

## Ten Biblical Functions of Congregational Singing

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**Abstract:** *This essay addresses an overlooked area of concern in worship studies—the theology of congregational singing. It examines the ontology and function of song, utilizing a biblical-theological methodology to answer the question, “What does congregational singing do for the people of God?” This essay argues that to properly ‘sing the Bible,’ the church must embrace and embody the magnificent array of theological functions of congregational singing, as displayed in Christian Scripture. To sing the Bible means more than just singing biblical words. To faithfully sing the Bible, Christians must sing together in a way that reflects all of the biblical functions for congregational song. Through an exegesis of Ezra 3:10–13 and additional Scriptures from the Old and New Testaments, this essay develops ten theological functions of congregational singing.*

**Key Words:** *Bible, biblical, congregational song, Ezra 3:10–13, function, music, singing, theology, worship*

It is almost common nomenclature in Protestant and Free Church traditions today to consider worship as only (1) the worship gathering and (2) musical worship.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, many Protestant churchgoers consider a church’s “worship” to refer to only the congregational singing within the liturgy. As further evidence of reductionism, worship music is now a codified subgenre of commercial music.

The reductionisms affecting congregational worship, however, are not solely limited to the concept of “worship.” The use of music in the church is also experiencing significant oversimplification. Conversation regarding music in worship tends to reflect a view that the primary—if not sole—activity in congregational singing is the vertical praise of God. James K. A. Smith notes that “wide swaths of contemporary Christianity tend to think of worship as only an ‘upward’ act of the people of God who gather to offer up their sacrifice of praise, expressing their gratitude and devotion

to the Father, with the Son, in the power of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>2</sup> Smith categorizes this view as “worship-as-expression.”<sup>3</sup> He raises this point with a desire to recover a formative dimension to Christian liturgy that can remain unseen, if not even dormant, in some congregations. For Smith, Christian worship is not just expressive; it is also formative.

Just like worship has become one-dimensional for a number of Christians, so have Christian perspectives on congregational song. Singing in worship today is largely perceived as achieving a doxological function of vertical praise to God. Although this understanding is accurate, singing as expressing praise to God is only one dimension of song, but it is not the only function mentioned in the Bible.

By utilizing a biblical-theological methodology, this essay argues that to properly “sing the Bible,”<sup>4</sup> the church of Jesus Christ must embrace and embody the magnificent array of theological functions of congregational singing, as displayed in Christian Scripture. To sing the Bible means more than just singing biblical words; it also does more than merely offer up doxological praise to God. To faithfully sing the Bible, Christians must sing together in a way that reflects all of the biblical functions for congregational song.

### Locating the Functions of Congregational Singing in Relevant Literature

Given the rich history of Christian discussions concerning music in the church (and the occasionally volatile nature of such discussions), there is no shortage of academic studies that speak to music for worship. Yet, a variety of approaches exist, and not all align with the argument advanced in this article. The research interests of the present study require a focused inquiry in three areas. First, relevant studies must focus on congregational song rather than music in general.<sup>5</sup> Second, relevant studies must employ

<sup>2</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works*, Cultural Liturgies 2 (Baker Academic, 2013), 182.

<sup>3</sup> Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 182.

<sup>4</sup> “Sing the Bible” refers to one biblical element for public Christian worship in a fivefold liturgical model promoted by J. Ligon Duncan III, “Foundations for Biblically Directed Worship,” in *Give Praise to God: A Vision for Reforming Worship: Celebrating the Legacy of James Montgomery Boice*, ed. Philip Graham Ryken, Derek W. H. Thomas, and J. Ligon Duncan III (P&R, 2003), 65.

<sup>5</sup> In many cultures and languages, identifying a legitimate song is neither easy nor obvious; it is more a progression or “matter of degree”—to borrow an idea

<sup>1</sup> For more on the association of worship with music, see Jonathan Ottoway, Adam Perez, and Lester Ruth, eds., *How Worship Became Music: A Historical Sourcebook* (Abingdon, 2026).

methods from biblical studies (including exegesis), as substantive interaction with biblical texts is needed for a clearer understanding of the mechanics of congregational song. Third, relevant studies must look beyond just the *evidence for* congregational song and consider the function or purpose of congregational singing in ecclesial life.

A survey of relevant literature reveals a number of noteworthy Protestant perspectives on the theological functions of congregational song. In *The Lord's Song*, John Kleinig offers a highly-technical analysis of Israel's music and worship, seeking to specify "the ritual function and theological significance of sacred song within the sacrificial ritual as described in Chronicles."<sup>6</sup> Though limited almost exclusively to choral music in Chronicles, Kleinig's study delineates five functions for song in Israel's worship: (1) proclamation of God's name and deeds; (2) presenting prayer or petitions to the Lord; (3) prophecy; (4) praise to God; and (5) a "martial significance of praise," related to military exercises and "supernatural warfare against the Lord's enemies."<sup>7</sup>

Steven Guthrie supplies a substantial theological analysis of music and song in "Singing, in the Body and in the Spirit."<sup>8</sup> In this article, Guthrie aims to justify the liturgical practice of singing with sufficient theological reasoning. To do so, he appeals to insights from Augustine, Calvin, and Bonhoeffer before commencing an exegetical study of Ephesians 5:19 and its surrounding context. Guthrie carefully argues that singing in

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from Vern Poythress, "Ezra 3, Union with Christ, and Exclusive Psalmody, II," *WTJ* 37.2 (1975): 226. In the English language (atonal, Western), song may be relatively easy to recognize. But it is vital for Western Christians today to understand that the boundary lines for what constitutes a song are not always clear and require further definition. At its most basic level, vocal song involves a melodic cadence, a text, and the human voice. The use of the phrase "melodic cadence" here is intentional, in order to provide a definition of song broad enough to include chants and poetry. It must be noted that the songs preserved in the Bible are devoid of melodic notation, other than poetic elements and musical superscriptions.

<sup>6</sup> John W. Kleinig, *The Lord's Song: The Basis, Function and Significance of Choral Music in Chronicles*, JSOT Supplement Series 156 (JSOT Press, 1993), 7.

<sup>7</sup> Kleinig, *The Lord's Song*, 133–90. It must be noted that Kleinig also distinguishes between vertical and horizontal dimensions of song in worship (pp. 145–47). Yet, he considers both aspects as part of the proclamation function for choral song in Chronicles and not additional functions to add to an itemized list.

<sup>8</sup> Steven R. Guthrie, "Singing, in the Body and in the Spirit," *JETS* 46.4 (2003): 633–46. For his book-length investigation of similar themes, see Steven R. Guthrie, *Creator Spirit: The Holy Spirit and the Art of Becoming Human* (Baker Academic, 2011).

