

**First Christian Church (Lawrence, KS)**  
**Dr. Barry M. Foster**  
**March 5, 2023**

*The Shape of Our Worship*  
**“Sing a New Song”**

Psalm 33:1-5

*Sing joyfully to the Lord, you righteous; it is fitting for the upright to praise him. Praise the Lord with the harp; make music to him on the ten-stringed lyre. Sing to him a new song; play skillfully, and shout for joy.*

*For the word of the Lord is right and true; he is faithful in all he does. The Lord loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of his unfailing love.*

Psalm 40:1-3

*I waited patiently for the Lord; he turned to me and heard my cry. He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire; he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand. He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God. Many will see and fear the Lord and put their trust in him.*

Psalm 96:1-3

*Sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth. Sing to the Lord, praise his name; proclaim his salvation day after day. Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous deeds among all peoples.*

Psalm 98:1-9

*Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things; his right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him. The Lord has made his salvation known and revealed his righteousness to the nations. He has remembered his love and his faithfulness to Israel; all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God.*

*Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth, burst into jubilant song with music; make music to the Lord with the harp, with the harp and the sound of singing, with trumpets and the blast of the ram’s horn—shout for joy before the Lord, the King.*

*Let the sea resound, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it. Let the rivers clap their hands, let the mountains sing together for joy; let them sing before the Lord, for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples with equity.*

[Slide 1] *Opening/Review*

Good morning, church! In our series, “The Shape of our Worship,” we’re looking at the different elements of our worship service, why they are there, what is important about them, how each part fits into the whole, and most importantly, how we engage with God in worship through the various parts of the service.

We began by looking at the need to prepare ourselves before we come to church on Sunday mornings, so that we are ready to meet with God and his people. Then we use the time right before the service to prepare our heart and mind to enter the presence of the Lord.

The opening portion of the service reminds us that God is here to meet with us, to manifest his presence to us and enter into relationship with us. We enter with joyful, exuberant praise and thanksgiving, grateful for all that he has done for us. We bow our hearts to acknowledge him as our king; and we intentionally step into his throne room.

[Slide 2]

Last week we looked at Paul’s instructions for the church when we gather in worship; specifically in reference to singing “*psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.*” “Psalms” referred to Scriptural passages that were put to music. “Hymns” were newly composed songs that might be modeled on biblical psalms, or incorporated biblical teaching. They often were odes of praise to God and Christ. “Spiritual songs” were new songs that were inspired by the Spirit or had content that focused on spiritual themes or encouraged spiritual attitudes or behavior in keeping with Christian teaching and values.

[Slide 3]

I pointed out that even though there are many different styles of music, we can distinguish two primary types of worship songs: (a) *songs we sing about God to each other*; and (b) *songs we sing to God about him and us, or about our relationship to him.*

[Slide 4]

Today, we’re going to pick right up where we left off last time, looking at the musical aspect of our worship service. The title for today’s sermon is “Sing a New Song.” I hope you noticed that repeated exhortation in the passages we just read from the Psalms. It’s something that is found in a number of places in the Psalms as well as in Isaiah and notably in the book of Revelation. It occurs so often that it really bears asking the question, “*Why is it so important to sing new songs? What is it about new songs that matters to God and to our worship?*”

[Slide 5] *A short historical detour*

Before I answer that question, let me point out some personal observations I have made from my study of church history as well as from my own experience in church over the past half-century. These are all related to the issues of singing new songs or making changes in the way the church has used music in worship. I want to hasten to add that I am in no way attempting to give a comprehensive or authoritative statement on music in church worship. These are simply some of my observations that I believe are pertinent to our topic for today.

[Slide 6]

In the late fourth century, melodies and songs from the Eastern church made their way to Milan, Italy, where they were embraced by Ambrose, the bishop, who used them to compose new hymns for the church. It was Ambrose who introduced congregational hymn singing to the church of his day with this new version of plainsong or chant, in which everyone sang in unison. At the time, he was accused of bewitching Milan with these melodies. But because of his influence, hymn singing became an important part of the Western church liturgy, and plainsong was the music of the church for the next five centuries.

