



# Church Music

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*Sing aloud to God our strength;  
shout for joy to the God of Jacob.  
Raise a song, sound the tambourine,  
the sweet lyre with the harp.  
Blow the trumpet at the new moon,  
at the full moon, on our festal day.  
For it is a statute for Israel,  
an ordinance of the God of Jacob.  
He made it a decree in Joseph,  
when he went out over the land of Egypt.*

*Psalm 81:1-5*

*Sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to  
God with thankful hearts.*

*Colossians 3:16*

Niceta, bishop of Remesiana in what is now Yugoslavia [ca. 370-414]:

*It is time to turn to the New Testament to confirm what is said in the Old, and, particularly, to point out that the office of psalmody is not to be considered abolished merely because many other observances of the Old Law have fallen into desuetude. Only the corporal institutions have been rejected, like circumcision, the sabbath, sacrifices, discrimination in foods. So, too, the trumpets, harps, cymbals, and timbrels. For the sound of these we now have a better substitute in the music from the mouths of men. The daily ablutions, the new-moon observances, the careful inspection of leprosy are completely past and gone, along with whatever else was necessary only for a time – as it were, for children. Of course, what was spiritual in the Old Testament, for example, faith, piety, prayer, fasting, patience, chastity, psalm-singing – all this has been increased in the New Testament rather than diminished.*

Lewis, *Instrumental Music*, 94.

## **A Survey of New Testament Texts on Singing in Christian Worship**

There are four key contexts of Scripture relating to the purpose of singing in Christian worship which need to be considered:

*Even so you, since you are zealous for spiritual gifts, let it be for the edification of the church that you seek to excel ... I will pray with the spirit, and I will also pray with the understanding. I will sing with the spirit, and I will also sing with the understanding ...*

*... How is it then, brethren? Whenever you come together, each of you has a psalm, has a teaching ... let all things be done for edification.*

1 Corinthians 14:12-15, 26

The exact meaning of singing and praying “with the spirit” in this context is debatable. But Paul clearly says the *essential* purpose of singing (and praying) in church is edification which necessitates everyone understanding what is being said through song and prayer. As it was under the old covenant, singing remains an important community vehicle for rehearsing and celebrating God’s will and his redemptive acts.

*Therefore do not be foolish but understand what the will of the Lord is. <sup>18</sup> And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, <sup>19</sup> addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, <sup>20</sup> giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>21</sup> submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.*

Ephesians 5:17-21 ESV

Kenneth L. Boles comments:

The imperative 'be filled' is followed by a series of four participle expressions which illustrate what it means to be full of the Spirit: addressing one another, singing/making music, giving thanks, and being subject to one another ... The Spirit filled life is not lived in isolation, but in community with God's saints. The 'one another' (*heautois*) duties are incumbent upon all who are in Christ, for they are also in his body the church. Praise that is directed toward God can also be sung for the mutual benefit of fellow believers ... The primary focus of such singing is probably the public assembly, although the context is the entire spectrum of the Spirit-filled life ... Paul's purpose here is to encourage his readers to sing enthusiastically and with inward conviction ('in/with your heart') to one another and to the Lord.

Adapted from Boles, Kenneth L. (1993). *Galatians and Ephesians*. Joplin, College Press Publishing Company, 308-309.

*And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord. And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.*

Colossians 3:15-17 NKJV

The parallel between this context and that of Ephesians is obvious. The command is to be filled with the Spirit and to let the word of Christ dwell in us richly, and the means for facilitating that is: teaching and admonishing one another, singing with grace in our hearts to the Lord, giving thanks, and submission (Colossians 3:18-25). The grammatical construction of Colossians 3:16 is ambiguous as reflected in the different NIV translation of verse 16: *Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.* But, “Whatever view is taken of the punctuation or construction of the sentence, the collocation of the two participial clauses (as they are in the Greek text), ‘teaching and instructing...’ and ‘singing...’, suggests that the singing might be the means of mutual edification as well as a vehicle of praise to God.”

Bruce, F. F. (1984). *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*. (NICNT). Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 158.

