The “New Song” of the Psalter as a Vision for Contemporary Worship Music
W. David O. Taylor

Sing to the Lord a new song; Sing to the Lord, all the earth.
— Psalm 96:1

Thy nature, gracious Lord, impart,
come quickly from above;
write thy new name upon my heart,
thy new best name of Love.
— Charles Wesley, “O for a Heart to Praise My God” (1742)

The question of innovation in Christian worship has rarely involved easy answers or outcomes devoid of conflict. Situations become even more theologically charged, liturgically complicated, and pastorally sensitive with matters related to innovations in the arts in worship. The introduction of new media of art into corporate worship, or new uses of existing media of art, or new contexts for the practice of familiar media of art—all such occasions for innovation demand careful treatment. Holy Scripture has inevitably been summoned to argue one case against another. In some cases, a particular text has served as a privileged departure point. In other cases, a theological presupposition about faithful worship has suggested the right way forward. The language of “new song” in the psalms has not infrequently been enlisted to advance particular arguments about art in corporate worship. Most commonly, especially within contemporary worship contexts, it has involved the justification of new works of music. But should this be?

For example, in their joint book, Holy Roar, Chris Tomlin and Darren Whitehead argue based on their reading of the psalms that

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the church should be writing new, spontaneous songs.\textsuperscript{2} In his essay on the artistic worth of worship song melodies, Guy Jansen asks: “What kinds of newness was the psalmist thinking of when he exhorted us to ‘Sing to the Lord a new song’? Should we be seeking to be creatively \textit{new}—even cultivating a tiny flash of melodic genius—and not merely making a tune to carry another worthy set of words?”\textsuperscript{3} In a speech given at the 2016 Catalyst Conference in Atlanta, Georgia, Brian Houston, senior pastor at Hillsong Church, remarked: “When it comes to influence, predictability is our enemy. . . . Thank God for innovation. Spontaneity is our friend in the church.”\textsuperscript{4} Comments such as these inevitably influence the thinking of Hillsong worship leaders.\textsuperscript{5} Connected to this pattern of thought in contemporary worship music (CWM), Lester Ruth offers the following observation:

As business, CWM promotion shapes a culture of trendiness among church musicians. As noted by another former publisher, the emphasis typically is on singing a \textit{new} song to the Lord, meaning the system makes keeping up with the latest

\textsuperscript{2} Chris Tomlin and Darren Whitehead, \textit{Holy Roar: 7 Words that Will Change the Way You Worship} (Nashville: Bowyer & Bow, 2017), 84–86.


songs a high priority for church musicians. CWM catalogs, magazines, and other promotional material often emphasize what is new or “hot,” shifting their effective role from mere recording usage to promoting usage and thereby displacing more careful reflection on a song’s lyrical content.⁶

A narrow reading of the biblical text leads to a theologically skewed idea of newness, which, in turn, results in particular musical habits and liturgical inertias. While the instinct, then, of worship songwriters may be to interpret the psalmic phrase as a warrant for new compositions, I contend that this meaning represents only one possible interpretation of the phrase, which appears six times in the Psalter (33:3; 40:3; 96:1; 98:1; 144:9; 149:1).⁷ What this essay argues is that a careful reading of the phrase points to a polyvalent sense in the Psalter. The “new song,” I suggest, does not exclusively concern new compositions; it also points to the experience of a new grace and a new future. And what this polyvalent sense of the phrase opens up for the church at worship is a set of liturgically and theologically rich possibilities. Following an examination of these three senses of “new song,” I suggest five implications for contemporary worship music.


