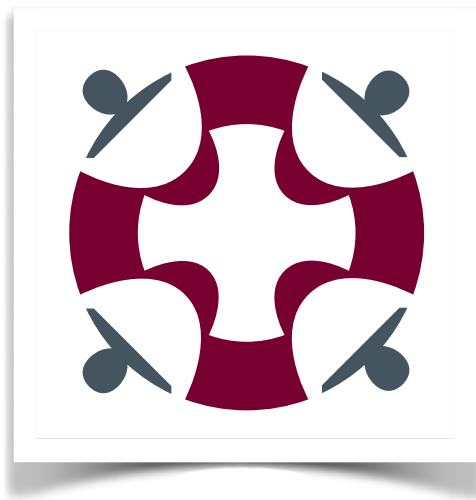


Liturgical Music Guide

Providence Reformed
Presbyterian Church



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Frequently Asked Questions About Music, Hymns, & Worship at Providence

This FAQ is intended as an example of representative questions often asked about music and singing in our worship services here at Providence. It is just a summary, and so does not contain extensive arguments and explanations.

Q. Why do we sing in church?

A. There are plenty of reasons to sing in church. For one thing, we are commanded to sing to God and to one another when we gather together as the body of Christ (Ps. 149:1; Col. 3:16-17; Eph. 5:18-20; etc.). We also have the example of the saints in the Old Testament singing vigorously with musical instruments when they gathered for worship at the temple (1 Chron. 15:16; Ps. 150). And the glorified saints in heaven don't just talk; they *sing* to the Lord (Rev. 5:9-10).

Q. Why do we both speak and sing in the service?

A. The Apostle Paul tells us “to speak” and to “sing” (Eph. 5:18-20). We speak to God (prayer) and to one another (responsive readings) all through the service. And we hear God speak to us through the voice of the pastor (or the authorized liturgical leader) when we are called to worship, admonished to confess our sins, assured our sins are forgiven, and when the pastor reads aloud the Scriptures and then explains them to us in the sermon. We also sing psalms and hymns all through the liturgy in response to God's gracious gifts to us in the service.

Q. Why is congregational participation in singing important?

A. We don't come to church as individuals to sit as part of an audience to be entertained by bands and choirs or even to be moved by rousing, rhetorically sophisticated sermons. We are called by God to gather as a body of worshippers who pray, speak, and sing to the Lord and to each other. The unfortunate tendency in modern American churches is to mimic the entertainment industry in our Sunday morning events rather than be faithful to the wisdom of twenty centuries of the Holy Spirit's work in the tradition of the church. The service is a dialog between Christ and his people.

Q. I've been in contemporary church services where there is little or no congregational singing. Why is that?

A. That is not true of all "contemporary" church services. Often churches that have services that are styled "contemporary" sing as much as we do. But there are other churches that de-emphasize congregational participation because they are trying to create a comfortable atmosphere for unbelievers. In these services the Sunday morning program is purposefully modeled on contemporary entertainment events that unchurched people are used to. They can come into such a "service," relax, enjoy some good music (performed upfront by a band or choir), and then hear an engaging "talk" about Christ and the Bible.

This American Evangelical model, now exported around the world, replaces the traditional divine service with a "rock concert and a Christian TED talk." That pretty much sums it up. Now, there may be a time and place for something like that on any other day of the week. But there has to be a time when the body of Christ gathers as the church to enter into God's special presence for worship. Interesting events that attract unbelievers are great for Gospel presentations. But the Lord's Day service ought to be for the people of God gathered together as the church. Moreover, when the church gathers on the Lord's Day, she doesn't merely gather to watch and listen. Rather, she comes together to *participate* in the celebration of Christ's feast.

Q. I thought Protestant worship was primarily about hearing the Word and listening to the sermon? This emphasis on congregational participation sounds Catholic to me.

A. There's nothing distinctively Roman Catholic about congregational participation in the liturgy. It may seem Roman Catholic to some Evangelicals because Catholics and Protestants have switched positions on this practice in modern times. What do I mean when I say they have "switched positions"? Presently, many Catholic churches have a good amount of active congregational participation, while Protestants tend to gather as passive audiences, except for a few hymns sung to prepare for the sermon. This is the exact opposite of what was true at the time of the 16th-century Reformation.