Ephesians "is used in the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit."<sup>9</sup> Underneath this idea, Guthrie also observes at least three other functions of singing: (1) singing "enlists" and aligns the body and the senses in a holistic expression of praise to God; (2) singing cultivates an awareness beyond the individual self, as it requires "sensing and responding to others and one's environment"; and (3) singing "offers a powerful aural image of life together" in Christ, a particular type of unity that preserves and enhances "individual distinctiveness" in the church.<sup>10</sup>

The contributions from Kleinig and Guthrie are by no means the only studies on the topic. Though his primary interests pertain to spiritual formation through Contemporary Worship Music, David Lemley acknowledges at least five functions for singing in worship, with reference to three key passages in the NT (1 Cor 14:12–17, Eph 5:8–20, and Col 3:12–17).<sup>11</sup> Donald Hustad uses five categories to explore the functionality of music, explaining both how music operates in the Christian life and how to select church music appropriate for God's purposes.<sup>12</sup> Paul Westermeyer synthesizes biblical texts and historical sources to support at least four functions of music in worship.<sup>13</sup> The functions of music and song are addressed in manuals for worship ministers, including Constance Cherry's

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<sup>9</sup> Guthrie, "Singing, in the Body and in the Spirit," 646.

<sup>10</sup> Guthrie, "Singing, in the Body and in the Spirit," 646.

<sup>11</sup> David Lemley, *Becoming What We Sing: Formation through Contemporary Worship Music*, Calvin Institute of Christian Worship Liturgical Studies Series (Eerdmans, 2021), 43–45. The complexity of Lemley's multifaceted study results, at times, in overlapping themes and functions for song in worship. Nevertheless, the following functions may be discerned: (1) singing is evidence of a relationship to God in Christ, (2) singing is an offering of praise, (3) singing is a ministry to one another in the body, (4) singing is an expression of unity in the body of Christ, and (5) singing "energizes the witness of the church" to live a lifestyle of worship to God (p. 45).

<sup>12</sup> Donald P. Hustad, *Jubilate II: Church Music in Worship and Renewal* (Hope Publishing Company, 1993), 22. For Hustad, good church music is appropriate church music, and appropriate church music is what "serves the purposes of God in the church, especially in *leitourgia* (worship), *kerygma* (proclamation of the gospel), *didache* (Christian education), *diakonia* (pastoral care), and *koinonia* (fellowship)" (p. 23).

<sup>13</sup> Paul Westermeyer, "The Functions of Music in Worship," in *Music and the Arts in Christian Worship: Book One*, ed. Robert E. Webber, vol. 4 of *The Complete Library of Christian Worship* (Star Song, 1994), 99–103. For Westermeyer, music facilitates praise, expresses prayer, proclaims God's Word, and recounts the story of God (pp. 99–100). Westermeyer also lists a fifth "function"—that song is a gift to be stewarded and celebrated in worship.

*The Music Architect*<sup>14</sup> and Bob Kauflin's *Worship Matters*.<sup>15</sup> The topic also appears in popular-level volumes written to encourage singing in a broad Christian audience, such as Jim Thompson's *Sing Loud, Die Happy*<sup>16</sup> and *Sing!* by Keith and Kristyn Getty.<sup>17</sup>

Though all such studies advance the conversation, more development is needed. Kleinig's study is limited to OT material. Other studies lack sufficient interaction with biblical texts. The taxonomies of musical functions in the examples listed above are relatively short, rarely reaching more than four or five functions. Furthermore, some studies expand beyond congregational singing to consider sacred music in general or singing in all of life. What remains to be constructed is a focused and comprehensive theology of congregational singing that examines the ontology and function of song, according to Scripture. Thus, the present study addresses a lacuna in scholarly literature by offering a cogent biblical theology of congregational song, answering the question, "What does congregational singing do for the people of God?"

### One Biblical Theology, Ten Theological Functions

The present article seeks to advance the study of congregational song by constructing a biblical theology of congregational singing with ten parts. To some degree, all discussions of Christian worship emerge from

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<sup>14</sup> Constance M. Cherry describes church music as "multifunctional," before proceeding to delineate three functions for church music: "[1] music accompanies the actions of worship, [2] music accommodates the dialogue of worship, and [3] music accomplishes the communal ministry of worship" (*The Music Architect: Blueprints for Engaging Worshipers in Song* [Baker Academic, 2016], 41). Regarding the way that music accompanies the actions of worship, Cherry notes that music facilitates sung proclamation, sung praise, sung prayer, and sung exhortation (pp. 42–50).

<sup>15</sup> Bob Kauflin proposes four reasons for music in worship: (1) music expresses emotion, (2) music reflects God's glory and activity, (3) music helps God's people remember, and (4) music expresses the church's "unity in the gospel" (*Worship Matters: Leading Others to Encounter the Greatness of God* [Crossway, 2008], 98–99).

<sup>16</sup> Jim Thompson recognizes distinct vertical and horizontal functions of congregational singing, but he only addresses the topic briefly and intermittently (*Sing Loud, Die Happy: An Exploration of How God's Gift of Song Is Meant to Change Us* [Wipf and Stock, 2022], 52–54).

<sup>17</sup> Keith and Kristyn Getty offer four functions of singing in the Christian life: (1) "singing take's Sunday's truths into Monday," (2) "singing sustains you in every season of life," (3) "singing reminds you of what God has done in your life," and (4) "singing keeps your mind on eternity" (*Sing! How Worship Transforms Your Life, Family, and Church* [B&H, 2017], 38–50).

a desire to practice what could be called "biblical worship," as the Word of God is integral to all truly Christian worship.<sup>18</sup> This study seeks to identify themes, patterns, and connections between OT and NT passages in order to codify a list of theological functions for congregational singing in Christian worship.

Support for theological functions of congregational singing could arise from a variety of biblical texts spanning both the OT and the New Testament. This study begins with an exegetical analysis of Ezra 3:10–13 as a paradigmatic example of congregational singing in the Bible.<sup>19</sup> While theological functions of congregational singing could be sufficiently argued with isolated verses from various biblical passages, the examination of one biblical episode showcases how many theological functions operate simultaneously in a singular expression of musical worship. Thus, what follows are not ten independent principles but ten aspects of a holistic action—a deeply corporate activity contingent upon the cooperative participation of individual worshipers. Then, within each function, additional biblical passages will be cited to provide complementary support in order to demonstrate the cohesiveness of each theme throughout Scripture.<sup>20</sup>

The selected verses of Ezra 3 gain additional significance against the

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<sup>18</sup> However, though most uses of biblical worship seek to engage Christian Scripture, not all uses of biblical worship (a) refer to the same topic or (b) employ the same methods. To this end, Mike Farley supplies a seminal taxonomy for understanding common approaches to "biblical worship" in "What Is 'Biblical' Worship? Biblical Hermeneutics and Evangelical Theologies of Worship," *JETS* 51.3 (2008): 591–613. Hermeneutically, the present study will proceed using what Farley defines as a biblical-typological approach.

<sup>19</sup> Critics might contest the selection of this passage as paradigmatic on two levels. First, some might dispute that this passage does not explicitly pertain to singing, whereas the primary musical verb **אָנָה** (*'anab*) in v. 11 commonly means to answer or respond. The implication is that not everyone may have sung each note at exactly the same time. Second, it is unclear precisely who participated in the singing of v. 11. While it seems clear that all the people *shouted praise* to God (v. 11b), perhaps only the priests and the Levites carried out the song of v. 11a. Even with the ambiguity of such points, this episode is clearly an example of congregational worship. All of Israel was present (Ezra 3:1). And the inclusion of musical instruments like trumpets and cymbals evokes the idea that this episode featured (a) music, (b) congregational worship, and (c) some form of congregational singing—even if all individuals in attendance may not have sung every note concurrently.

