



Come Let Us Hum

By David Robertson

“Come, let us sing for joy to the Lord; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation. Let us come before him with thanksgiving and extol him with music and song” (Psalm 95:1-2).

How important and essential is singing for the Church? There have been those on the extreme end who have argued that there should be no singing at all in the New Testament church. And there are those who seem to think that ‘worship’ is all about singing and music. In between there are all kinds of practices and opinions. I suspect that many Presbyterian churches are not known for their enthusiastic singing – but if we are to be faithful to the Scriptures, we must recognise that congregational singing is an essential element of Christian worship. We are to ‘speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs’ (Ephesians 5:19).

In this we are different from Islam. I used to belong to a church which had acapella singing of psalms only. In its Gaelic version it sounds like nothing in the Western world! So much so that I had a Muslim friend mistake Gaelic psalm singing for Islamic chant! Recently I have been reading a bit about the Islamic attitude to music - in general it's not positive – certainly when it comes to dance and instrumental music. Even listening to ‘entertainment’ is wrong and will have severe consequences on the judgement day. “The messenger of Allah said, “Whoever listens to the entertainment (song and music), lead will be melted inside his ear on the day of judgment.”

It seems that our Western governments have, at least temporarily, become ‘Islamic’ in this regard. For example, it is now illegal in California to sing in church – as it is in Scotland and Victoria and NSW. The NSW government regulations (which may be just about to change) tell us that five people in a music group

can sing providing they are 1.5 metres apart and not facing each other. Congregations are not allowed to sing. There is good reason for that. There is significant evidence that Covid 19 can be spread through the air, by droplets. Singing increases the chance of these droplets being spread. There have been examples of choirs in the Netherlands and US which ended up being ‘super-spreaders’.

However, there are other factors to consider. Firstly, where choirs did become super spreaders they were generally indoors, with poor ventilation, practising for a period of hours. The situation is somewhat different in a church where there is plenty of spacing, a howling gale and a short service! In other words, both extremes are not good for making policy for all. The BBC carried a report suggesting that speaking loudly is as bad as singing quietly. Presbyterians can be quite good at the quiet singing! Perhaps Presbyterians should be allowed to sing, whilst Pentecostals are banned?! It would make as much sense as some of the other petty rules that are being enforced.

There is also an element of hypocrisy involved in the government regulations. I can't sing in my socially distanced, well ventilated local church – but I can sing when I go to the Sydney cricket ground! In California Governor Newsom will prosecute you if you sing Amazing Grace in church, but sing it on a protest march with thousands of others and you are fine!

The trouble is that our governments tend to regard churches as a non-essential activity - unlike shopping, sports, protests and casinos. And they regard singing as a non-essential part of that non-essential activity – so when it comes to regulations being dropped, I suspect that singing in church will be permitted about the same time as large raves in nightclubs are. Sadly, there are

too many of us in the church who have gone along with, and fed the idea that singing is a non-essential part of public worship. I would suggest that those who think like this should read Rob Smith's *Come Let Us Sing* – <https://ap.org.au/2020/09/16/come-let-us-sing/> in order to get a more biblical position. Any command of God is not an optional extra. The old Puritan principle (known as the regulative principle) still applies – we should neither add to, nor take away from, the commands that God has given us in worship. God does not just tell us that we should worship – but also how we should worship. It is not up to the State to do so.

In a time of emergency, there may be exceptional circumstances, where for a limited period, we comply with government guidelines as regards our public worship. But we should never let that become a habit and never give up on the principle that the State has no right to tell us how, or who, to worship. Given

that NSW and Victoria have had no community transmission for weeks and the chances of Covid being spread in church are almost as low as those of getting TB, we can only hope that common sense, rather than fear and politics will prevail and that the ban on singing will be lifted ASAP. As I write I hear that we will be permitted in NSW to sing in outdoor gatherings – which may mean we can hold outdoor carol services, provided that masks are worn! I hope and pray that a day will soon come when I will never hear in a church – ‘come let us hum’. Instead, I look forward to Psalm 95 being read as our call to worship and in churches throughout the land, the call to ‘shout to the Lord’, being enthusiastically obeyed (although the call to ‘clap your hands’ may require a bit of culturally adaptation and renewal).

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