Q. Are you saying that the Roman church at the time of the Reformation didn't have congregational singing and participation?

A. Yes, there was virtually no sung or spoken participation in the late Medieval Roman Mass. The priests and monks did almost everything. Laymen gathered to watch and listen. As it turns out, lay people were largely dispensable. The Mass was thought to be effective apart from the participation of the congregation.

Many Protestant Christians today do not know that the Reformers to a man, especially Luther and Calvin, sought to correct the late medieval distortions of worship by restoring congregational participation. The late medieval Mass was hardly a congregational worship service at all. The Mass was said in Latin, which very few laymen understood.

There was virtually no congregational participation in the service beyond watching the visual "performance" by the priest at the altar. The bread, (supposedly) transformed into Christ's real body and held up for the people to adore, was the climax of the Mass. The people almost never partook of the Communion elements; only the priest ate and drank. There was no congregational praying, singing, or reciting of the creeds. The congregation merely watched and listened. They were largely passive. As individuals they may have performed private devotions completely independent of what the priest was doing up front, but as a community they did not participate in the liturgy. The 16th-century Reformers found that to be unbiblical and therefore great disservice to Christian people who gather for worship.

Q. Wait. I thought the Reformation was about correcting false doctrine. Are you saying it was also about correcting false and unbiblical worship practices?

A. Yes, that's what I'm saying. It might be argued that the Reformation was mostly about worship and that the doctrinal corrections were part of the larger practical liturgical Reformation. One of the Reformation's greatest achievements was to restore intelligent, unified participation by the Body of Christ in worship. Christian people were thereby transformed from uncomprehending observers of the worship of the sacrificing priests into an active royal priesthood. Calvin, echoing the early Church fathers, insisted that "each Christian bears the exalted title of sacrificer," and therefore has a rightful place in the offering of praise and

prayer in the liturgy. It is not the priest alone who has access into the heavenly sanctuary, but rather every member of the Body of Christ has heavenly access to God's throne room on the Lord's Day.

Q. Is this related to the doctrine of “the priesthood of all believers”?

A. Yes. The doctrine of the priesthood of all believers includes the importance of the participation of all believers in the corporate worship service. The active priesthood of all believers takes place during corporate worship as the whole congregation participates in offering to God prayer and praise. The congregation prays, praises, and communes with God. In the New Covenant there are no degrees of nearness (as there were in the Old Covenant), but every worshiper is a “saint,” that is, one who has sanctuary access.

The pastor does not worship for the congregation as a proxy; the people worship as the pastor *leads* them. What this means is that the priesthood of all believers demands a corporate, participatory liturgy. In other words, in the worship of the church everybody speaks and sings together all through the service. That's what the priesthood of all believers means.

Q. Does the restoration of the people as priests with full sanctuary access have something to do with singing in church?

A. It certainly does. But not merely singing. Because of their commitment to the priesthood of all believers the Reformers restored many of the practices of the pre-medieval, early church. They intentionally sought to recover what has been called “old catholic” forms of worship while bypassing the distortions of medieval Roman Catholic liturgical rites.

For example, the Reformers restored frequent Communion. They all sought to reintroduce weekly Communion at every Lord's Day worship service. They all effectively revived preaching and teaching so that the people could be instructed by God's Word every week. They all brought the recitation of the creeds by the congregation back into the worship service. They all rediscovered the Psalms as the inspired prayer book and hymnbook of the church.

Now, however, in 21st-century American Evangelicalism many of these practices have disappeared from the Sunday morning service. That's why I said that Rome and American Protestantism

have switched places. You are more likely to find a participatory service with Psalms, hymns, creeds, and communion at your local Roman Catholic service than you are in your neighborhood Evangelical community church.

Q. How did the Reformers seek to reform church music?

A. Mainly by resurrecting congregational singing. Vigorous congregational singing became one of the hallmarks of Reformation worship. John Calvin, for example, discusses music and singing under the heading of prayer. The people were taught to sing the Psalms in corporate worship, since the Psalter is the inspired prayer book of the Bible.