<sup>20</sup> It must be noted that not every passage in consideration speaks directly to corporate worship. Nevertheless, every example aids a biblical understanding of singing, which can therefore be appropriated and applied to gathered worship.

surrounding context of the episode. The Israelites were in exile. God stirred the Persian king Cyrus to send the people of Israel back to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple (Ezra 1:1–3). So, the exiles left Babylon and returned to their land. After establishing themselves near Jerusalem, the priests rebuilt the altar of God and offered sacrifices on it (Ezra 3:2–3). But the foundation of the temple had not yet been laid until the second year. Zerubbabel and Jeshua appointed the Levites to supervise the rebuilding work of the temple (Ezra 3:8), leading to the climactic events of Ezra 3:10–13:

And when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests in their vestments came forward with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the LORD, according to the directions of David king of Israel. And they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the LORD,

“For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel.”

And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. But many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers’ houses, old men who had seen the first house, wept with a loud voice when they saw the foundation of this house being laid, though many shouted aloud for joy, so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people’s weeping, for the people shouted with a great shout, and the sound was heard far away.<sup>21</sup>

From the selected passage in Ezra 3, ten theological functions of congregational song can be seen largely in the following order: (1) doxological, (2) ethnic, (3) genealogical, (4) eschatological, (5) prophetic, (6) ecclesiological, (7) didactic, (8) empathetic, (9) evangelistic, and (10) petitionary.

### 1. The Doxological Function

First, congregational singing is doxological. The name for this category derives from the Greek verb *δοξάζω*, meaning to praise or glorify. In Ezra 3, the people cry out in doxological praise and thanksgiving to God. The Hebrew verb *הלל* (*halal*) appears three times in this brief section: once in v. 10 and twice in v. 11. It is quite appropriate that a verb for praising God occurs so frequently in the target passage, as the English term “praise” constitutes perhaps the most common popular perception of singing—a vertical expression of praise and thanksgiving to God.

<sup>21</sup> All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

Many Psalms serve as examples of this doxological function in the Old Testament, such as Ps 95.<sup>22</sup> In general, the Psalms have been sung as a part of Jewish and Christian worship for generations.<sup>23</sup> In the English translations of the Psalms, words for “sing” and “praise” appear together overtly in at least thirty-one verses.<sup>24</sup> Many of these examples translate a single Hebrew verb *זמר* (*zamar*) which encompasses music-making, “a song accompanied by instruments,” and even “calls to praise in communal hymns.”<sup>25</sup> Another common technique among the Psalm writers connects the verb *הלל* (*halal*, often translated “praise”) with the verb *שיר* (*shir*, *shur*, often translated “sing”).

The NT includes ample evidence for similar constructs. Hebrews 2:12 extends the discussion of Hebrew verbs in the Psalms, given the relationship of Heb 2:12 to Ps 22:22 as explained by Ron Man.<sup>26</sup> A second NT

<sup>22</sup> This Psalm employs many of the verbs listed in this section, as it encourages the people of Israel to sing to the Lord (v. 1), to bring thanksgiving to him (v. 2a), and to make a joyful noise with songs of praise (v. 2b). Yet, such praise is not omnidirectional or without a source. God is the source and object of praise, as identified in the subsequent verse: “For the Lord is a great God, and a great King above all gods” (Ps 95:3). Undoubtedly, the people of God are urged to sing praises to him for who he is, in an individual prescription. John Goldingay successfully highlights the vertical dimension of praise in Ps 95, linking the worshiper as the subject to God as the object of worship (*Psalms*, vol. 3, *Psalms 90–150*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms [Baker Academic, 2008], 99).

<sup>23</sup> According to Sigmund Mowinckel, “That the Psalter was being used as a song-book for the temple service is seen not only from [some] headings ... but also from a great many technical terms in the headings and elsewhere, which without a doubt refer to the liturgical use of the Psalms” (*The Psalms in Israel’s Worship*, trans. D. R. Ap-Thomas [Eerdmans, 2004], 202). For a thorough survey of Jewish and Christian reception of the Psalms, see Susan Gillingham, *Psalms Through the Centuries*, 3 vols., Wiley Blackwell Bible Commentaries (Wiley-Blackwell, 2008–2021). See also Terry L. Johnson, “The History of Psalm Singing in the Christian Church,” in *Sing a New Song: Recovering Psalm Singing for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Joel R. Beeke and Anthony T. Selvaggio (Reformation Heritage Books, 2010), 17–52.

<sup>24</sup> Ps 7:17; 9:2, 11; 18:49; 21:13; 30:4; 47:6–7; 57:9; 59:17; 61:8; 66:2, 4; 68:4, 32; 71:22–23; 75:9; 84:4; 92:1; 98:4–5; 104:33; 105:2; 106:12; 108:3; 135:3; 138:1; 146:2; 147:1; 149:1.

<sup>25</sup> Daniel I. Block, *For the Glory of God: Recovering a Biblical Theology of Worship* (Baker Academic, 2014), 225.

<sup>26</sup> As Ron Man explains, “The immediate reason for the writer of Hebrews

example, this time in narrative form, arises in Acts 16:25. Paul and Silas, imprisoned, are “praying and singing hymns to God” (θεόν). The direction affirms that one purpose of singing lies in expressing praise and thanksgiving, vertically, to God.

## 2. The Ethnic Function

Second, congregational singing is ethnic, in that it can express the identity of a particular people group or ἔθνος. The song utilized in Ezra 3 erupts from an ethnic heritage of Jewish songs and worship forms. In particular, the language of v. 10 describes the cultic rituals characteristic of the Jewish people—the temple belongs to Yahweh, the leaders are priests and Levites, and they praise “according to the directions of David king of Israel.” In the most general sense, the ethnic function of song affirms that worship is expressed in particular forms associated with cultural and ethnic identities. Furthermore, the lack of biblical content prescribing specific musical styles communicates the importance of creating songs in relation to ethnic preferences, as well as the ubiquity of singing in every culture.

The OT affirms the plurality of cultural forms and styles in other passages, as evidenced by Ps 67:4. In Ps 67, the nations (plural) will sing for joy, most likely in indigenous—not homogenous—expressions of musical worship. Jesus endorsed and employed specific ethnic expressions of music. He concludes a celebration of the Passover, a Jewish holy day, with a Jewish song (cf. Matt 26:30; Mark 14:26).<sup>27</sup> This ethnic function of singing

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to quote Psalm 22:22 ... is to demonstrate Christ’s solidarity with us, His brethren (Heb 2:11–13). It is only natural that we should follow our ‘forerunner’ (6:20) and the ‘author and perfecter of [our] faith’ (12:2) as He *praises* the Father” (*Proclamation and Praise: Hebrews 2:12 and the Christology of Worship* [Wipf and Stock, 2007], 31, emphasis added). Man also notes, “The priesthood of Christ is a major theme in Hebrews; and one crucial activity of a priest is *leading the people in worship*” (p. 32, emphasis original). The worship described by Man and embodied by Christ is none other than the doxological glorification of God the Father.