*We have an altar from which those who serve the tabernacle have no right to eat. <sup>11</sup> For the bodies of those animals, whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest for sin, are burned outside the camp. <sup>12</sup> Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered outside the gate. <sup>13</sup> Therefore let us go forth to Him, outside the camp, bearing His reproach. <sup>14</sup> For here we have no continuing city, but we seek the one to come. <sup>15</sup> Therefore by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name. <sup>16</sup> But do not forget to do good and to share, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased.*

Hebrews 13:10-16 NKJV

This is the last of the New Testament contexts which relate music to Christian worship. The writer seems to speak of Christian worship *in its broadest context*. In Romans 12:1, Paul describes the sanctified life of Christians when he urges them “... *to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.*” NASB. In the view of the apostle Paul and the writer of Hebrews; *worship is not so much something Christians do; worship is something Christians are!* In this sense, Christian worship assemblies are *a communal aspect* of our everyday lives of worship [i.e. service] to God, not the be all and end all of our worship. “...*the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name ...*”, is reminiscent of Paul’s, “... *singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord*”, and, “... *singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord, giving thanks always for all things to God the Father*”. And singing certainly fits the bill here in Hebrews 13:15. But so would prayer. And so would God-honouring speech and testimony and teaching, etc.

Origen [ca. 185-251] comments on Psalm 33:

*Rejoice in the LORD, O you righteous.*

*Praise befits the upright.*

<sup>2</sup> *Praise the LORD with the lyre;*

*make melody to him with the harp of ten strings.*

<sup>3</sup> *Sing to him a new song;*

*play skilfully on the strings, with loud shouts.*

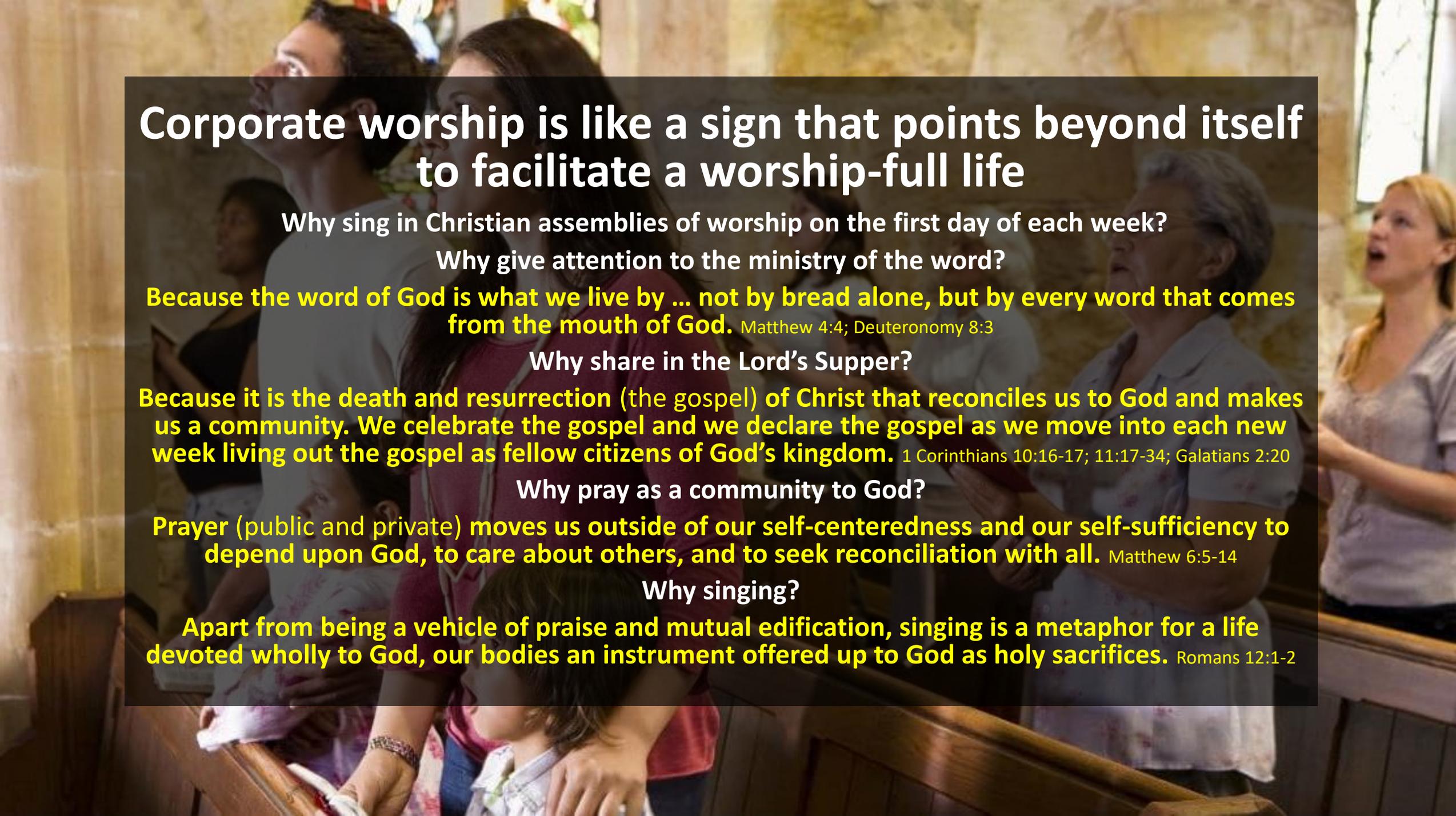
*The kithara is the active soul being moved by the commandments of God, the psalterion is the pure mind being moved by spiritual knowledge. The musical instruments of the Old Covenant understood spiritually are applicable to us. The kithara, speaking figuratively, is the body, the psalterion the spirit ... He who makes melody [psallon] with the mind makes melody [psallei] well, speaking songs and singing in his heart to God.*