All the Reformers wrote model liturgies and prayers for use in the churches. This revival of congregational prayer was based squarely on the priesthood of all believers, which demanded that the people participate in the prayers and not just listen to someone else pray. There is nothing Roman Catholic about congregational praying of pre-composed prayers. These congregational prayers of praise and petition were sometimes spoken together, but they were more often than not *sung* by the congregation. They are what we call “hymns.” Hymns are nothing else than corporate prayers sung by the congregation.

Q. Are you saying that the Reformation was characterized by singing churches?

A. Yes. Many modern Protestants don't appreciate the fact that the Reformation, whether led by Luther or Calvin, was a full-fledged liturgical reformation. You didn't just come to Calvin's Geneva in the 1500's to learn doctrine; you came to learn how to worship God. You came to be formed into a worshipping community. This meant you were trained to sing. To sing your faith. To sing the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds. To sing the *Te Deum*. To sing your prayers. To sing the Lord's Prayer. Especially, to sing the inspired hymnbook of the church, the Psalter. You were trained in a new manner of living fitting for the Gospel. You were trained to be incorporated into a Christian army of Psalm-singing worshippers. You came to Geneva or Wittenberg or Strasburg in the mid-sixteenth century and you experienced what Paul meant in Colossians 3:16, “Let the word of Christ dwell among you *gloriously*, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with

thankfulness in your hearts to God.” This is what it meant to be a Reformation Christian. You were a singing Christian, a participant in a congregation of singing, justified believers.

Q. But didn't Martin Luther complain that “the devil has all the best music” and commandeer popular drinking melodies for his hymns?

A. No. He did say, indeed he bemoaned the fact that the devil had all the best music. But he was talking about the sacred music of the late-medieval Roman church, *not* the music of the tavern. Luther of all people did not identify the local tavern as the devil's lair. He did, however, believe passionately that the late medieval church had become the haunt of demons and that the Pope of his day was an antichrist.

When Luther complained about the devil having the best music he was concerned that the Roman church not be allowed to keep all the best church music and use it to draw people away from the Gospel as it was being proclaimed in the Reformation churches. Everybody at that time knew what Luther meant: Why should the papacy/the Roman Catholic church have all the great church music?

Q. Why don't we sing more contemporary praise songs and choruses in our worship service?

Praise songs and choruses may have a place outside of our liturgical worship on Sunday (in children Sunday school and Vacation Bible School, for example). But for our Lord's Day worship we strive to include psalms, hymns, and liturgical music of more robust textual and musical content. We look to reflect the poetic, theological, and emotional richness and depth of the Psalms and other Scriptures by chanting the Psalms and by singing hymns of high theological and poetic quality, appropriately paired with melodic and harmonic richness and strength.

Adolescent and teenage music are omnipresent in our culture, even in most commercially produced contemporary Christian music. But the church's corporate singing must lead the congregation into mature forms of praise and prayer (Eph. 4:14-15; James 1:4; Heb. 5:12-14). If the church is to be mature (and *to mature*) by means of her corporate singing, the content of our hymns must faithfully cover the full range of Christian living (and dying).

Q. So are hymns actually prayers? When we sing a hymn are we praying?

A. Yes, hymns are corporate prayers sung by the congregation. Whether we praise God together in song, confess our sins to him, or petition him to help us or others in times of need, when we *sing* hymns together we are *praying* to God.

Q. Is there something special about singing as opposed to speaking?

A. Yes, there is a difference. The Apostle Paul tells us to let the word of Christ dwell in us “richly” by singing “psalms, hymns, and Spiritual songs” (Col. 3:16). The word of Christ dwells among us *richly* or *gloriously* when it is sung. Singing glorifies and beautifies speech.

When you love someone you use heightened, glorified poetic speech and you sing those words to your lover. Somewhere Augustine sloganizes this fact: *Cantare amantis est* (“only the lover sings”). Lovers don’t merely talk, they sing. Love beautifies. We sing to those we love. We sing about that which we love. Just as poetry is glorified verbal communication, so singing is appropriate whenever plain talk is not enough.