<sup>27</sup> The verb is a participial form of ὑμνέω. The significance of this point is captured by D. A. Carson who notes, “The ‘hymn’ normally sung was the last part of the *Hallel* (Pss 114–18 or 115–18). It was sung antiphonally. Jesus as the leader would sing the lines and his followers would respond with ‘Hallelujah!’” (“Matthew,” *Matthew and Mark*, EBC 9, red. ed., ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland [Zondervan, 2010], 604). As an aside, ὑμνέω is the same verb utilized in Heb 2:12. Some scholars like R. T. France highlight the distinction between this Jewish practice and modern singing—that what transpires in Matt 26:30 would sound like “a strange, loud and raucous noise” to twenty-first century Westerners (*The Gospel of Matthew*, NICNT [Eerdmans, 2007], 996). Nevertheless, in the cultural context, this pericope is very much an example of singing.

bears significance for ancillary discussions of contextualization and missiology, but the point remains—the Bible affirms that singing embodies and expresses ethnic and cultural identities.

## 3. The Genealogical Function

Third, congregational singing is genealogical. This label relates to the Greek word for generation (γενεά). In Ezra 3:10, musical praise commences “according to the directions of David king of Israel.” The exiles return to Jerusalem centuries after David’s death, yet Israel remembers his instructions for gathered worship and connects their congregational song to the tradition identified with King David of Israel.

One may also locate this genealogical function in the lyrical content of the Psalms. For example, Ps 145 states: “One generation shall commend your works to another ... and shall *sing aloud* of your righteousness” (Ps 145:4a, 7b, emphasis added). In the New Testament, the temporal element of the genealogical function arises in the Magnificat, Mary’s Song recorded in Luke 1: “For behold, from now on *all generations* will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. And his mercy is for those who fear him *from generation to generation*” (Luke 1:48b–50, emphasis added).

In such examples, songs—like genealogies—can connect present worshipers with the historical past. This function emphasizes that every phenomenon of Christian congregational singing is tied to a rich musical tradition that spans generations.<sup>28</sup> The musical expressions of the present do not occur in isolation. Rather, by singing, Christians take part in a historic practice with continuity among God’s people for generations, through the Bible and in the witness of Christian history.

## 4. The Eschatological Function

Fourth, congregational singing is eschatological, rooted in ἔσχατος and associated with discussions of eschatology. In the eschatological sense, songs can provide Christians with a future-forward orientation, directing the people of God toward an eternity of worship in Christ. In Ezra 3, the eschatological function of song is most visible in the lyrical content that points forward specifically to a future hope ultimately fulfilled in the eternal reign of Christ. Ezra 3:11 alludes to this function by proclaiming an eternal dimension to God’s love as enduring forever (עולם, *olam*).

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<sup>28</sup> This genealogical point is for all Christians, not just some traditions such as Protestants or evangelicals. Even the Catholic Church views the “musical tradition of the universal Church [to be] a treasure of inestimable value, greater than that of any other art” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church: With Modifications from the Editio Typica*, 2nd ed. [Doubleday, 1995], 326 [§1156]).

Ezra 3 is not the only instance of this function. Jonah offers up a prayer to God with poetic (and melodic?) cadence from the belly of the great fish in Jonah 2. He expresses an eschatological dimension in Jonah 2:4: “yet I shall again look upon your holy temple.” Embedded in this prayer is an overt statement of hope in a future witness of the presence and glory of God, of something that will inevitably come to pass. In the New Testament, the most obvious examples arrive in the songs of Revelation, which capture the enduring reign of God’s kingdom in melodic cadence.<sup>29</sup> Another NT example is the reference to Christ’s eternal reign in 2 Tim 2:11–13. Though this property of congregational song is similar to the didactic function to come, the eschatological function warrants a separate categorization for the way such truths instill an orthodox expectation and anticipation in the body of Christ.<sup>30</sup>

Yet, congregational songs fulfill the eschatological function in a second way that expands beyond an eternal orientation in the lyrical content. Every congregational song is a typological device, made possible by the doctrine of union with Christ.<sup>31</sup> Singing songs on earth here and now demonstrates the eschatological function by training Christian hearts and minds to long for the future events to come in the eternal reign of Christ, which includes gathered singing in worship to him who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb (Rev 5:13). Such a theology of the future relegates an other-worldly-ness to song, where every song becomes an anthem to the Christian that this world is not home (Phil 3:20–21; 1 Pet 2:11). On

<sup>29</sup> For a more extensive treatment of music and worship in Revelation, see Robert S. Smith, “Songs of the Seer: The Purpose of Revelation’s Hymns,” *Themelios* 43.2 (July 2018): 193–204.

<sup>30</sup> Proper expectation and consideration of the future is essential to the Christian life. For more on such topics, see Jeremy Begbie, “The Future: Looking to the Future: A Hopeful Subversion,” in *For the Beauty of the Church: Casting a Vision for the Arts*, ed. W. David O. Taylor (Baker, 2010), 165–85. Begbie observes the writers of the NT “move from the future to the present,” thereby challenging prevalent cultural perspectives that start with present action and move toward future possibilities (p. 166). Thus, the eschatological function of congregational song teaches Christians to anticipate an imminent future reality, which then bears direct application to one’s present existence. Contrast this with the didactic function, which bolsters a stronger sense of faith or belief in divine realities.

<sup>31</sup> Although much more can be said on this point, see Poythress who remarks, “Christ is the leader, the model, and the motivator of New Testament congregational singing” (“Ezra 3, Union with Christ, and Exclusive Psalmody, II,” 218). See also the discussions of the present and active ministry of the resurrected Christ as song leader and worship leader in David Peterson, *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship* (InterVarsity Press, 1992), 228; and Man, *Proclamation and Praise*, xi, 17–37, 74–81.

this theme of congregational song as an eschatological typological device, one cannot escape the relevance of the prominent evidence of songs in the book of Revelation (e.g., Rev 4:8, 11; 5:9–10, 12–13; 7:10–12).

## 5. The Prophetic Function

Fifth, congregational singing is prophetic, but this label is more implicit compared with the other functions illustrated in Ezra 3:10–13. In Ezra 3, the physical proximity of the gathered people presented a clear horizontal function of congregational song. As Israel sang of God’s goodness and love (v. 11), they edified one another with these truths. It is a horizontal ministry through song to others who are present.

A proper recognition of the Hebrew verb for “sing” in v. 11 (עָנָה, *anah*) bolsters this point. The term commonly means to answer or respond, heightening the horizontal aspect. It seems likely that God’s people offered alternating, responsorial statements of praise to God. The call and response nature of this event renders two additional observations. First, those present would have heard the words sung by those around them. Second, the waiting required by the call and response cadence would have augmented their ability to hear the words sung by the opposite group, as well.