⁷ The phrase appears once in Isaiah (42:10). Factors that determine the meaning of the phrase include a) the context or placement of the phrase within the psalm, b) the dating of the psalm, whether pre-exilic, exilic, or post-exilic, c) the role that Yahweh is seen to play vis-à-vis the phrase, whether referencing past, present, or future action on Yahweh’s part, and d) the role that the subject of the new song plays, whether the subject comes into new knowledge (vs. ignorance), a new experience (vs. familiar), or a new orientation or story (vs. an experience of disorientation or a presumed story line). For helpful discussion of the Isaiah passage, see John N. Oswalt, The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40–66, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 123–24; Claus Westermann, Isaiah 40–66: A Commentary, trans. David M. G. Stalker (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1969), 102–4; Jo Bailey Wells, God’s Holy People: A Theme in Biblical Theology, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, Supplement Series 305 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 155–57.
The Three Senses of “New Song” in the Psalter

A Fresh Composition

The first sense of the phrase “Sing to the Lord a new song” is that of a freshly composed song. Psalm 33:1–3 (NIV) says this:

Sing joyfully to the Lord, you righteous;
It is fitting for the upright to praise him.
Praise the Lord with harp;
Make music to him on the ten-stringed lyre.
Sing to him a new song;
Play skillfully, and shout for joy.

Robert Alter comments: “This phrase is, in a sense, the composer’s self-advertisement: God is to be celebrated not with a stock item from the psalmodic repertoire but with a freshly composed piece.”

 Adds Artur Weiser, “The psalm is a ‘new song’ which was composed to be used on the festal occasion of the ‘renewal’ of the Covenant.” Leslie Allen ascribes this meaning to Psalm 144:9, as does John Goldingay, while Marvin Tate perceives a similar meaning at work in Psalm 96:1. While commentators may not agree on additional meanings that the phrase may carry in any given psalm, there is a general agreement that, in some fashion, all six instances of the phrase plausibly suggest the idea of a new composition.

Matthew Henry, writing in the early eighteenth century, introduces the reader to a slight variation on this idea. Summarizing Psalm 149:1, he observes, “We must sing a new song, newly composed upon every special occasion, sing with new affections, which make the song new, though the words have been used before, and

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keep them from growing threadbare.”¹¹ Here we observe a dual sense for the phrase “freshly composed.” The psalm itself, according to Henry, is freshly composed, while it is also freshly composed. The new song, then, can refer not just to a new musical composition, as Henry reads the phrase, it can also refer to an outburst of new affections. Peter Craigie argues a similar idea in his exegesis of Psalm 33:3, where he regards the new song as an exposition of the “ever-new freshness of the praise of God.”¹² Charles Briggs adds that the new song of Psalm 33 signifies “a fresh outburst of praise [giving voice to] a fresh experience of divine favour.”¹³

For John Calvin, the psalmist’s use of the phrase refers to an uncommon song. Such an extraordinary song corresponds to an extraordinary display of God’s goodness. As Calvin comments on Psalm 40:3, the psalmist “uses the word new in the sense of exquisite and not ordinary, even as the manner of [God’s] deliverance was singular and worthy of everlasting remembrance.”¹⁴ Here, then, we observe an additional nuancing for the idea of a freshly composed song.¹⁵ As the French Reformer sees it, the subject, object, and form of a “new song” in the Psalter each contributes to the complex meaning of the phrase. The work and character of God (the object) provokes an affective response in the psalmist (the subject), which in turn leads to the creation of a new song (the poetic form). The excellently crafted new song arises out of a heartfelt response to God’s mighty deeds.

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¹⁵ Other commentators may not use Calvin’s language of “extraordinary” or “exquisite,” but there seems to be a general agreement around the uncommonness of divine activity that elicits the new song.
A New Grace

A second basic sense of the phrase “new song” in the Psalter is that of a new grace. This is a sense that we discover especially within psalms of disorientation, to use Walter Brueggemann’s language. The opening verses of Psalm 40 (NIV), for example, are illustrative:

I waited patiently for the Lord;  
He turned to me and heard my cry.  
He lifted me out of the slimy pit,  
Out of the mud and mire;  
He set my feet on a rock  
And gave me a firm place to stand.  
He put a new song in my mouth  
A hymn of praise to our God.  
Many will see and fear  
And put their trust in the Lord.