Q. Why do we speak some parts of the service and sing others?

A. Good question. Part of the answer to this is that we are not trained to sing many portions of the service. Typically, Presbyterians tend to say everything except the hymns. But this has not always been the case in Reformation churches. James Hastings Nichols describes the typical Reformation service in the sixteenth century: “In classical Reformed worship the ‘liturgy’ in the strict sense, the people’s part, was all sung. It is not the spoken prayers, taken by the minister, but the sung liturgy of the people which must be studied in the first instance to comprehend the meaning of early Reformed worship” (*Corporate Worship in the Reformed Tradition* [1968], p. 35). Modern Presbyterians really ought to learn to sing more of the service in order to glorify our words to the Lord and each other.

The second part of the answer to this question is that some parts of the service are more appropriately spoken than sung. This is especially true for the corporate prayer of confession near the

beginning of the service. We come into God's presence singing (as Israel entered the gates of Yahweh with song, Ps. 100:4). But we immediately understand that we need to be purified of our guilt before we can be drawn in close to God. Our confession of sin ought to be humble and not "glorified," not sung. It should be spoken.

In the Old Testament this was nicely pictured in the way in which the various sacrifices were presented. The order was always Purification—>Ascension—>Communion. If you look at 2 Chronicles 29:25-30, you will see that with the commencement of the ascension offering (mistranslated "burnt offering") the music and singing begin in earnest. So also, when we are forgiven, we "lift up our hearts" and are ushered into heaven in Christ. That is when we begin to sing vigorously with "the angels, archangels, and all the hosts of heaven."

Q. What are the benefits of "chanting" the Psalms?

A. First of all, "chanting" is a loaded word. Most people think of monks mumbling in monasteries when they hear the word "chant." But the truth is that "chanting" is simply a way of *glorifying* ordinary speech. It's one step up in beauty from a simple recitation. A well-done chant will have the same rhythm and cadence as ordinary speech, but with the musical quality of ordinary speech enhanced and beautified. More importantly, when we "chant" a Psalm it allows us to give voice to the actual inspired words of the Psalm as it was meant to be sung. *Metrical* Psalms change the wording and the poetic flow in order to make the words fit the *meter* of the music. So, for example, we get "rhyming" at the end of lines. Here's an example from stanza five of the Anglo-Genevan metrical version of Psalm 6:8-9.

Depart from me, transgressors.
Flee now, all you oppressors:
The LORD did head my cry!
He heard my supplication,
My plea for consolation,
And with his help is nigh.

Now there's nothing terribly wrong with singing that version of Psalm 6. But recognize that this is a *paraphrase* of the biblical Psalm. It's not the Psalm itself. When we sing the metrical version, we are not singing the inspired words of the Psalm. We are singing what is in effect a creative *hymn* based on the Psalm. But if we

“chant” the Psalm we actually sing the very inspired words of the Psalm in the form in which God intended it to be performed by his people.

Depart from me, all you workers of evil,
For Yahweh has heard the sound of my weeping.
Yahweh has heard my plea;
Yahweh accepts my prayer.

You may think there’s nothing different about these two ways of singing Psalm 6:8-9. The difference lies in the content, but also the *form* of the Psalm. And the way Psalms, indeed the way all Scripture impacts us, is not only by means of the *ideas* contained in the words, but also in the very *form* God has used to communicate his Word to us. By “chanting” the Psalms we are able to sing the very words of God in the form he gave them to us.

Q. What about musical instruments? Should we have more of them?

A. Yes, we should. We’re always working on that. The organ was invented to be an affordable substitute for having a mini-orchestra accompany the congregation every week. The organ has performed this function well, and in fact is historically well suited for accompanying congregational singing due to its sustained tone and wide frequency range. But there is a need to have cymbals, stringed instruments, and all sorts of other musical instruments to help us worship the Lord with beauty and vigor. We are commanded to use them in Psalm 150. When God moved Israel into a more glorious environment of worship (the Temple), he also moved David and others to outfit and train the Levites to sing and play musical instruments in order to glorify the people’s worship. According to 1 Chron. 15:16, “David also commanded the chiefs of the Levites to appoint their brothers as the singers who should play loudly on musical instruments, on harps and lyres and cymbals, to raise sounds of joy.” And it turns out there are also musical instruments in heavenly worship (Rev. 5:8; 15:2).

If you found this Music Guide to be helpful, be sure to pick up a copy of our Worship Guide. That booklet explains our order of service on Sunday morning.



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