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Sing to the Lord a New Song



Music and Worship
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Uniting Art with Faith

The church musician faces the joyful though daunting task of uniting art with faith and encouraging parishioners to do likewise. Many of us who direct school, community or professional choirs are committed to the art-faith alliance; our faith undergirds and permeates our expression of the choral art even though we may not be free to talk about it. But if we happen also to work in a church, we have the luxury of addressing this arts-faith partnership openly. Without apology, we can and must encourage “faith-full” singing among our choristers and parishioners.

The opening verse of the 98th Psalm sets forth a direct three-fold mandate straight from God: “O sing to the Lord a new song” (Psalm 98:1a). Whether one is a music director, a choir member, or a pew person, “sing to the Lord a new song” can explain why and how to be a faithful music maker. Let’s look closely at each dimension of this three-pronged commandment.

“**Sing...**” There’s no doubt about it – God created us to sing. Augustine said that anyone who sings “prays twice,” praising God in both words and music. God is the great music lover, having created not one bird to sing, but millions, creatures who spend their days doing nothing more than singing and would do so even though none of us listened. Within the human spirit as well as in nature, the commandment to sing hardly needs even to be spoken or written down. Something in us,

deep, insists on song. Music has that inexplicable power to by-pass the intellect and reach straight to the soul.

Church choirs provide hard and fast evidence. The very fact that busy volunteers continue to show up in the choir loft week after week gives witness to this God-given longing. We all know they don’t come for the pay check!

My life flows on in endless song

above earth’s lamentations;

I hear the real though far-off hymn

that hails a new creation.

No storm can shake my inmost calm

while to that rock I’m clinging:

Since Love is Lord of heaven and earth,

how can I keep from singing?¹

“... **To the Lord...**” Worship needs an object and a preposition. We sing **to God**, we join each other in the worship **of God**. Harold M. Best, former dean of the Wheaton College Conservatory of Music, has said that we make too much of worship without making too much of God.² We need to sing **to the Lord** first, and only then to each other. As a matter of fact, the best worship occurs when we overhear one another singing to God, and the best **witness** is overheard worship.

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We call it a “service” of worship, the service we render to the God who has given so much to us. During the week, we may serve God by giving money for God’s work, by helping with a Habitat build, by standing up for justice. On Sunday we serve God by prayer, by liturgy, by listening to God’s word, and especially by singing. Worship doesn’t end at noon on Sunday; it **continues** then. If we get good enough praising God on Sunday, in a hymn, we’ll be better able to praise God on Monday in a confrontation with a co-worker or in trying to help a suffering friend. That’s what we really mean when we say that a hymn is best sung “by heart,” when it’s gotten deep inside you...when “your life flows on in endless song.”

That’s also why it is so important to plan every service of worship carefully, selecting each musical component based on the day’s text and your careful assessment of the congregation’s needs. A church is being formed, or malformed, by its song. So we do well, in our selection of hymns and anthems, not only to ask, “Does the congregation like this one?” and “Is this accessible and well-crafted?” but also “Is God being praised by this hymn?” and “What sort of disciples are being taught and grown by singing this?”

“... **A New Song.**” In this final part of the verse the composer’s mantra is revealed. “A new song” – not only does God give permission, God **commands** us to create and sing new songs!

But does this single verse provide a case for making “all things new” in worship music? If so, what are we to do with the great body of hymns and anthems from ages past? And how are we to respond to the congregants who cherish repetition and security in worship music? Many want to hear and sing something familiar, or at least something that **sounds** familiar. In short, they know what they like, and they like what they know. How then do we faithfully obey God’s direct commandment to sing to the Lord a **new** song?

Harold Best suggests that we interpret Psalm 98:1 this way: “Sing to the Lord a new song, **and** sing **old** songs **newly** – as if for the first time.”³ This interpretation broadens our horizons considerably. If God commands us to sing new songs **and** old songs newly, we can draw not only on the resources of contemporary composers, but we can sing – as if for the first time – the music of Martin Luther, Charles and John Wesley, Fanny Crosby, multi-cultural music, and yes, even Bach! As we try to be faithful music makers in our time, we have the advantage of singing the very best songs of all the previous times!

All this makes a case for diversity in the selection of worship music, not just for diversity’s sake, or as one slightly irreverent colleague puts it, so you can offend everybody equally. Rather, we must strive for diversity to take advantage of the work of all God’s composer-servants, both today and through the ages. Our faith **and** our music-making are enriched as we select from the very best of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.

The Book of Revelation describes heaven, God’s Kingdom come, as a place of great singing. Not only will the saints be gathered around the throne, but all God’s creatures, those who make music in sky, and earth, and sea. All creation will sing praise to the Lamb who now sits enthroned at the center of heaven (Revelation 5:11-13).

Mark Twain mused that if heaven is one endless choir rehearsal, he didn’t think he would bother to try for it, and at the end of any given rehearsal some of your own choir members might agree. But the writer of Revelation reiterates that you and I are created for praise. When we “sing to the Lord a new song,” or an old song sung newly, we are all merely lisping in the presence of the Almighty. But lisp we must, and we can never stop! Not only must we choir directors do it because it’s our job, we must **all** do it simply because we’re children of God. When God’s kingdom comes, our lisping will be transformed into perfectly clear tones that blend with the voices of the saints and all creation. **And** “when we’ve been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun, we’ve no less days to sing God’s praise than when we first begun.”⁴

1.The original text of “How Can I Keep From Singing?” has been variously attributed to Anna Warner, Robert W. Lowry, and others.

2.Harold M. Best, lecture at American Choral Directors National Convention, February,1999, Chicago, Illinois.

3. Ibid.

4.John Newton, “Amazing Grace, How Sweet the Sound” st. 5, anonymous c. 1790.