Having established a horizontal function for congregational song, the next step is to support the label of this function as “prophetic.” Prophecy in both the OT (נָבִיא) and NT (προφητεία), demonstrates a wide semantic range, rendering the action itself quite mysterious. One reason why prophecy remains so difficult to understand is the frequent overlap with other spiritual gifts and liturgical actions, such as singing.<sup>32</sup> A proper inquiry into the biblical nature of prophecy—much less an assessment of modern appropriations—expands beyond the scope of this essay.<sup>33</sup> However, in a general sense, prophecy involves a sensitivity to the Spirit of God in proclaiming the Word of God to the people of God. In prophetic activity, God uses humans to impart his words to the lives of other humans. This general understanding of prophecy matches the horizontal

<sup>32</sup> Allen P. Ross agrees that though prophet (נָבִיא) “has a very wide usage; ... ‘prophecy’ and ‘singing’ were at times used interchangeably (1 Chron. 25:1–6)... In fact, it was generally understood that poetry was more inspired than ordinary communication and therefore natural to prophetic speech” (*Recalling the Hope of Glory: Biblical Worship from the Garden to the New Creation* [Kregel, 2006], 215–16).

<sup>33</sup> Kleinig proposes at least four possible interpretations of song as prophecy in the worship of Israel (*The Lord’s Song*, 154–56). For a charitable interaction between two positions in the church today, see also Andrew Wilson and Thomas R. Schreiner, “The Continuation of the Charismata [with responses],” *Themelios* 44.1 (April 2019): 16–40.

function of congregational song. When Christians sing horizontally *to one another*, the Spirit of God can apply the Word of God through the voice of one Christian to the ears of another, ultimately leading to edification within the body.<sup>34</sup>

Additional biblical evidence corroborates a relationship between music and prophecy—at a general level—in the edification of God’s people. Consider the example of Miriam the prophetess (נְבִיאָה, *neviah*) leading a song in Exod 15:20–21.<sup>35</sup> First Chronicles 25 also illustrates the connection between music and prophecy, as David identified gifted Levites capable of ministering *through prophecy* (נָבֵא) “with lyres, with harps, and with cymbals” (v. 1, emphasis added). And 1 Chr 25:6 reveals this prophetic action as involving praise (יָדָה) and thanksgiving (הִלֵּל) again *with* musical instruments.<sup>36</sup>

Paul’s instructions to the Ephesians and the Corinthians serve as appropriate NT examples. In Eph 5:19–20, the prophetic function of congregational<sup>37</sup> song arises (1) in Christians singing *to one another* and (2) in the power of the Holy Spirit, as vv. 19–20 rest on the prerequisite of being filled with the Spirit (v. 18).<sup>38</sup> The ensuing fruit of this prophetic function of singing is edification, a conclusion also supported by Paul’s explanation

<sup>34</sup> Biblical texts to examine in support of this idea include 1 Chr 25, 1 Cor 12–14, Eph 5, and Col 3.

<sup>35</sup> Ross affirms the prophetic nature of Miriam’s song: “Yet, because the roles of the prophet and the musician often overlapped, . . . the song that Moses and Miriam sang may very well have been a prophetic work, inspired by God” (*Recalling the Hope of Glory*, 162).

<sup>36</sup> On the connection between music and prophecy in the OT period, Ross remarks, “In the Old Testament, singing or rhythmic chanting was considered the most powerful form that prophecy could have and a form of prophecy itself. Thus, when the Chronicler used the verb ‘prophesy’ for the work of temple singers, he was signifying that their singing, and especially what they were singing, was due to prophetic inspiration” (*Recalling the Hope of Glory*, 258).

<sup>37</sup> For those who might question the application of Eph 5:19–20 as intended for corporate worship, commentator Frank Thielman describes the target verses as a “brief treatment of the kind of corporate worship that results from being filled in the Spirit” (*Ephesians*, BECNT [Baker Academic, 2010], 353–54).

<sup>38</sup> As Thielman explains: “One result of being filled with the Spirit is speaking to one another in the form of [psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs] . . . All three kinds of singing are forms of ‘speaking’ to one another within the worshipping community” (*Ephesians*, 361).

of worship and prophecy to the Corinthians.<sup>39</sup> Paul contends to the Corinthians that individual expressions of worship are indeed valid, but cultic activity is, in part, an expression of edification and love for one another in the body of Christ.<sup>40</sup>

## 6. The Ecclesiological Function

Sixth, congregational singing is ecclesiological. From ἐκκλησία meaning assembly, congregation, or “called out ones,” the ecclesiological function of congregational song is an expression of unity and solidarity in the people of God and the body of Christ. Vern Poythress explains how congregational song can facilitate a united expression for any people, as he comments, “one of the obvious reasons for using singing is that the rhythm allows a large number of people to keep their voices together, while the fixity of the words of the song allows them to say the same thing at the same time.”<sup>41</sup> Congregational singing is thereby a tool that enables individuals to respond together as one, and this function affords any church body the opportunity to express unity and solidarity through song.

In Ezra 3:11b, *all* (כָּל, *kol*) the people shout, praising (הִלֵּל, *halal*) Yahweh. But the description of “all” applies most directly to the shouting of the people in praise—not necessarily the responsorial song of v. 11a. Though the text appears to imply that the priests and Levites supply the musical praise song while the people offer up a united shout of thanksgiving, it does not eliminate the possibility that the people’s shout or praise may have held some kind of melodic cadence. Not enough is known about this episode to argue for or against the whole congregation fully participating together in united melody at the same time.

The textual evidence features the presence and expressiveness of the whole congregation—“all the people” of Ezra 3:11. Whether or not all Israel sang the lyrics of Ezra 3:11a, at least some groups are singing together, and all of Israel is responding to God in a musical moment. Said simply, song facilitated a united response then, and congregational song still facilitates united responses today. The text emphasizes the unity of

<sup>39</sup> Among the myriad of issues and themes in 1 Corinthians, Paul addresses matters of worship in particular in 1 Cor 11–14. Speaking to the context of 1 Cor 12–14, D. A. Carson explains, “the dominant focus of these chapters is the conduct of the church as it is assembled together” (*Showing the Spirit: A Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12–14* [Baker, 1987], 19).

<sup>40</sup> Anthony Thiselton affirms that 1 Cor 14 speaks primarily to edification and order in gathered worship (*The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NIGTC [Eerdmans, 2000], 1074–75).

<sup>41</sup> Poythress, “Ezra 3, Union with Christ, and Exclusive Psalmody, II,” 225.

song, not necessarily whether this singular episode truly engages each individual present in an identical manner.

A similar example occurs in 2 Chr 5:11–14, where the musicians and singers worshiped *in unison* (כֵּאֶחָד, *ke'echad* could be translated “as one”). The context of 2 Chr 5 reveals who was involved in this ceremony: “all the heads of the tribes” (v. 2), “all the men of Israel” (v. 3), “all the elders of Israel” (v. 4), and “all the congregation of Israel ... were before the ark, sacrificing” (v. 6). The image of gathered worship in 2 Chr 5 illustrates that all of God’s people are gathered together, and the musical leaders guided them in responding as one. The episode here in 2 Chr 5 is similar to the gathering of God’s people in Ezra 3:1, where “the people gathered as one man.”

