

Calvary Orthodox Presbyterian Church

Congregational Singing Policy

Approved by the Session on February 16, 2019

I. General Purpose Statement:

Calvary Orthodox Presbyterian Church seeks to promote congregational singing as prescribed in Scripture in a way that encourages our congregation to sing to God and to one another with thankfulness in our hearts. The goal is the glory and worship of God as outlined in Scripture rather than according to human invention. Therefore, this policy will address the Biblical and confessional foundation of congregational singing along with its implications for selection of hymns, singing, and musical accompaniment.

II. Biblical Foundation

The Bible's most clear instructions for congregational singing found in the New Testament include Colossians 3:16 and Ephesians 5:18-21.

“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.” Colossians 3:16 (ESV)

“And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but 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, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.” Ephesians 5:18-21 (ESV)

Although Paul does not use the term “congregational singing” in these texts, he is certainly writing of corporate singing in the context of other believers. Such a context would have primarily been in the assembly of believers on the Lord's Day for corporate worship. Let us observe some of the major points drawn from these two texts:

- Congregational singing is meant to cause the word of Christ to dwell in us richly. This means that congregational singing must be in accordance with the truth of God's word. It also means that the songs sung must be rich with Scriptural theology that points to the culminating work of Christ.
- Congregational singing is meant to address one another. More specifically, corporate singing is to teach and admonish others within the covenant community. This is to be done in wisdom, meaning that the words of our songs must communicate substantial truth. We should sing so that others can hear and in hearing the truth of the Word of Christ, they might be built up in faith.

- Congregational singing is meant to address God. We are to sing with thankfulness in our hearts to God. This means we must sing joyfully out of thanksgiving but also reverently as we are addressing God.
- Finally, we are to sing and make melody with our hearts. The primary way God outlines for the church to communicate to one another and to God during worship is by singing. Our voices should be an expression of knowledge and praise from our hearts and minds.

In short, congregational singing is designed by God for communication. We are to communicate the word of Christ to one another and to God. From these basic biblical points, we will draw further applications for congregational singing.

III. Westminster Confession of Faith

The Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF) summarizes the teaching of Scripture regarding singing in worship in helpful ways. Let us draw out three main points from the confession:

1. WCF 21:1 "...But the acceptable way of worshiping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshiped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture."

Although this does not directly reference congregational singing, it sets forth an important principle that has major implications on it. The regulative principle of worship is grounded in Scripture's teaching that God institutes his own worship. When his people assemble publicly for worship, they are to worship according to what God has prescribed, rather than "according to the imaginations and devices of men." With reference to congregational singing, we must follow the prescribed form God has laid out for us in his word, rigorously seeking to conduct our singing in every way that fulfills God's plan for it. If we do not have grounds for an element of worship that is (a) either expressly set down in Scripture or (b) by good and necessary consequence that may be deduced from Scripture, then we shall not offend God by worshiping him in such a way.

2. WCF 21:2 Religious worship is to be given to God, the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost; and to him alone; not to angels, saints, or any other creature: and, since the fall, not without a Mediator; nor in the mediation of any other but of Christ alone."

Every element within the worship service must, not only be instituted by God, but also be for his glory alone. Worship is not a venue intended to display the gifts of men but the majesty, honor and glory of God. Simply, worship is to be given to God alone and not to the creature. In addition, the church's worship is mediated by Christ alone. He is our worship leader and no man can take his place. God, however, uses servants to conduct his worship in order that his people will be further edified according to the truth and so that all things may be done decently and in order. These servants must never in any way draw attention to themselves, distract, or eclipse the worship of God, nor should they ever be considered to stand in the role of mediator, as if they

worship on behalf of the people. Instead, they worship with God’s people and serve them. Every response to God in corporate worship should be done corporately as far as it is possible.

3. WCF 21:5 “The reading of the Scriptures with godly fear, the sound preaching and conscionable hearing of the Word, in obedience unto God, with understanding, faith, and reverence, singing of psalms with grace in the heart, as also, the due administration and worthy receiving of the sacraments instituted by Christ, are all parts of the ordinary religious worship of God...”

It is important to note that our confessional standards assert that congregational singing is a prescribed element of corporate worship. In support, it references the above passages (Colossians 3:16 and Ephesians 5:18-21) along with James 5:13 and 1 Corinthians 14:15. The Confession uses the term ‘psalms’ to describe what the church is to sing. Certainly, we should make regular use of the 150 psalms of the Psalter. The Westminster Assembly, however, did not believe in exclusive psalmody. Chad Van Dixhoorn writes, “The commendation of the Psalms in the confession and directory needs to take into account that early-modern use of the term ‘psalm’ is not limited to the Book of Psalms only. The common use of psalm almost always included hymns...”¹ Therefore, we encourage regular singing of the metrical psalms but also encourage the singing of biblically faithful hymns that explicitly sing of the revelation of Christ and the redemption purchased by him.

IV. The Directory for the Public Worship of God of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church

The Directory of Public Worship (DPW) is part of the constitution of the OPC and seeks to lay out sound principles for worship based on our primary (Scripture) and secondary (WCF) standards. Let us briefly examine five principles laid out in the DPW and conclude with the full text of the section specifically devoted to Congregational Singing.

1. DPW I.B.3.b “Public worship is to be conducted in reliance on the gracious working of the Spirit of the exalted Christ, which alone can make anyone capable of such sincerity, reverence, devotion, awe, expectation, and joy. Hence, from its beginning to its end, public worship should be conducted in that simplicity which manifests dependence on the Spirit of Christ to bless his own ordinances.”