[Slide 7]

But sometime before the year 900, some rascally singers began adding a different line to that of the melody. They were probably tenors, who were bored with always having to sing along with everyone else when they could hear a harmonizing tone in their own mind that improved the sound. Or maybe basses who preferred to just hang out on the lower tones where they could let the sound ring while everyone else flitted around on the complicated melodies. What emerged was a new kind of song—instead of a single unison line of melody, there were two, or even three different lines, all woven together into a complex harmonic whole.

The new type of song was known as *organum*. Not only was it a spark of beauty and creativity that allowed talented musicians to enrich the experience of worship for everyone, it was also the beginning point for what eventually developed into what we would call Western choral music. But when it was first introduced, it was viewed as an unwelcome innovation and criticized for being too complicated and confusing; most of all, for breaking the unity of the church's worship. We should also note that this kind of music was being sung outside the church, and then made its way into the church, though not always with the approval of church leaders—something that has been the case going back to the earliest centuries of the church's history, when church leaders scolded congregants

and warned them against bringing into the church's worship instruments and tunes that were being played at pagan theater performances and civic festivals.

[Slide 8]

Martin Luther was similarly denounced by the Catholic church for using popular tunes to compose hymns for his churches. To his accusers, Luther's practice proved that he was a heretic: such worldly music had no place in the worship of God. But for Luther, using well-known melodies was an easy and powerful tool for cementing biblical doctrine in the minds of the common people. His hymns were vehicles for teaching truth to those who needed it the most, for whom the Latin masses were mostly incomprehensible and therefore meaningless.

[Slide 9]

Isaac Watts is considered by many to be one of the greatest composers of hymns for the Christian church. Yet the church in which he grew up was one that only sang from the psalms. As a boy, he complained to his father about how poor the songs were, so his father challenged him to produce something better. Isaac accepted the challenge and wrote his first hymn. He continued to write, eventually composing nearly 600 hymns, including quite a few that are still sung throughout the world. But in his own day, even though his hymns were very popular among ordinary churchgoers, many church leaders criticized them as being "too worldly," since they did not simply repeat the words of the Psalms. One pastor addressed the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church that was meeting in Philadelphia in 1789 with these words: *"I have ridden horseback all the way from my home in Kentucky to ask this body to refuse the great and pernicious error of adopting the use of Isaac Watts' hymns in public worship in preference to the Psalms of David."*

[Slide 10]

Consider as well the work of John and Charles Wesley. Preaching to crowds of people in the open air, most of whom were unfamiliar with church or the Bible, the Wesleys reached tens of thousands with the gospel. John was the pre-eminent preacher of the two, but Charles wrote over 6,500 hymns to support the growing movement. Those hymns helped common folk to understand biblical doctrine, but what was just as important was that they also conveyed the emotional appeal of having a heart-felt connection to God that went beyond understanding doctrinal truths to knowing the love of God and loving him in return.

[Slide 11]

As I mentioned in the Friday email, Mary and I went to see this new movie, "Jesus Revolution," which tells the story of one of the key happenings that launched the Jesus movement among the hippies in the late 1960's and early

1970's. Since we both were swept into the kingdom of God toward the tail end of that movement, it was a nice trip down memory lane for the two of us. It was also a nice chance to learn a bit more about some parts of that history that were less familiar to us. (It's worth seeing, if you get a chance.)

More important, the movie was a tremendous reminder to me that despite all of the failings and shortcomings of that movement, including a number of its leaders and musical "superstars," the outpouring of God upon this nation during those years has had a profound and lasting impact upon the church for good. I'm not competent to give an adequate historical and spiritual analysis of all that God has done or even of what has happened as a result of that move of God; nor do we have the time today to really dig into it. But I'd like to take just a few moments to note some key shifts that have happened in the Protestant church's worship in the last fifty years as a result of the Jesus movement. (Similar effects can be seen in other streams of the global church as well.)

[Slide 12] *A look at the past half-century*

The last half-century has seen dramatic changes in the way churches approach worship and in the way music is integrated into worship—not just in America, but thanks to the growth of global media, in churches all over the world.