Ferguson, Everett. (1972). *A Cappella Music in the Public Worship of the Church*.  
Abilene: Biblical Research Press, 57.

Chrysostom [ca. 347-407], *On Psalms*, commented:

*Therefore, just as the Jews are commanded to praise God with all musical instruments, so we are commanded to praise him with all our members – the eye, the tongue, ear, the hand. Paul makes this clear when he says, ‘Present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your spiritual service’. The eye praises when it does not gaze licentiously, the tongue when it sings [psalle], the ear when it does not listen to wicked songs and accusations against a neighbour, the mind when it does not devise treachery, but abounds in love ... Those instruments were then allowed because of the weakness of the people to train them to love and harmony ... David at that time was singing [epsalle] in the Psalms, and we today with David. He had a kithara of lifeless strings; the church has a kithara arranged of living strings. Our tongues are the strings of our kithara, putting forth a different sound yet a godly harmony. For indeed women and men, old and young, have different voices but they do not differ in the word of hymnody for the Spirit blends the voice of each and effects one melody in all ... The soul is an excellent musician, an artist; the body is an instrument, holding the place of the kithara and aulos and lyre ... Since it is necessary to pray unceasingly, the instrument is always with the artist.*

Ferguson, Everett. (1972). *A Cappella Music in the Public Worship of the Church*.  
Abilene: Biblical Research Press, 56-57.



# Corporate worship is like a sign that points beyond itself to facilitate a worship-full life

Why sing in Christian assemblies of worship on the first day of each week?

Why give attention to the ministry of the word?

**Because the word of God is what we live by ... not by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.** Matthew 4:4; Deuteronomy 8:3

Why share in the Lord's Supper?

**Because it is the death and resurrection (the gospel) of Christ that reconciles us to God and makes us a community. We celebrate the gospel and we declare the gospel as we move into each new week living out the gospel as fellow citizens of God's kingdom.** 1 Corinthians 10:16-17; 11:17-34; Galatians 2:20

Why pray as a community to God?

**Prayer (public and private) moves us outside of our self-centeredness and our self-sufficiency to depend upon God, to care about others, and to seek reconciliation with all.** Matthew 6:5-14

Why singing?

**Apart from being a vehicle of praise and mutual edification, singing is a metaphor for a life devoted wholly to God, our bodies an instrument offered up to God as holy sacrifices.** Romans 12:1-2

Christian worship is every player in the orchestra being brought into harmony by the conductor. This is so whether we consider our lives as individuals, as members of the body of Christ, or as part of the wider creation.