The psalmist’s song arises out of an experience of darkness—pit, mud, mire (vv. 1–2). The new song in verse 3 recounts the psalmist’s movement from disorientation to new orientation. From a place of darkness the psalmist enters into an expansive place of God’s wonders (vv. 4–5). In verses 6–8 the psalmist describes the new obedience to which he gladly commits himself. In verses 9–10 he goes public. The new song here takes on a proclamatory aspect: “I do not conceal your love and your truth from the great assembly.” Then, unexpectedly, the psalm plunges back into disorientation. Troubles, sins, fear of harm, fear of verbal abuse, and the experience of material and social vulnerability encroach the psalmist on every side. The psalmist returns to lament. Brueggemann’s explication is especially helpful:

A complaint should not come after the joy of the new song, but experientially the sequence is significant. It reminds us that the move from disorientation to new orientation is not a

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single, straight line, irreversible and unambiguous. Life moves in and out. In our daily life the joy of deliverance is immediately beset and assaulted by the despair and fear of the Pit. So the one who hopes has to urge God against delay. The one who has not “withheld” praise has to ask that Yahweh not “withhold” mercy. There is a realism to the psalm, but it is a realism set in a profound trust.17

In the context of the Psalter, experiences of disorientation are rarely swept out of view. They remain present and function in dynamic tension with the experience of new orientation. While the experience of disorientation has yet to be resolved, the psalmist possesses new knowledge of God. The literary form of the psalm coheres to its theological perspective. Even as the psalmist moves poetically from disorientation to new orientation, then back to disorientation, so the psalmist sees both himself differently (“mine ears hast thou opened,” v. 6, KJV) and God differently (“He put a new song in my mouth,” v. 3).

How does this reading of Psalm 40 suggest a distinctive understanding of a “new song”? Two things can be suggested. First, the new song points to a new experience of God’s gracious deliverance. Yahweh’s deliverance from the pit issues into a new grace, that is, the experience of solid ground under the psalmist’s feet (v. 2). The deliverance also ushers in the gift of a new song (v. 3). The new song in this way seeks to recount the psalmist’s experience of God’s work of redemption, generous provision, and instruction.

But a second reading can also be offered here. In the first reading the focus lands on the psalmist’s experience of new grace. In a second reading the focus lands on God. For what can be experienced as “new” is precisely God’s enduring graciousness. In Psalm 40 God appears in past, present, and future tenses: “Many, O Lord my God, are the wonders you have done” (v. 5); “You are my help and my deliverer” (v. 17b); “Be pleased, O Lord, to save me; make haste, O Lord, to help me” (v. 13). While the psalmist’s experience of disorientation may not change, he can nonetheless cling, by faith, to God’s “righteousness,” “faithfulness,” “love,” “truth,” and “mercy.”

17 Ibid., 131.
We discover, then, in Psalm 40 a subjective and objective dimension to the idea of a new song. The “new song” refers both to the psalmist’s experience of new grace arising out of an experience of disorientation and, if the psalm is to be taken as a whole rather than piecemeal, in the midst of disorientation. The “new song” likewise refers to the possibility of experiencing the God we have always known in a new way (vv. 1–10) as well as the God I did not know could be this way, that is, gracious in this exact way (vv. 11–17).18

A New Future

A third meaning of “new song” is brought to light in Psalm 149:1. Here the new song points to a new future. Calvin offers an historically early exegesis for this idea. He writes, “The object, I think, of the Psalmist, is to encourage them to expect the full and complete deliverance, some prelude of which had been suddenly and unexpectedly given in the permission to return.”19 In light of the many evils that Israel experienced during exile, Calvin continues, the “Psalmist had good reason for animating the godly to look forward for the full accomplishment of the mercy of God, that they might be persuaded of divine protection until such time as the Messiah should arise who would gather all Israel.”20

Calvin regards this anticipation of full redemption as the “new song.” “It follows,” he argues, “that [the psalmist] speaks of some rare and unusual benefit, demanding signal and particular thanksgiving. And I am disposed to think that whoever may have been the author of the Psalm, he alludes to that passage in Isaiah (chap. xlii. 10) ‘Sing unto the Lord a new song,’ when he speaks of the future restoration of the Church, and the eternal kingdom of Christ.”21 Leslie Allen confirms this sense of “new song.” He writes,

18 Goldingay, Psalms 90–150, 103, suggests a similar reading and employs Brueggemann’s terminology, though with reference to Ps 96:1: “The implication might then be that for the nations a new song is appropriate because they are now becoming aware of facts about Yhwh that they had not known before. Praising Yhwh will mean singing a song they have not sung previously, a new song that will reflect their ‘new orientation’.”
19 Calvin, Commentary on the Book of Psalms, 12:311.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid., 12:311–12.
“In such a psalm as this . . . they are encouraged to eschew despair and to look for the dawn of a new day when justice will be done.”

