

# CHRIST OUR SONG

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**BOB KAUFLIN**

One of my clearest memories of Sovereign Grace Churches in the early 80s is the singing. It was passionate. Emotional. Engaged. Physically expressive. Jubilant. Expectant. Loud. And a far cry from the formal and often subdued singing I experienced growing up.

Of course, that kind of singing might be expected of any congregation fueled and governed by God's Word, centered on the good news that Jesus came to save sinners and empowered by God's Spirit. And it's the kind of singing we still aspire to today.

But have you ever wondered why passionate congregational worship is so appropriate for those who follow Jesus? It's not as though Jesus came to save musicians. Scripture never records Jesus carrying a guitar, playing a lyre, or pounding on cymbals. We know he sang a hymn with his disciples the night before he died (Matt. 26:30), and we can assume he joined in the songs at the synagogue. But we have no reason to believe his voice was particularly exceptional or that he ever encouraged musical training.

And yet, singing seems to be what followers of Jesus do. It's what we must do and are commanded to do:

*“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God” (Col. 3:16).*

But God isn't looking for mere obedience. He wants us to understand how singing can benefit us and bring glory to Christ. How does that happen? I can think of at least three ways.

### **Christology Set to Song**

First, *singing is meant to deepen our knowledge of Christ*. The first Christian converts from Judaism were used to praying the *Shema* daily: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one” (Deut. 6:4). With those words ringing in their ears, they were having to confront the stunning reality that God is

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one, yet also three—Father, Son, and Spirit. Jesus was not simply an exalted teacher and prophet. He was Immanuel, God with us.

Under the Holy Spirit's guidance, Paul and the other New Testament authors faithfully incorporated the revelation that Jesus Christ is God in the flesh into the monotheistic faith passed down from their forefathers. For in-

stance, in the book of Revelation, John intentionally uses the same titles for Jesus as he does for God (Rev. 1:8; 22:13). In Revelation 5:13, we read, “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!” Jesus receives the same worship God does.

But teaching wasn't the only way the new Christians grew in their understanding of who Jesus is. They sang. And the word of Christ, or the gospel, found its way into their hearts.

“Long before the Church had begun to speculate about the Trinitarian formulas in which its later creeds were to be defined, it was confessing that Jesus was one with God and was worthy of such divine and transcendent honours as most properly belonged to the one, true and living God, the Maker of

heaven and earth. Christology was born in the atmosphere of worship."<sup>1</sup>

Likewise, our Christology today is nurtured and deepened in the “atmosphere of worship.” It’s why we take pains to write and sing so many songs that plumb the depths of the nature, actions, and heart of the Savior. From its early years, Sovereign Grace Music has focused on producing songs about Jesus, especially those that articulate substitutionary atonement. Songs like “Before the Throne of God Above,” “Jesus Thank You,” “All I Have is Christ,” and many more have “catechized” us and enabled the word of Christ to dwell richly in us.

But while Christ dying as our substitute on the cross is at the heart of our relationship with God, it’s not all there is to say about Jesus. He is the one through whom creation was made. He is our good shepherd. His beauty shines beyond our ability to express it. His heart overflows with compassion and kindness that should stun us. He will return as the holy judge to mete out justice to all his enemies and right every wrong. All these themes and more are worthy contributions to the songs we sing that help deepen our knowledge of Christ.

### **From Doctrine to Devotion**

A second way that singing benefits us and brings glory to God is that *singing is meant to strengthen our affections for Christ*. Knowledge isn’t enough. God wants us to feel in our hearts what we know to be true in our heads. And that’s what words set to music help us do.

Not too long after it was published in 2005, I had the joy of reading Ron Chernow’s brilliant biography of Alexander Hamilton. I was profoundly affected by the way Chernow captured the conflicting impulses of a highly complex character. But years later, watching Lin Manuel-Miranda’s musical adaptation of Hamilton, I was touched even more deeply. The musical enabled me to feel the grief Hamilton experienced in losing his son, the intensity of the bond between Hamilton and his friends, and the passionate devotion Eliza displayed for her deceased husband.

At the end of the day, it doesn’t matter how I feel about Alexander Hamilton and what he accomplished. But it’s eternally significant how I feel about

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1. RALPH MARTIN, *WORSHIP IN THE EARLY CHURCH* (GRAND RAPIDS, MI: WM. B. EERDMANS PUBLISHING CO, 1975), 33.

Jesus Christ and what he accomplished.

To say we believe certain truths about Christ and not be affected by him is dangerous. Knowledge that doesn't move our hearts can lead to boredom and formalism at best, self-righteousness, self-deception, and hypocrisy at worst. Singing helps to align what we believe with what we love. It turns doctrine into devotion.

Of course, we don't need music for that to take place. But God designed melodies, chords, and rhythms to affect us emotionally. It's totally appropriate, and part of God's design, to shed tears of joy when singing, "There is no sinner beyond the infinite stretch of Your mercy," to exuberantly shout out, "No power of hell, no scheme of man can ever pluck me from His hand!" or to experience an otherworldly peace as we sing, "Christ has regarded my helpless estate." As Jonathan Edwards put it:

"The duty of singing praises to God seems to be given wholly to excite and express religious affections. There is no other reason why we should express ourselves to God in verse rather than in prose and with music, except that these things have a tendency to move our affections."<sup>2</sup>

In other words, we don't sing to Jesus *like* we mean it. We sing *because* we mean it. And we want to mean it even more deeply.

### **Passionate Singing, Passionate Living**

Third, *singing is meant to shape our response to Christ*. An undeniable connection exists between the way we engage with God in corporate worship and how we approach every other day of the week. If our singing is half-hearted on Sunday, it's likely that our desire to glorify Christ will be half-hearted on Monday.

Singing is inherently a full-body experience. It involves our lungs, our lips, our throats, our tongues, our teeth, our faces, our hands, and on occasion, even our feet.

"My lips will shout for joy, when I sing praises to you; my soul also, which you have redeemed" (Ps. 71:23).

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2. JONATHAN EDWARDS, *THE RELIGIOUS AFFECTIONS*, (CARLISLE, PA: BANNER OF TRUTH, 1961), 44.

“My heart is steadfast, O God! I will sing and make melody with all my being” (Ps. 108:1)!

That kind of engaged singing reinforces for us where our allegiance lies. We’re confronting the empty lies and fleeting pleasures of the world so easily succumb to and confessing with everything in us that unshakeable truth and eternal joys are found in Christ alone.

That’s why passionate singing isn’t a substitute for a life lived for the glory of Christ. It’s meant to reflect and inspire it. As we sing of our Savior’s love in the midst of the congregation, we remember what’s true, what’s beautiful, what’s good, and what’s most important. That leads to changes in our hearts, our relationships, our choices, and our actions.

Typically those changes take place over a period of time and not as a result of a single meeting. That’s why faithfully joining the voices of other believers in our churches week after week matters more than experiencing a worship high at an event or conference. God can certainly use both. But it’s the consistent returning to songs, hymns, and spiritual songs that will leave the greatest mark on our souls.

So as we have an opportunity, let’s take advantage of the gracious gift of singing. It will never fully communicate how glorious our Savior really is, even in eternity. But it can point us in the right direction and grow our love for Christ in the process.

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