(1) The first is actually a general shift that is a continuation of what had already been happening: moving away from an emphasis on being an institution primarily responsible for moral instruction, with the goal of producing conformity with acceptable social norms; to an emphasis on being a spiritually oriented organization that leads people to find new life in Jesus Christ that is evidenced through living according to biblical teaching. While this has been going on for about a century and a half, the effect of the Jesus movement was to accelerate this shift fairly dramatically.

[Slide 13]

(2) This is matched by one of the most obvious and dramatic changes we can note today: the shift from a highly formal atmosphere to a much more casual atmosphere for Sunday worship. Many more churches today employ a freer liturgy, or have no liturgy. Dress is much more casual. There is a much more relaxed feel to church today in most Protestant churches than there was when I was a boy.

[Slide 14]

(3) The Jesus movement was instrumental (no pun intended) in leading churches to adopt new musical styles, new instruments, and new kinds of songs that would be used in worship. Popular music outside the church merged with

traditional music within the church. Teams of musicians were added alongside the traditional pianist and/or organist, or replaced them; groups of singers or a lead singer became the prominent voices in place of a choir (or in addition to the choir).

[Slide 15]

(4) A renewed appreciation for congregational singing led to an emphasis on the involvement of the congregation rather than emphasizing the performances of the trained musicians (organist, pianist, soloists, and choir). As many have noted, recent trends in the opposite direction in the largest megachurches and those who aspire to be like them have raised serious questions about current models of church and worship.

[Slide 16]

(5) The Jesus movement ushered in a new approach to worship music that focused strongly on the emotional and spiritual connection to God. A higher percentage of songs used in worship were songs sung to God rather than simply being about God. The goal for the weekly worship gathering was not the production of an aesthetically pleasing service with a theologically sound liturgy, but encountering God through music and preaching, worship and the Word.

I point these things out, not because I think that we have to change to be relevant or because the church has to reflect whatever is going on in the culture around us. Not every change is good, and not everything that is happening outside or inside the church ought to be embraced. But I do think that we have to take seriously what has happened in our world and in the church in the last fifty years. And we need to ask the question I posed earlier: “*Why is it so important to sing new songs?*”

[Slide 17] *Reasons to sing new songs*

Let me share five reasons I believe it is important for us as the church to sing new songs, to embrace new music; five reasons that our texts for today illuminate for us.

(1) Psalm 33:1-5 was our first text. The psalmist exhorts God’s people to sing, to use instruments, to play skillfully (that’s why the worship team and the choir practice!), and to do so with joy. He specifically enjoins us to sing a new song. I probably should have included verse six in our reading, even though it leads us to a much longer section that doesn’t exactly pertain to the topic. But verse six says: “*By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, their starry host by the breath of his mouth.*” We are to sing a new song because God is the creator, and we are created in his image. The one who made the heavens and their hosts by the breath of his mouth is the one who has breathed his breath into us so that we

are alive and able to do what he does to a lesser degree: we have been given a capacity to be creative—to create.

God is eternally creative, innovative. He is eternally inspiring new songs in the hearts and minds of his creation. Those new songs are as varied in style and type as the landscapes of this earth, the species of plants and animals, and the daily sunrises and sunsets. He has made a world for us with an enormous variety of things, each of which has its own unique beauty—but which I might not see at first.

There are a lot of foods that I like. I might prefer a roast beef dinner to a grilled salmon salad, but I can really enjoy that salad if it's what you put in front of me for dinner. Enjoying the goodness of one doesn't require me to dismiss the goodness of the other.

You and I have different preferences when it comes to lots of things—foods, art, music, entertainment options, and so on. A man I dearly loved thought that the Flint Hills were the most beautiful place on earth. I think they're a lot of grass in the way between me and the Rocky Mountains. There are people who love looking at rustic barns. I think of them as sources of firewood.

But here's the thing—I can learn to appreciate the beauty in what others find lovely. And it's easier to do that if the other person is someone I know and love—because I'm already inclined to care about what they care about. So even if I am not enamored with tropical beaches, I can learn to see them as beautiful and to appreciate all that is good about them by setting aside my own preferences and thinking about them through the lens of someone who does love them.

The same is true about music. I can learn to love and appreciate music that I don't like all that well if I love someone who does care for it—provided that the music genuinely reflects God's creativity and isn't contrary to God's nature.