The message of unity and oneness is taken up again in Rom 15. Though Paul discusses oneness without any direct musical application, Paul employs worship words and imagery in Rom 15:6–9 that support the ecclesiological function of singing. Paul called the Romans to worship (i.e., δοξάζω, “to glorify”) as a body with one voice. The clear point of Rom 15:5–6, explains Douglas Moo, is: “Only when the Roman community is united, only when the Christians in Rome can act ‘with one accord’ and speak ‘with one voice,’ will they be able to glorify God in the way that he deserves to be glorified.”<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, the usage of δοξάζω in Rom 15:9a supports a plausible musical connotation, due to the textual link of Rom 15:9b to Hebrew songs in Ps 18:49 and 2 Sam 22:50.<sup>43</sup> Thus, the expression of unity and one voice in Rom 15:6 can be musical, though it is not solely limited to music.

## 7. The Didactic Function

Seventh, congregational singing is didactic. This categorization derives from the word διδαχή (or the “teaching”). In addition to the historical document of the same name that began circulating at the end of the first century, *didache* can be described as “the teaching about the Christian faith conveyed to new converts.”<sup>44</sup> In short, the didactic function asserts that

<sup>42</sup> Douglas Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 2nd ed., NICNT (Eerdmans, 2018), 888.

<sup>43</sup> The words of Rom 15:9b are a song in both Ps 18:49 and 2 Sam 22:50. Although the musical expression of the Psalms is more easily recognized, the key to understanding 2 Sam 22 is in the surrounding context. This entire chapter begins with an introductory comment about the musical nature of the passage: “And David spoke to the Lord the words of this song” (2 Sam 22:1). The Hebrew verbs (ידה and זמר) are consistent in both contexts.

<sup>44</sup> Donald K. McKim, “*Didache*,” in *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Westminster John Knox, 1996), 77.

songs instruct the singer.<sup>45</sup> Poythress considers singing to be a type of “teaching,” and structures his article to support this concept.<sup>46</sup> Songs carry Christian doctrine primarily through the lyrics, and the theological and biblical content produces a remarkably formative action when utilized by the Holy Spirit.<sup>47</sup> At the most basic level, the didactic function affirms that (1) songs teach and (2) songs express the beliefs of the singer.

Returning first to Ezra 3, the content of the song in v. 11 demonstrates didactic elements through the lyrics of the people’s praise. Israel sang of God’s goodness and of his steadfast, enduring love toward his people. Not only do these truths vocalize the people’s praise, but these words are also instructing the people as they participate in the liturgical practice.

An additional OT example arises in Exod 15. All of God’s people sang (a form of שיר) a song (שירה, *siyrah*) to God, but the song follows an important statement in Exod 14:31: “Israel ... believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses.”<sup>48</sup> What did the people believe? The content of Exod 15 demonstrates that Israel believed God to be transcendent and holy (15:1, 11, 13), powerful and strong (15:1–2, 13), the source of salvation and deliverance (15:2), both El and Yahweh (15:2–3), sovereign over the natural world (15:4–5, 8) and the nations (15:14–15), just and righteous (15:7, 9), loving (15:13), and eternal (15:18).

Just as the songs of Exod 15 communicate doctrinal content about God and his character, so do the songs and hymns of the New Testament.<sup>49</sup> Scholars recognize that Paul, for example, imported unoriginal material into letters for doctrinal purposes (e.g., Acts 17:28, Phil 2:5–11,

<sup>45</sup> The idea that songs teach at a general level seems unavoidable. But more work must be done to clarify the type and scope of teaching that occurs during congregational singing.

<sup>46</sup> Poythress, “Ezra 3, Union with Christ, and Exclusive Psalmody, II,” 225.

<sup>47</sup> As Ross notes, “Hymns ... do not report personal experiences but tend to be more doctrinal. So the singers and musicians [in Israel’s worship] were assigned the ministry of presenting or accompanying the various expressions of the faith of the people” (*Recalling the Hope of Glory*, 256). Like the people of Israel, song can be a primary way for Christians to express doctrinal beliefs.

<sup>48</sup> Because of Exod 14:31, Exod 15:1–18 should be considered an expression of faith, trust, and belief. Brevard S. Childs affirms: “The narrative account had closed with the remark that the people ‘feared Yahweh’, and ‘believed in him’ (v. 31). The content of this belief is now expressed *by the song*” (*The Book of Exodus* [Westminster John Knox, 2004], 248–49, emphasis added).

<sup>49</sup> The NT writers often cited early Christian hymns to communicate doctrinal truths. When discussing such material, Christians must keep in mind the chasm in meaning between hymns of today and hymns in the Scriptures.

1 Tim 3:16, Titus 1:17).<sup>50</sup> It is unknown to what extent such passages were actually sung as congregational songs, but such hymns seem to have corresponded to liturgical use in the early church.<sup>51</sup> Thus, such passages from Exodus and the Pauline corpus affirm the use of creedal songs to provide theological instruction for the people of God, from even the earliest days of Judeo-Christian history.

### 8. The Empathetic Function

Eighth, congregational singing is empathetic. The empathetic function of congregational song is derived from the Greek *πάθος* (passion and suffering) and the cognate verb *πάσχω*. As the English word *empathy* connotes, songs can express or influence emotions.<sup>52</sup> Poythress offers evidence for the empathetic function in his study of Ezra 3, as he remarks, “Yet another distinctive factor in song appears to be its heightened capacity for expressing and arousing the emotions of the singers.”<sup>53</sup>

Ezra 3 showcases the empathetic function of congregational song through the weeping and shouts of joy in vv. 12–13. Although the text specifies that weeping and shouts of joy accompanied the laying of the foundation for the temple, it is unknown how closely these emotions are connected to the experience of music and song in Ezra 3. It is at least possible that music was played and songs sung while the people felt both joy and sorrow.

<sup>50</sup> For a discussion of the hymnic qualities of Phil 2:5–11 and a survey of arguments for Pauline and non-Pauline authorship, see Gordon D. Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, NICNT (Eerdmans, 1995), 192–94. Regarding 1 Tim 3:16, scholars point out that this verse stands apart from the surrounding context in a variety of ways, most notably in the parallel structure and form of six discernible phrases. George Knight concludes: “This sixfold statement appears to be a citation of a statement of the apostolic church” (*The Pastoral Epistles*, NIGTC [Eerdmans, 1992], 182).

<sup>51</sup> For example, regarding 1 Tim 3:16, Knight observes “the statement appears to be liturgical” (*The Pastoral Epistles*, 183).

<sup>52</sup> See Patrick N. Juslin and John A. Sloboda, ed., *Handbook of Music and Emotion: Theory, Research and Applications* (Oxford University Press, 2010); Tom Cochrane, Bernardino Fantini, and Klaus R. Scherer, eds., *The Emotional Power of Music: Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Musical Arousal, Expression, and Social Control*, Series in Affective Science (Oxford University Press, 2013); and Jeremy S. Begbie, “Faithful Feelings: Music and Emotion in Worship,” in *Resonant Witness: Conversations between Music and Theology*, ed. Jeremy S. Begbie and Steven R. Guthrie, Calvin Institute of Christian Worship Liturgical Studies Series (Eerdmans, 2011), 323–54.

