singing, with a cantor chanting Psalms, prayers, and Scripture passages.

¹ For a broader discussion, see Dr. C. van Dam's articles "Musical Instruments in Worship," published in *Clarion* recently.

There are various theories as to why there was no instrumental music in the synagogues.² It seems clear that the rabbis did not want it, but why? Did they want the people to remember the suffering during the exile in Babylon? Were they afraid that it would lead to musicians carrying their instruments around and thus trespassing the rules regarding rest on the Sabbath day? Did the rabbis want to honour the temple as the main place of worship in Israel and did they, therefore, want synagogue worship to have a more sober character? Did they feel that music and singing should be reserved for the ministry of the sacrifices at the temple? Personally, I find the last two suggestions intriguing but it is hard to be sure about it.

The heavenly Jerusalem

As we move to the New Testament there is both continuation and discontinuation. The Lord still expects his people to gather in sacred assemblies. But, as the Lord Jesus predicted to the Samaritan woman, no longer is there one special place where God is worshipped. True worshipers worship the Father in spirit and truth (John 4:21-24). No longer is there a sanctuary in Jerusalem where sacrifices are offered by priests. The book of Hebrews teaches us that Christ has entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption (Hebr. 9:12). We now have a high priest who has gone through the heavens. Jesus has ascended into heaven and since he is our mediator we may now approach the throne of grace with confidence (Hebr. 4:16).

One of the most important Scripture passages for our purposes is Hebrews 12:22-25. This passage tells Christian believers that they have come to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God, to thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven, to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

The implication is that the center of worship is now the heavenly Jerusalem where we have the Lord Jesus as our mediator. There is exuberant worship in heaven with thousands of angels singing the praises of Him who sits on the throne and the Lamb of God. It is for this reason that the Reformed worship service often begins with the call: "Lift up your hearts to the Lord" (*sursum corda*). As we begin our worship, we elevate our thoughts to the heavenly Jerusalem and draw near to God with reverence and awe.

In this connection we should also mention the work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit facilitates the two-way movement to which we referred earlier. The Spirit carries the prayers and songs of the believers as they pray and sing to God (Rom 8:26). The Spirit also works the other way round, applying God's Word to our hearts, causing people to be born again, to repent and to have faith in Christ. How does the Spirit do that? With Lord's Day 25 we confess: primarily by the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments. The Spirit

² See Bob Williams, "Origins of Christian Worship," at <http://www.biblelessons.com/origins.html> (accessed Oct. 24, 2014)

also provides spiritual gifts to the congregation. When these gifts are used appropriately, it will lead to the congregation being strengthened, encouraged and comforted (1 Cor. 14:3). Even the unbeliever who attends the worship service will be brought to fall down and worship God, exclaiming, “God is really among you!” (1 Cor. 14:25)

Musification of worship

Let’s apply these insights to the practice of worship. As we worship in church, we are to lift up our hearts to the Lord in his heavenly sanctuary where Christ is, our Mediator and Intercessor. We should always keep the connection with the center of worship in heaven. The moment we separate worship from the heavenly sanctuary and make it something that can be experienced here on earth, we are in trouble. In addition, whatever is done in worship should serve to edify, encourage, and comfort those who are present.

This is why the Reformers had a problem with the Roman Catholic approach to worship. The church had introduced too many rituals to the worship service. The members of the congregation became spectators who were watching the clergy perform their duties. In response to this, the Reformers removed liturgical distractions and pursued a sober style of worship.

This is a lesson to keep in mind when we look at what is happening in some forms of Pentecostal and charismatic worship. The Pentecostal tradition tends to disconnect the work of the Spirit from the reading and the preaching of the Word. Instead, a more direct and tangible influence of the Spirit is desired. In the early days of Pentecostalism, prayer was often the vehicle for this. As people prayed, they would start speaking in tongues and this would be taken as a sign that the Spirit was at work.

In more recent years it seems like music has taken over this role of facilitating the work of the Spirit. The worship band plays an important role in the whole worship experience. It is as if people believe that somehow music is the vehicle that brings us into the presence of God. In this connection, the Australian theologian Barry Grant has warned against the *musification of worship*.³ Grant comments that music “has almost become a new means of grace.” If music supplants the Word, he says, “it has dangerously exceeded its role.” Indeed, if music is believed to be an instrument by which the Holy Spirit works faith in our hearts, we are far removed from the Reformed insight that the Holy Spirit works repentance and faith through the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments.

The other problem with the ‘musification of worship’ is that it tends to reduce the congregation to being an audience who are watching and listening to what the worship band is doing on stage. Instead of the musicians supporting the singing of the congregation, it can easily happen that the worship band is *performing* on stage, with congregation struggling to

³ Barry Grant, “Retuning the church: An exploratory discussion paper presented by Dr Barry Grant at the annual conference of the Association of Pentecostal and Charismatic Bible College of Australasia on Friday 19 May 2000.” http://www.tabor.edu.au/articles/2000/retuning_church.html

keep up with the band. This leads to the demise of congregational singing. An article that did the rounds on Facebook a while ago described the problem well: “Why Men Have Stopped Singing in Church.”⁴

In the next article we will draw practical conclusions for the role of musical instruments during the worship service.

⁴ David Murrow, “Why Men Have Stopped Singing in Church,” <http://churchformen.com/how-were-off-the-mark/why-men-have-stopped-singing-in-church>