Outline a theology of congregational singing and apply it to the Sunday gathering:\(^1\):

Everybody has an opinion about singing. What should we call it? What songs should we sing? Who are we singing to? How should we express ourselves? Questions like these have been asked (and debated) throughout church history. In recent years, these are also questions that I have been asked, and often asked myself. We intend to plant a church—what type of songs will we sing? I chose this topic because it is an issue about which many Christians are both particularly passionate and incredibly ignorant. In short, I want clarity for myself and I desire to bring clarity to others. To that end, this paper will seek to answer two questions. First, what does the Bible have to say about congregational singing, and second, what implications might this have for singing in the Sunday gathering?

Even a cursory overview of the Bible is enough to demonstrate the simple fact that God’s people sing. In the Old Testament, they sung of salvation (Ex. 15), of victory (Judg. 5), of champions (1 Sam 18:7), and of deliverance (2 Sam. 22). They sung before the ark (1 Chr. 16:4), in battle (2 Chr. 20:22), and in the temple (2 Chr. 29:28). Perhaps most significantly, they sung from the Psalter.\(^2\) In the New Testament, Jesus sung (Matt. 26:30), the apostles sung (Acts 16:25), churches are commanded to sing (Col. 3:16), and as Revelation makes unmistakably clear, those in heaven sing too (Rev. 5:9). God’s people are a singing people and they will continue to be a singing people for all eternity.

So why exactly do Christians sing? There are two ways to answer this question. One emphasises the word ‘sing’, and the other, ‘why’. The first is an anthropological question;

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\(^{1}\) This topic relates to the unit ‘Principles of Congregational Gatherings’.

\(^{2}\) Bernhard W Anderson and Steven Bishop, Out of the depths: the Psalms speak for us today (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 32.
why do Christians sing (as opposed to speak)? Rob Smith has answered this question more extensively elsewhere\(^3\), but the thrust of his argument is that “when we sing, we usually sing words with meanings, and those words not only facilitate the communication of the cognitive content of the song, but the singing of them helps communicate the emotional content of the song as well.”\(^4\) In other words, singing helps us engage with the emotional dimensions of our humanity in a way that speaking does not.\(^5\) Hence, James writes, “Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise” (James 5:13). The same is true for grief and anguish. Singing the lament psalms can help God’s people to process their emotional pain and so bring them to a point of praise (e.g. Ps 3-7).\(^6\)

The Bible gives more explicit answers to the second question; why do Christians sing? The two most helpful New Testament passages that address this issue are:

‘Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your heart.’ (Colossians 3:16)\(^7\)

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4 Smith, 260.

5 Smith says, "Singing engages parts of our brain (particularly in the right hemisphere) that speaking alone does not. Smith, 261.


'Be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart.'

*(Ephesians 5:18-19)*

Each passage addresses both the *horizontal* and *vertical* dimensions that take place when Christians sing. Horizontally, Christians ‘address one another’. Singing is an opportunity to ‘teach and admonish’ others as we affirm the truths of the gospel. Vertically, even though we address, teach and admonish one another, we do so as we ‘sing to God’, ‘making melody to the Lord’. Furthermore, the vertical aspect works both ways. Not only do we communicate with God, but he also communicates with us, since singing here is described as a key way for the ‘message of Christ’ to dwell among us richly.

Rob Smith helpfully suggests three words - *praise*, *prayer* and *proclamation* - to describe more fully what is going on when Christians sing. First, when we sing *praises*, we tell God (Ps 57) and or others (Ps 46) what we love and admire about him. Second, singing can also be a form of *prayer*. In fact, many of the psalms are prayers. This means that when Paul tells the Colossians and Ephesians to ‘sing psalms,’ he is in effect telling them to sing prayers. These may be personal (Ps. 55) or corporate (Ps. 85); requests (Ps. 83), thanks (Ps. 138) or confessions (Ps. 51). Finally, singing is a form of *proclamation*. Songs can be used to teach (Ps. 119), exhort (Ps. 100), admonish (Ps. 95) and evangelize (Ps. 67). As it can be seen, singing in the Bible is far from a one-dimensional activity.

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8 Unless otherwise stated, Scripture quotations are from the *ESV*.
9 These two aspects are defended more extensively in both David G Peterson, *Engaging with God: a biblical theology of worship* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 221; and John Woodhouse, ‘The key to church music’, in *The church musicians’ handbook* (ed by. Rosalie Milne and Sally Trethewey; Sydney: Matthias Media, 1994), 12.
10 Smith, ‘The role of singing in the life of the church’.
It is also important to note the variety of singing in the Old Testament assembly. According to Peterson, “although some biblical praise was sung by believers together, individual singers and choirs seem to have had a significant role in Old Testament gatherings for worship. This pattern suggests that there is a place in our gatherings also for corporate singing, for individuals ministering in song and for choirs.”\(^\text{11}\) Psalm 136 also appears to be a call and response song.\(^\text{12}\) At this point one might rightly ask, ‘But how much should New Testament believers copy the practices of Old Testament Israel?’ This is an important question. Answering this exact issue, Peterson says, “It is inadequate to construct a theology of the gathering on the basis of what is not said in the New Testament.”\(^\text{13}\) While many of the Old Testament shadows have been fulfilled in Christ, it is not unreasonable to suggest that singing in the assembly should have far more continuity than discontinuity between the testaments.

