

The Role of Music in Reformed Worship



The Chancel Choir of Shadyside Presbyterian Church; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

In the history of Reformed worship, there have been several controversies regarding how scripture informs and “regulates” worship and also what the role of music is within that worship.

For much of Presbyterian history, congregations only sang the biblical psalms and used no instruments whatsoever in worship, because there is no directive in the New Testament to use instruments in worship. Of course, when we look to the whole of scripture rather than just one part, we see descriptions of many different expressions of worship involving choirs, brass instruments, percussion instruments, stringed instruments, dance, and more. When we formulate a theology of worship the same way we formulate a theology of anything else—by

looking at what the whole of scripture, and not just one part of it, has to say on the subject—we find a description of worship that is full of beauty and which instills a sense of awe and wonder in the worshiper. Worship in scripture is liturgical—that is, highly participatory on the part of the gathered worshipping community—Christ-centered, and full of different kinds of musical and artistic expression.

Revelation chapter four has always been a particularly informative passage for me on the role of music in worship, as it depicts a worship service taking place in heaven around the throne of God:

After this I looked, and there in heaven a door stood open! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, “Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.” At once I was in the spirit, and there in heaven stood a throne, with one seated on the throne! And the one seated there looks like jasper and carnelian, and around the throne is a rainbow that looks like an emerald. Around the throne are twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones are twenty-four elders, dressed in white robes, with golden crowns on their heads. Coming from the throne are flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and in front of the throne burn seven flaming torches, which are the seven spirits of God; and in front of the throne there is something like a sea of glass, like crystal. Around the throne, and on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and inside. Day and night without ceasing they sing, “Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come.” And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to the one who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall before the one who is seated on the throne and worship the one who lives forever and ever; they cast their crowns before the throne, singing, “You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created.” (*Rev. 4:1-11, NRSV*)

On Earth as it is in Heaven

Jesus taught us to pray, “Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10). This is as true for worship as it is for the rest of life: we should desire to worship God here on earth as God is worshiped in heaven. Revelation chapter four depicts this for us. The various aspects of worship here are related to the elements of worship in the temple, only on a grander scale. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that Revelation considers the worship of God in the Jerusalem temple to be a copy, on a smaller scale, of the glorious, eternal worship of God in heaven.

In the temple, there were four carvings of cherubim: two on the Ark of the Covenant (Exodus 25:22) and two standing on either side of the Ark (I Kings 6:27-28). In heaven, according to Revelation, there are four actual cherubim surrounding God's throne. These are not the chubby, winged babies of Renaissance paintings: the biblical cherubim are fearsome creatures. One resembles a winged lion, one a winged ox, one a human being with wings, and the last one an eagle. In Christian art, these four cherubim came to represent the four Evangelists: Matthew (the human-faced cherub), Mark (the lion), Luke (the ox), and John (the eagle). But here in Revelation, they are the creatures who surround the throne of God and forever praise God by singing, "Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty" (v. 8), much as the seraphim do in Isaiah 6:3.

Also in the temple was the "molten sea," a large basin which the priests used for ritual washings (I Kings 7:23-26). Its counterpart in Revelation is the "crystal sea" which surrounds the throne of God (v. 6). The temple featured a seven-branched menorah of pure gold (Exodus 25:31-39), while in heaven there are the seven golden lampstands, which are the "seven spirits" (or sevenfold Spirit, i.e., perfect Spirit) of God (v. 5).

The city of God is described near the end of Revelation. Its twelve gates bear the names of the twelve tribes of Israel, and its twelve foundation stones bear the names of the twelve Apostles (Revelation 21:12-14). This helps us identify the "twenty-four elders": they represent the twelve tribes and the twelve Apostles and therefore the unity of God's "Old Testament" people and God's "New Testament" people (v. 4).

This chapter shows us what it might be like to have a glimpse of eternity. When the author looks into heaven, he finds a worship service already in progress. That is because this worship service never ends!

The key to understanding this heavenly worship lies in the phrase "without ceasing" and in the word "whenever." First, we read that the cherubim worship God continually: "Day and night without ceasing they sing, 'Holy, holy, holy ...'" (v. 8). Then we read, "And whenever the living creatures [cherubim] give glory and honor and thanks to the one who is seated on the throne ... the twenty-four elders fall before the one who is seated on the throne and worship ... singing, 'You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power'" (vv. 9a, 10a, 11a).

This is not a one-time exchange between these two groups: they repeat this call-and-response pattern for eternity. Though their words and actions are "scripted"—they say and do the same thing each time it is their turn—everything is from the

heart, full of awe and wonder. This endless liturgy enables them truly to praise God together, emphasizing their unity as the people of God.

Eternity is Now

I must confess: there is part of me that loves arriving to church late. That probably sounds strange, but when I enter a worship service that has already started (for example, during the opening hymn), I imagine what it must be like to step into heaven, into a worship service that has been in progress for millennia and will continue through eternity.

How grand and glorious will it be to worship God in eternity? The great news is, we do not have to wait. When we worship God here on earth, our worship is a part of that eternal liturgy in heaven. This is why we are encouraged to “lift up our hearts” and are reminded that we join our voices “with angels and archangels, and with all the company of heaven” when we sing, “Holy, holy, holy, God of power and might ...” When we confess in the Creed that we believe in “the communion of saints,” we affirm that our worship here on earth is joined with the heavenly worship. We are united with all the people of God, around the world and down through the centuries. When it comes to worship, eternity is now.

The word “amen” means “so be it” or “I agree.” Our “amen” after a prayer is an expression of agreement with what has been prayed. As Jesus has taught us to desire God’s will “on earth as it is in heaven,” our worship here on earth should be a loud “amen” to the heavenly worship. It should be our goal to give praise to God here just as the saints and angels do in heaven.

An Audience of One

Worship that is an “amen” to the heavenly pattern is directed *to God alone*. The focus is on what those gathered around the throne give to God, not on what they receive. The cherubim “give glory and honor and thanks to the one who is seated on the throne” (v. 9). The elders fall on their faces, worship God, cast their crowns before God, and sing (v. 10). They are participants, not passive spectators. Their behavior is characterized by activity: giving, thanking, bowing, worshiping, casting crowns, and singing. These worshipers are not the “audience”: God is.

Earthly worship that says “amen” to heavenly worship is focused completely on the one seated on the throne, and those who participate do so actively and passionately.

Heavenly worship is also *communal*. Those surrounding the throne do not worship as individuals who simply happen to be in the same place at the same time. Instead, they join their voices together in praise and adoration. Since all of life is worship, there are plenty of times for individual expressions of praise, when we speak to God in our own words. But there are also times for gathered worship, when we say the same words and sing the same melody, to worship not as a random collection of individuals, but as a unified body. This is what we call liturgy: “the work of the people.”

Liturgical praise is not the enemy of heartfelt praise. We can pour ourselves into worshiping communally just as much as we can individually. Furthermore, our times of individual devotion inform and enhance gathered worship. Someone once asked me, “Do you read unison prayers aloud at your church?” I replied, “We don’t read them aloud: we pray them aloud.” It all depends on the attitude.

Every time we gather to worship God as one body, may we join with all those in eternity in giving praise and thanks to the one who is seated on the throne.

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