[Slide 18]

(2) A second important reason for singing a new song comes to us from Psalm 40:1-3. Here the psalmist describes his joy at being delivered from death and given salvation, a new life. Celebrating that new life is the reason for the new song. Whenever I think of this, I recall a simple little song that Barry McGuire wrote. As he explained it, the inspiration for the song came as he was thinking about his former life as a rock and roll singer—stuck singing the blues because he was so empty. Drugs and partying had left him feeling bad all the time. But then he found Jesus. And he wrote these words:

*“Why, it's a happy road that I'm travelin' on; I just can't help myself, you've got me singin' a happy song, since your Son came shining, I know it won't be long till your happy road is takin' me home!”*

I can't think of a single time I've thought about that song or listened to him sing it that I don't start smiling inside and usually outside as well. It's not deep. It's not particularly striking musically. It's not one of my favorites of his tunes. It's just a really simple little folk tune, and when Barry played it, he just wailed away on his acoustic 12-string as hard as he could. He was not an amazing virtuoso on the guitar and he didn't have an extraordinary voice—quite the opposite, in fact. He could sing in tune. But he just beamed with joy when he sang that little chorus. And that joy comes through and it reverberates in my soul as I listen to it, as I think about it, as I sing along with it.

If you understand what it means to know God, to have salvation, then joy will lead you to a response of thanksgiving and praise and changed habits and behaviors. It will also lead you to embrace new songs that reinforce your convictions and your feelings about having this new life. Those songs become meaningful ways for your heart to respond to God.

[Slide 19]

(3) The third reason for us to sing new songs comes to us from a different passage of Scripture, Isaiah 42:10-12: *“Sing to the Lord a new song, his praise from the ends of the earth, you who go down to the sea, and all that is in it, you islands, and all who live in them. Let the wilderness and its towns raise their voices; let the settlements where Kedar lives rejoice. Let the people of Sela sing for joy; let them shout from the mountaintops. Let them give glory to the Lord and proclaim his praise in the islands.”*

In the context of chapter 42 of Isaiah, this passage is speaking about peoples who do not know God coming to know him through the ministry of the Messiah. Their new song is a song of joy that affirms that they belong to the new community of God's people. Once they were outside, now they have been brought in by the Messiah, and they rejoice at being rescued and made part of his family. Once they were subject to a sinful kingdom, trapped by their own self-centered way of living and by the bondage of Satan. Now they are freed and ready to sing.

When I enrolled at KU, I knew very little about this school or its traditions. I wasn't raised in a Jayhawk family, and I had no prior allegiance to the school. But before the first football game, my freshman choir director made sure that we all knew how to sing the fight song and the alma mater and so on. Singing the new songs of God's kingdom is a part of being welcomed into the family. It is how we embrace life in the new kingdom and learn our history and rehearse our commitments to God and to one another.

[Slide 20]



(4) Our fourth reason for singing new songs also comes from a different Scripture: Revelation 5:9-10: *“And they sang a new song, saying: ‘You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth.’”*

Here we see that what calls forth the new song of worship is not just the creativity of God, but the supreme worthiness of the Lamb, the Messiah, our Lord Jesus. What he has done to secure eternal salvation for his people; the unparalleled value of the sacrifice of his life; the magnitude of his conquest of sin, death, and the grave; his absolute supremacy as the Lord of the universe; these all cry out for a new song that celebrates his worth and attempts to match it with a worthy effort to praise him adequately.

Think of it like this: when a new king comes to the throne or achieves some grand victory, some composer will be commissioned to write a new song for the coronation or for the celebration of the king’s victory. Or even take it down a notch from there—a sports team wins a championship, and someone will make a new video to mark the accomplishment. It’s our way of recognizing the supremacy of someone. That’s at the heart of what worship is about, as Revelation shows us. And new songs are always appropriate for that.

[Slide 21]

(5) Our final reason for singing new songs takes us back to Psalm 96. This psalm exhorts us to sing new songs in order to declare God’s goodness and glory, to tell of his deeds, his accomplishments; and specifically to tell those things through these new songs to new audiences who are unfamiliar with God and with what he has done. Those new songs are to be sung so that the whole earth learns of salvation; so that the whole earth may rejoice in worship.

