

## A Vision for Worship “At All Times”:

### **Complementing Bethesda’s Existing Worship Tradition with New (Old) Approaches**

“Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another **with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness** in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus”  
– Colossians 3:16-17a (NASB)

"I will extol the Lord **at all times**;

his praise will always be on my lips." – Psalm 34:1 (NIV)

"...**continually** offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name." – Hebrews 13:15 (ESV)

There are many beautiful and meaningful ways that we can sing “psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs”. Paul makes clear in the context of Colossians that such **singing is both natural** (albeit *supernaturally* enabled) **and an essential aspect of the “new self [...]** renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator,” (3:10) as it is inhabited by “the word of Christ”, **an overflow of “thankfulness to God”** that helps us do whatever we else do “in the name of Jesus”. Thus, singing is for the believer both **a *manifestation* and a *cultivation* of our metamorphosis**. But there are surprisingly few ways – **practical, musical approaches** – that make it relatively easy for the average person to actually do what the Bible consistently instructs us to do: **sing continually**, even when we’re at home with our family or we’re by ourselves, whether we’re working or relaxing, or somewhere in between, i.e. “by the way” (Deut 6:7). These approaches will vary somewhat from culture to culture, but there are some basic principles to follow:

First, they need to be:

**BIBLICAL** (with text either taken directly from Scripture, or closely inspired by it)

**BEAUTIFUL** (objectively well-balanced and unified, yet sufficiently varied to be interesting)

**BASIC** (requiring nothing more than an average human body, and no special talent)

Next, they should be:

**INTELLIGIBLE** (in a verbal and musical language that's broadly understandable)

**INTUITIVE** (they should feel natural; though the approach may be unfamiliar or intimidating)

Finally, they ought to be:

**MEMORABLE** (so that once you learn something you always have it with you)

**AUTOMATIC** (propelling itself forward, to encourage you to keep singing)

**COMFORTABLE** (something you that you can become easily attached to, even fond of)

These principles rule out a lot of possibilities, including even the ways that singing would have been done in the Temple or in the early church. (Which are, in any case, speculative.)

For English speakers raised in the musical heritage that was developed in Europe over the past 500+ years (i.e. most of us), what we are looking for is music that relies on **tonal melody** and **regular meter** for its primary musical content. Music in this form makes it *possible* for most average North Americans (non-professional musicians) to spontaneously sing, without having to rely on instrumental backing! In other words, music suited for the purpose of singing “at all times” would not be generated by “grooves”, textures, instruments, novel harmonies and/or irregular meters (elements on which most contemporary choruses tend to rely). That said, there is **no reason to jettison worship material** that is biblical, familiar, and well-loved, even though it may not fit the profile outlined above. Nor does it necessarily preclude the creative adornment of melodically/metrically driven music with instruments, grooves, unusual harmonies, and the like. (That said, since most of us are shy of hearing our own unadorned voices, warm encouragement of *a capella* singing will be helpful.) As the title of this plan implies, **the idea is to complement our living traditions, not get rid of them.**

For us, this all suggests the use not just of old and new hymns (which we have already been employing throughout our history) but of **psalms rendered in rhyming English verse** using well-constructed, interesting, and compelling hymn tunes. These can be found in numerous old psalters, or they could be newly composed. However, **psalms and hymns**, even when *a capella*, **do not need to be sung in an “old-fashioned” way**. Faster tempi, rubato, hand claps, stomps, dancing, even at times shouting, could all be appropriate and biblically defensible!!! (Unfortunately, some of the principles outlined above rule out some of my own personal favourites, including some of the *Genevan* Psalter tunes, because the modal tonal language that many of them employ sounds harsh and severe to modern ears, and is thus not suited to our particular congregation.)

YH (Mar. 2021)