Whether the psalm envisions life from the perspective of exile towards post-exile, or from post-exile towards fulfillment of Yahweh’s promises, the point still stands: the psalmist in Psalm 149 exhorts the worshiper to sing a new song of a new story that beckons from the future. In general terms, the new song “is the song which breaks through the restraints of the present circumstances and voices expectations and confidence in the future works of God.” In specific terms, the new song announces an eschatological vision, which in the case of Israel would involve the end of exile. The new song in this way announces the final coming of God for the sake of the final restoration of the people of God.

For as long as God tarries to bring about the fulfillment of the divine promises to Israel, the psalmist enjoins the worshiper to sing a new song, a song of the age to come. The vision, which provokes the psalmist’s praise, involves a new story for God’s hasidim, “the faithful ones.” The new song points to a greater deliverance. The psalmist’s point, in this case, is not to generate a new musical composition, because the issue is not a musical one; it is a theological one. The new song, which Psalm 149 embodies and announces, is a new story for Israel. It is a new reality that the people of God are to sing themselves into.

22 Allen, Psalms 101–150, 401.
24 Tate, Psalms 51–100, 514.
25 Instead of the “old” covenant, God makes a “new” covenant with his people (Jer 31:31–37). Where Israel bears an “old” name of reproach, God gives her a “new” name (Isa 62:2). Where Israel labors under an “old” spirit, entangled and corrupted by idolatry, Yahweh promises her a “new” spirit and a “new” heart (Ez 11:19; 18:31; 36:26). And in place of the “old” heavens and earth, the Lord will create a “new” heavens and a “new” earth, “and the former things will not be remembered or come to mind” (Isa 65:17). Cf. also N. T. Wright’s comments about exile in The New Testament and the People of God (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 268–79, 299–301.
Implications for Contemporary Worship Music

With these three senses of the phrase “new song” in mind, what implications might hold for contemporary worship music? What might it mean for the church to sing a new song as the Psalter sees it? What music might the church’s songwriters need to write in order to give full and faithful expression to this psalmic sense of a shir hadash? Allow me briefly to suggest five possibilities.

Tradition as a Positive Resource, Not a Thing to Escape

First, the “new song” presupposes and affirms the old songs. It presupposes the tradition of Israel’s worship, the songs of “our fathers,” and it affirms the mighty deeds of Yahweh, which have been inscribed in the “songs of Zion” (Ps 137:3), the songs “from of old” (Pss 143:5; 77:11). The new song of Psalm 40, for instance, is only meaningful in the light of Psalm 70, which has been incorporated and re-oriented by the concerns of the fortieth psalm. Likewise, Psalm 108 creatively adapts rather than abrogates the theological interests of Psalms 57:7–10 and 60:6–12. As Goldingay observes, “We repeat words that have been used before, in part as a reminder that ‘we are not alone when we pray.’ We adapt them, so that they say what we ourselves need to say in our context.”

It is not simply, then, that Darlene Zschech’s song “Shout to the Lord” is old enough to be regarded as “traditional” music, or that “fog machines and pop music at church are traditions, too,” as the musician Audrey Assad recently remarked. It is rather that, from the perspective of the Psalter, tradition functions as a constructive resource for Israel’s worship. Length of time and mere repeated usage are not decisive indices of tradition. For Israel, tradition functions as fundamental root and frame of reference for faithful worship. Tradition represents a positive norm, not a thing to be escaped.

26 Goldingay, Psalms 90–150, 272.
or ignored in the composition of new songs. Such a relationship, I suggest, might be best characterized by the phrase “traditioned innovation.” C. Kavin Rowe explains the idea this way:

> Traditional innovation is a way of thinking and living that points toward the future in light of the past, a habit of being that requires both a deep fidelity to the tradition that has borne us to the present and a radical openness to the innovations that will carry us forward. Traditioned innovation names an inner-biblical way of thinking theologically about the texture of human life in the context of God’s gracious and redemptive self-disclosure.