But here is where we have to pause and think for a moment. If the purpose for singing these new songs to new audiences is so that they will learn of his salvation and come to him in faith, then it follows that they would have to understand the message of the song. And it would certainly help if the song were sung in a way that made it easier for them to grasp the message and remember it. Gospel tracts are great, but the psalmist doesn’t tell us to write out the message for them to read. Testimonies are great, but we’re not told to repeat our testimonies to these new audiences. Nor are we exhorted here to proclaim the good news to them. We’re told to sing a new song to them.

Now, obviously, from the New Testament we have an abundance of evidence that we are supposed to use literature and testimonies and preaching to bring the gospel message to people who don't know Jesus Christ. But it is striking that we are exhorted here to sing a new song so that they hear who God is and what he has done. It speaks to both the value of music and the power of music to affect people. Songs can reach a heart in ways that a sermon never will. And they stick in your brain far longer than almost anything else.

[Slide 22]

One of the things that the movie, "Jesus Revolution," got absolutely right was that Chuck Smith, the pastor of Calvary Chapel, was a pivotal person in sparking this massive movement. And as the movie rightly portrays, his impact came from three simple, but immensely powerful things he did. They were the catalytic actions that resulted in a spiritual explosion. (1) *He chose to love these hippies, right where they were, before they got cleaned up.* (2) *He welcomed them into his church; he opened the doors of his church, his house, and his heart, and he made them feel welcome—even though it was initially very uncomfortable for him.* (3) *He welcomed their music.* He gave these young musicians, like Chuck Girard and Love Song and 2<sup>nd</sup> Chapter of Acts and others, the opportunity to play, to lead worship, to use their music and their musical abilities to serve Jesus. He made them a prominent part of the ministry of the church. The church began singing new songs. And the result was dramatic—thousands came because the music was something that was familiar, even though the setting wasn't. And the message was able to penetrate their hearts, because they were hearing old truth in a new wineskin.

Not all of the music that came out of the Jesus movement was great, or even all that good. Not every contemporary Christian song is good. Charles Wesley wrote 6500 hymns. I promise you—they weren't all great or memorable. It's true in every age, every era of new worship music, from Ambrose to today: some songs are great, some are good, some are serviceable, some are mediocre to poor. Some are terrible. But we must not let poor examples of a particular style of worship music—or poor ways it is used—keep us from singing new songs, and finding the good in them that helps us see God and his truth and his love more clearly.

[Slide 23]

I know a pastor who made a decision that their church was only going to sing new music, meaning music that was really fresh, whatever was most current. I understood his desire to stay abreast of what the Spirit of God was doing. But though I respected him (and still do), I think that decision was a mistake. I'm

firmly committed to singing new songs, to trust that God is going to inspire songs that speak to a new generation in a powerful way. But I also believe that our worship is intended to connect us not only to God and to one another and to new audiences, but to our history, to the church triumphant, who those who are worshiping around the throne right now, while we await the return of the Lord. That's why we're committed to keeping a blended worship for our Sunday mornings.

Let me tell you a few more things I believe as we close; beliefs that I hold that reflect my understanding of what Scripture and the experience of the church teach us.

I believe that our worship should reflect who we are, and should give everyone a chance and a way to express our love for the Lord with music that is familiar and meaningful. And I believe that each of us needs to be committed to loving one another more than we love our favorite style of music, so that we choose to embrace and appreciate music that is perhaps unfamiliar, songs that are someone else's favorite—because we care more about having Jesus rule over our worship and make himself known to us and to the world through our worship than we care about which kinds of songs we sing. And I also believe that we can find good music from lots of different styles and eras that will have something for us that is rich and meaningful, something that touches our heart in simple or profound ways, something that helps us see God better and love him more fully. And I believe that some of the best songs we will ever hear, that will impact us the most haven't even been written yet.

So, I'm going to keep singing new songs. I hope you'll join me.

[Slide 24]

*Transition to communion*

*[Worship team, if you would begin making your way to the platform . . . ; those who are helping to serve communion please join me in the front . . .]*