The reformation principle of the simplicity of worship certainly applies to congregational singing. The songs that are sung and the music that accompanies should draw attention to the truth and the appropriate response to the truth. We should not rely on the skill or wisdom of man but the Spirit of Christ to work by his appointed means.

2. DPW I.B.4.d “Because God’s people worship, not as an aggregation of individuals, but as a congregation of those who are members of one another in Christ, public worship is to

¹ Van Dixhoorn, Chad. *Confessing the Faith: A reader’s guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith.*

be conducted as a corporate activity in which all the members participate as the body of Christ.”

Public worship is to express the union we have with one another through our union with Christ. Therefore, all our responses to the Lord’s truth in public worship should involve all the members of Christ’s church. One individual should not be highlighted over another.

3. DPW I.C.2 “The triune God is not a passive spectator in public worship, but actively works in each element of the service of worship. Neither are the people of God to be passive spectators in public worship, but by faith are to participate actively in each element of the service of worship.”

God is active in worship and so is each worshipper. Therefore, each member of the body of Christ is to actively participate in congregational singing. Never should any worshipper or a portion of the congregation be spectators.

4. DPW I.C.4.b “Because musicians and musical instruments serve the part of worship that is performed by the congregation, it is fitting that they be positioned with or behind the congregation.”

Musicians and musical instruments should always serve the congregation in the biblical goal of singing to God and to one another. They are not an end in and of themselves and therefore, they should never be the focus either in terms of their location in the worship space or in the performance of their skills.

5. DPW I.D.2.a “The session is responsible to give immediate oversight to the conduct of public worship in the local church.”

All aspects of public worship, including congregational singing are under the oversight of the Session. Therefore, the Elders are responsible to conduct worship in a way that is faithful to the Scriptures and for the edification of the members of the body of Christ.

DPW II.B.2 Congregational Singing:

a. Congregational singing is a duty and privilege to be practiced and cultivated in all the churches. Let every member of the church take part in this act of worship. God’s people should sing, not merely with the lips, but with understanding and with grace in their hearts, making melody to the Lord.

b. As public worship is for the praise and glory of God and the building up of the saints, not for the entertainment of the congregation nor the praise of man, the character of the songs used therein is to befit the nature of God and the purpose of worship.

c. Congregations do well to sing the metrical versions or other musical settings of the Psalms frequently in public worship. Congregations do well to sing hymns of praise that respond to the full scope of divine revelation.

d. In the choice of song for public worship, great care must be taken that all the materials of song are fully in accord with the Scriptures. The words are to be suitable for the worship of God and the tunes are to be appropriate to the meaning of the words and to the occasion of public worship. Care should be taken to the end that the songs chosen will express those specific truths and sentiments which are appropriate at the time of their use in the worship service.

e. Musical gifts are properly used in public worship to assist the congregation in its worship of God. They may not be used for the praise or applause of men. No person may take a special part in the musical service unless he is a professing Christian who adorns his profession with a godly walk, or who is a baptized covenant child whose conduct is appropriate to his status.

V. Policies

Based on the above, these are the policies of Calvary Orthodox Presbyterian Church with regard to congregational singing:

- **Selection of Hymns and Psalms**
 - Both Psalms and Hymns that express the full scope of divine revelation will be sung in public worship.
 - Only Psalms and Hymns produced by an OPC hymnal [Trinity Hymnal or Trinity Psalter-Hymnal] will be sung in public worship.
 - The Session has the responsibility to file a complaint to the appropriate judicatory should the words of a hymn produced by the OPC be deemed unbiblical.
- **Singing**
 - Everyone in public worship is encouraged to sing enthusiastically together as one body despite their skill or level of proficiency.
 - There will be no choir or select singer(s) that perform for or lead the congregation's singing during any Lord's Day public worship.
 - The Session has the responsibility to ensure that the truth of God and praise to God that is sung can be heard over the musical accompaniment as we are to sing to one another.
- **Musical Accompaniment**
 - The musical accompaniment is to serve the congregation in the primary task of singing and therefore, should only promote the singing of voices.
 - Music without singing should only occur before or after the service (prelude and postlude), during the collection of offering, or during the passing of the elements of the Lord's Supper. There should be no special music during any Lord's Day public worship.
 - **Instruments**
 - Although no particular instruments are forbidden in the Scriptures, it is the Session's responsibility to ensure that the accompanying instruments only

promote congregational singing by serving the voices of the body of Christ.

- The Session must ensure that the number of instruments is in accordance with the reformation principle of simplicity of worship and by no means obscure the glory of God.
 - As suggested in the DPW, the musical instruments should not be up front as a performance, but serving the congregation, they should be positioned with or behind the congregation.
- **Musicians**
- Those who serve the congregation by musical accompaniment must have the requisite skills so that their playing does not distract from the singing.
 - They must also play for the glory of God and service of the whole body rather than for the praise or applause of man.
 - According to the DPW, those who participate in musical accompaniment must be “a professing Christian, who adorns his profession with a godly walk, or who is a baptized covenant child whose conduct is appropriate to his status.” A professing Christian is one who is a member in good standing of a Bible believing church. Ordinarily, he or she is a member of Calvary OPC.
 - Before being approved to participate in the musical service of the congregation, musicians must meet with the Session to discuss this policy.