<sup>53</sup> Poythress, “Ezra 3, Union with Christ, and Exclusive Psalmody, II,” 225.

The Bible offers many similar examples where songs bear some relationship to the emotion of the singer.<sup>54</sup> Among the abundance of OT evidence, Ps 67:4 contains a clear and concise example: “Let the nations be glad and *sing* for joy” (emphasis added).<sup>55</sup> Note here the overt connection between singing and joy. James 5:13 provides a NT corollary. Those who experience the emotions of cheer (*εὐθυμέω*) and joy should respond with *singing* (*ψάλλω*).<sup>56</sup> At the very least, one may conclude that singing and emotion bear an innate connection in everyday human experience.<sup>57</sup> As Harold Best explains, “When all the Scripture references to music making are combined, we learn that we are to make music in every conceivable condition: joy, triumph, imprisonment, solitude, grief, peace, war, sickness, merriment, abundance, and deprivation.”<sup>58</sup> Such examples make clear: the Word of God encourages the musical expression of emotion as part of how God created the world to function for his glory. Singing functions as both a response to and expression of emotion.

### 9. The Evangelistic Function

Ninth, congregational singing is evangelistic. The name of this category originates in *εὐαγγέλιον*, the Greek word for gospel or good news. To this end, singing can be an avenue for proclaiming the good news of Jesus to those who have not heard and a means of reaching the lost with the gospel. More broadly, singing can catalyze participation in the mission

<sup>54</sup> Consider the range of emotions—both joy and lament—in the Psalms, or take the book of Lamentations as a whole. Overt songs (*שיר*) reference a range of emotions of great pain and joy (cf. Isa 26:16–19). Furthermore, there is the example of prayer-songs connected to emotion (cf. 1 Sam 2 and Jonah 2).

<sup>55</sup> The ascription describes this Psalm as a song (*שיר*), and the Psalmist expresses a desire for the nations to experience the emotions of gladness (*שמח*, *samach*, “to delight in”) and joy (*רנן*, *ranan*, “to cry out, in joy or praise”). Goldingay agrees: “Indeed, they [the peoples] are not merely confessing and realistically acknowledging how things are but rejoicing and resounding: that is, resounding with joy” (*Psalms*, vol. 2, *Psalms 42–89*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms [Baker Academic, 2006], 302).

<sup>56</sup> Douglas Moo clarifies here that *εὐθυμέω* “connotes a state of the emotions rather than outward circumstance,” as circumstances are the broader context of the letter (*The Letter of James*, PNTC [Eerdmans, 2000], 235).

<sup>57</sup> See also the statement of Jesus in Matt 11:17. Carson notes the frequency and regularity with which Jesus extracts spiritual analogies from common human activities, such as the example of musicmaking among village children in Matt 11:17 (“Matthew,” 313).

<sup>58</sup> Harold Best, *Music Through the Eyes of Faith*, Through the Eyes of Faith (HarperOne, 1993), 186.

of God and serve as a means of evangelistic ministry. This function resembles the didactic function of singing, but the evangelistic function is more narrowly focused on the calling of sinners to turn from their idolatrous worship to embrace the worship of the living God.

The evangelistic function of congregational singing can be understood in at least two ways. On one level, worship through singing can itself be an evangelistic witness. Ezra 3 exemplifies this point in v. 13. The eruption of sound—joy, sorrow, and song—was heard from far away. But how did Israel recognize this? The most logical explanation is that outsiders heard the sheer volume of Israel’s worship and came to seek the source. Similarly, Paul alludes to what could be described as an evangelistic function of gathered worship in 1 Cor 14:24–25, of which music is a part (cf. ψαλμός in 1 Cor 14:26). Here, Paul acknowledges the possibility of unbelievers experiencing a conviction of sin and conviction of truth through the liturgical activities of the gathering.<sup>59</sup> Building upon the biblical foundation established by Paul, Harold Best speaks of evangelism as “overheard worship.”<sup>60</sup> Best’s word picture appropriately describes the *actual* scenario of Ezra 3 and the *potential* scenario of 1 Cor 14, where congregational singing might move unbelievers to follow God.

On another level, lyrical content can also communicate the message of the gospel and the urgency of the mission of God in a manner that spurs God’s people to missional action. God-glorifying and gospel-centered songs can stir in the people of God a desire to reach the nations for God’s glory. Many songs in the OT mention God’s glory, his salvation, and his deeds (e.g., 1 Chr 16; Pss 67, 96). While initial occasions concerned Israelite worshipers, the people and nations of earth are intended to be the ultimate recipients of such proclamation. The song of Jesus in Rom 15:9 implies that Jesus is not only singing *among* the Gentiles, but *for* the Gentiles to join the people of God.<sup>61</sup> Additionally, hearing and singing the Song of Moses in Rev 15:4, for example, engenders an aspiration and

<sup>59</sup> Thiselton rightly explains that the present passive verbs are key to understanding this potential evangelistic scenario in vv. 24–25: “The present passives ἐλέγχεται and ἀνακρίνεται express the heart of this verse: the person in question undergoes conviction and judgment. The Greek ἐλέγχω means *to bring to the light, to expose*, especially in classical contexts, but in the NT and often in the papyri it denotes both *conviction of sin* and *conviction of truth*, most especially in the Fourth Gospel, where the agent who brings home this conviction is Jesus Christ or the Spirit-Paraclete” (*The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 1128).

<sup>60</sup> Best, *Music Through the Eyes of Faith*, 203.

<sup>61</sup> Reggie Kidd affirms this: “The early Christians’ outward-boundness is a reflection of God’s own heart, for Jesus came to take God’s song to the nations” (*With One Voice: Discovering Christ’s Song in Our Worship* [Baker, 2005], 164).

urgency for this reality to materialize.

## 10. The Petitionary Function

Finally, congregational singing is petitionary. This function is derived from the Greek and Hebrew words for the action of prayer that are regularly rendered “petition” in English translations (cf. הִלָּאֵה, *she’elah* in 1 Sam 1:27; חָנַן, *chanan* in Dan 6; and δέησις in Phil 4:6).<sup>62</sup> Petition may be a specific type of prayer for Christians today, but the petitionary function of singing recognizes that congregational songs function as prayer in general—as direct communication with God himself.

Although prayer is not mentioned directly in the text of Ezra 3:10–13, it is not new for congregational songs to be considered expressions of prayer in an ontological sense. The most overt historical example is the influential axiom: “He who sings prays twice,” which some claim originates with Augustine.<sup>63</sup> Calvin expressed a similar view, though not as pithily.<sup>64</sup> In this respect, the sung lyrics of Ezra 3:11 function simultaneously as both song *and* prayer. After all, the Israelites sang to the Lord (v. 11). The orientation of their singing suggests that they considered their words to be communication with God.

At least two passages in the OT support this link between prayer and song—the prayers of Jonah (Jonah 2:1) and Hannah (1 Sam 2:1).<sup>65</sup> In both cases, the petitioner prays to God in the context of relative privacy, but the biblical documentation of these prayers connects prayer and music. Hannah’s *prayer*, in particular, is cited by Allen Ross as “the first example

<sup>62</sup> Kleinig observes that one reason for Israel’s choral songs is “to present Israel’s petitions to her Lord (1 Chr 16:35)” (*The Lord’s Song*, 147).