Before applying this thinking to the Sunday gathering, it is important to keep in mind the purposes of the Christian assembly. John Woodhouse has argued convincingly that Christians gather together for three primary reasons.\(^\text{14}\) First, they gather as a testimony to Christ. Though Christian gatherings are a human activity they are a divine achievement. In the earthly gathering, Christians express the reality that God has acted by his Spirit to create a new humanity in the Lord Jesus Christ (Eph. 2:15). Second, Christians gather for

\(^{11}\) David G Peterson, *Encountering God together*, 125.


fellowship in Christ. They gather together because by God’s grace they belong together. They have all heard the one gospel and received the same spirit (Eph. 4:5). They are children of the same family (Jn. 1:12) and have been called to love one another (Jn. 13:35). Finally, Christians gather for building maturity in Christ. They gather together in order to be built in faith, hope and love and to encourage each other as the day draws near (cf. Acts 2:42; Heb. 3:13, 10:24-25). As we have already argued, singing plays an important role in this third purpose (Col. 3:16).

With that in mind, let me suggest five ways in which this theology ought to drive our practice in the Sunday gathering. First, there should be singing in the Sunday gathering. While it is certainly possible to imagine individual circumstances where singing may not be appropriate for a time, it would seem to cut against the grain of Scripture to disregard singing completely. As we have seen, Christians are not only commanded to sing, but it is integral to who they are as the people of God. This may be individual, congregational or choral, but either way, there should be singing.

Second, the common observation that our gatherings sing far more than those of the Reformation churches is not necessarily such a bad thing. Shead laments, “Our greatest point of contrast with Cranmer’s church is the sheer quantity of music we sing.” Given that singing is a key way to let the ‘word of Christ dwell among us richly,’ far more important than the quantity of the songs we sing is their quality. This leads us to the next

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15 I am aware of at least two church plants that have chosen not to sing in order to be more ‘seeker friendly’.
implication.

Third, the songs we sing should reflect the diversity of praise, prayer and proclamation described above. In a 2002 survey of over 150 contemporary songs, Evans found that 71 per cent of songs were written from the individual’s point of view, and over half of them had to do with the individual’s relationship with God.17 This highlights the common deficiency in our understanding about the corporate nature of singing and the role that singing can have as a ministry to one another.

Fourth, congregation members should not be afraid to express their emotions when singing. With the rise of the charismatic movement and the modern emphasis on personal experience, many Christians are rightly concerned about emotionalism. Emotionalism means pursuing feeling as an end in themselves rather than as a response to the gospel. But as Bob Kauflin reminds us, “the problem is emotionalism, not emotions […] vibrant singing enables us to combine truth about God seamlessly with passion for God.”18 To be sure, such emotional expressiveness may need to be tempered so that “everything is done in order” (1 Cor. 14:40), but it may also be appropriate from time to time to challenge the almost stoic-like nature of congregational singing in some churches.

Fifth, the language of ‘worship’ should not be used exclusively for congregational

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17 Mark Evans, *Open up the doors: music in the modern church* (London; Oakville: Equinox, 2006), 137.
18 The irony of quoting a reformed charismatic at this point is not lost on the present author. Bob Kauflin, *Worship matters: leading others to encounter the greatness of God* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2008), 99.
singing (or the Sunday service for that matter). As Peterson says, “Although some of Scripture’s terms for worship may refer to specific gestures of homage, rituals or priestly ministrations, worship is more fundamentally faith expressing itself in obedience and adoration.”\textsuperscript{19} In light of this, terms like ‘worship pastor’ can be misleading.\textsuperscript{20} That being said, although some may prefer not to use worship terminology, it is still not technically incorrect to speak of ‘worshipping God together in song.’\textsuperscript{21} The appropriateness of doing so will necessarily depend on the congregation.

In conclusion, we have seen that congregational singing is an important part of the Christian life. Singing helps us to express our human emotions, as well as praise, pray to and proclaim the glories of our great God. It is both an individual and a corporate activity, and is an important way for Christians to minister to one another. In the face of our culture’s present love of all things musical, there is a great need to reexamine the Bible’s teaching on congregational singing, and once more appreciate it for the wonderful gift that it is. Failure to do so will come at great cost to our Sunday gatherings.

\textsuperscript{19} David G Peterson, \textit{Engaging with God}, 283.
\textsuperscript{20} Kauflin recognises the danger, but chooses to use the term anyway. Kauflin, 54.
\textsuperscript{21} Praising God vertically and teaching one another horizontally can both be acts of worship.
Bibliography of Sources Cited