<sup>63</sup> The phrase appears in a variety of locations and publications, including the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (p. 327, §1156 fn. 21). As an alternate source and translation, consider Brian Wren’s work: “Whoever sings [to God, in worship], prays twice” (*Praying Twice: The Music and Words of Congregational Song* [Westminster John Knox Press, 2000], 1). It must be noted that some challenge the Augustinian authorship of this statement on the grounds that he said something similar, but perhaps not this concise phrase. Despite its dubious origins, the maxim effectively encapsulates the petitionary function of congregational singing.

<sup>64</sup> See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 2, The Library of Christian Classics (Westminster John Knox, 2006), 2:894–96 (3.20.31–32).

<sup>65</sup> As an example from the Psalms, Goldingay describes Ps 67 as a prayer (*Psalms 42–89*, 299). Thus, Ps 67 serves as further evidence of the connection between prayer and song.

of an Israelite song delivered at the sanctuary.”<sup>66</sup> Hannah’s words in 1 Sam 2 can be classified as song due to the overt poetic form and its inclusion in the worship of the early church.<sup>67</sup> Yet, in the passage itself, Hannah does not *sing*; she *prays* (לָלַחַם, *palah*) and *says* (אָמַר, *amar*) these words to God.

The relationship of prayer and song can also be seen in the New Testament. In Acts 16:25, Paul and Silas pray (προσεύχομαι) and sing hymns (ὕμνῳ) to God. Were these two separate actions or one? Even within the linguistic evidence, the answer is not entirely clear. Maybe this action was not altogether different from Hannah’s (melodic?) prayer to God. James 5:13 also functions as a strong NT example. Though the prescribed response to joy and cheer is *to sing praise* (ψάλλω), Moo explains: “Prayer is clearly the topic of this paragraph, being mentioned in every verse.”<sup>68</sup> The sequence certainly supports a relationship between song and prayer, as sentences containing the verb προσεύχομαι surround ψάλλω in Jas 5:13. One cannot escape the composite picture constructed from biblical evidence—verbs for prayerful petition surface in musical texts and musical features occur in texts commonly considered prayer.

### Conclusion

This article constructed a robust biblical theology of congregational singing from Ezra 3:10–13 and supplemental Scriptures. While the essay offers ten theological functions of congregational singing, the list supplied in this article serves as a starting point—not an exhaustive list. At the same time, by recognizing these ten theological functions of congregational singing in Scripture, the article has advanced its central argument—that congregational singing, in the Bible, is more robust than the reductionistic approach to singing that exists in many congregations today. Indeed, congregations stand much to gain from recovering a view of congregational singing that extends beyond just musical praise to God. In addition, the explication of these ten theological functions for congregational singing prompts at least four additional reflections.

First, congregational songs are multifaceted liturgical elements that resist reductionisms. Songs are irreducibly complex. As seen in Christian Scripture, singing accomplishes multiple actions simultaneously. Even

<sup>66</sup> Ross, *Recalling the Hope of Glory*, 253. Ross also notes here that, linguistically, the verb *pray* in 1 Sam 2:1 might refer to the preceding prayer rather than the praise that follows. Nevertheless, the association of prayer and music remains.

<sup>67</sup> Donald P. Hustad, “Music in the Worship of the Old Testament,” in *Music and the Arts in Christian Worship: Book One*, ed. Robert E. Webber, vol. 4 of *The Complete Library of Christian Worship* (Star Song, 1994), 191.

<sup>68</sup> Moo, *The Letter of James*, 234.

songs that may appear as vertical praise to some are also teaching others, expressing emotion, and facilitating unity (among other functions). Rarely will a congregational song for Christian worship serve only one isolated function independent from the others. Churches ought to beware of reducing song functions unnecessarily and limiting the manifold benefits offered to God’s people. A bolstered theology of congregational singing offers churches and church leaders a new vocabulary for understanding the mechanics of worship. Furthermore, each function of congregational singing can also become a point to highlight for musicians, song leaders, or the congregation at large—thereby enriching worship.

Second, this study emphasizes the richness of congregational song, as opposed to other forms of Christian musicking. The present technological moment affords on-demand music for limitless occasions. One no longer needs to have developed personal musical skills in order to experience music. Yet, the present study highlights that not all music accomplishes the same functions, and the biblical-theological functions delineated here apply uniquely to congregational singing. Thus, singing along to a recording, performing songs in a concert venue, and singing as God’s gathered people each constitute separate theological discussions with separate aims. Distinguishing the different types of music allows for the recognition that not all songs are best for gathered Christian worship. Some worship songs might be more suitable for private, personal devotional use. Those entrusted with song selection and liturgical planning, ought to choose songs that facilitate the full breadth of theological functionality represented by the ten points in this study. One might evaluate the effectiveness of a particular song based on the number of functions that it embodies. For example, a song with a complicated melodic shape or wide range might actually discourage a united response. Or, some creative songs might avoid confessional, doctrinal content in the pursuit of artistic expression, resulting in diminished didactic potency. As yet another example, songs should ideally reflect the ethnic and cultural styles of the community, so homogenous songs in a culturally diverse community would also hold limited effectiveness in worship.

Third, active participation in congregational singing must be distinguished from passive reception. Yes, the gospel of grace frees the Christ-follower from the works-righteousness of singing *to please* God, but Christians who abstain from singing practically disavow the theological functions of congregational song. Those who refrain from singing practically promote the inverse of each function. As examples, a refusal to sing is akin to stating, “I refuse to give God the praise he deserves. I do not believe the lyrical content of the selected songs. I deny God’s work in the past, and I do not anticipate his work in the future. I abstain from uniting

with the body of Christ in song.” Quite clearly, many Christians would be hesitant to verbalize such thoughts. But silence or apathy in congregational singing becomes an inadvertent affirmation of such alarming theological admissions.

Lastly, proper consideration of the theological functions for congregational song should lead to renewed joy and vigor in singing. This essay provides Christians with many reasons to sing for joy and not out of obligation. Like any aspect of the Christian life, singing can become rote and rather meaningless. One remedy to the depreciation of song is continued consideration of God’s purposes for singing in the Bible. Indeed, God commands singing (cf. Ps 96:1). But the systematic approach in this study is meant to support the biblical imperatives with theological principles to aid in comprehension, appreciation, and application. Given the evidence for ten theological functions of song for the people of God, why would Christians choose to abstain from singing, sing out of legalistic obligation, casually select songs for worship, or trim songs from the liturgy? Congregational singing is a manifold witness in melodic cadence, a rich treasure for the people of God, and a gift that will continue to edify and endure throughout all eternity to the praise of God’s glorious grace. The taxonomy of ten functions in this essay presents a theological case for the wisdom of congregational singing for the continued vitality of the church, and exposure to such overt theological benefits will lead the body of Christ to a fresh appreciation of song, as well as more vigorous participation in congregational singing.