Conceptualized this way, the emphasis lands on a positive, though not uncritical, relationship to tradition. The poet is a richly informed student of tradition, not a spectator of the tradition. The musician inhabits the tradition deeply rather than superficially, thoroughly rather than haphazardly. And the writer engages the tradition in a vigorous manner, viewing the forebears of the faith as primary conversation partners in the interpretation of the new context that requires a new song. To view the relationship between innovation and tradition this way is to chart a creative course between traditionalism and idiosyncratic novelty—between the desire for everything to remain “as it always has been” and the desire for “every-

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29 Cf. Gordon S. Mikoski, “Traditioned Innovation,” Theology Today 68, no. 2 (2011): 113–15. “Stated positively, theology today needs to be an exercise in traditioned innovation. It will have to probe deeply its traditional sources in order to appropriate critically the treasures of the past while seeking continually to reinterpret them creatively in ways that make sense to varied contexts about contemporary issues and problems” (113).


thing to change.”32 For the church’s songwriters this means viewing tradition and innovation as twin aids in the redemptive purposes of God in the world.

The Whole Counsel of God, Not a Piecemeal Offering

This, then, leads to a second suggestion. To sing a new song in the psalmic sense requires a thorough knowledge of the whole counsel of God. To know the counsel of God only in piecemeal fashion is, for the church’s songwriters, to be ill-equipped to teach the church to sing the new song. Martin Luther once remarked that the Psalter “could well be called a ‘little Bible’ since it contains, set out in the briefest and most beautiful forms, all that is to be found in the whole Bible.”33 Thomas Aquinas said something similar when he wrote that the Psalter ought to be read more often in the church because it contained the whole Scripture.34 If, in some qualified sense, the Psalter exhibits the whole counsel of God in miniature, in liturgical and devotional form, then the church’s songwriters will want to immerse themselves in the whole Book of Psalms.

In doing so I suggest that they will be trained in a grammar school of right speech about God. Throughout the psalms we encounter a Sovereign God and a Shepherd God, a Creator and a Redeemer, who is also a King and a Refuge. The Psalter introduces us to a God who is near and a God who is experienced as absent. Here we find a Just Judge who exacts vengeance; here we meet a Merciful Lord who inclines his ear to the cries of the afflicted. The psalms introduce us to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to the God of Deborah and Hannah, and ultimately to the God of Jesus Christ,

who by the Spirit makes all our worship pleasing to God. The church’s songwriters enable the church to sing the new song when they learn to sing the whole of the psalms, rather than only idiosyncratically informed bits and pieces of the psalms.

**The New Self that Belongs to Christ, Not the “New Thing” of the Present Moment**

Third, to sing the new song is to sing the song, as St. Augustine has argued, that “belongs to the new person.” Related to the above typology, this new song is linked to the experience of a new grace. A new person, Augustine explains, sings a new song because he belongs to the order of Christ. “Humankind has aged in sin but is made new through grace. It is right, then, that all who are renewed in Christ, all those in whom eternal life has begun, should sing a new song.” The act of singing itself, Augustine argues, brings about real change in the Christian. To sing a hymn to God, in this view, is a performative act, for “the hymn itself gives us freedom.” To sing this new song involves an ontological as well as an ethical change: it is to become like Christ and to live like Christ.

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35 Granted, the psalms do not speak of the triune nature of God, but they do open up the possibility for Christian songwriters to discover the triune economy in the theological language of the Psalter.

36 Esther Rothenbusch Crookshank offers this observation of Watts’s hymnody: “Watts made hymnody a microcosm of the world, and peopled it with fish, mountains, rainbows, all manner of creeping things, snatching them all from the Psalms but animating them with rhyme and tune—animation not in the Disneyesque sense but in the sense of the Holy Spirit’s *ruach* (or breath), by Whom life constantly, joyously springs forth. Watts brought animals, England, the whole world into divine praise because that is where he believed they belonged—under God’s sway and Christ’s glorious reign” (“‘We’re Marching to Zion’: Isaac Watts in Early America,” in *Hymns in American Protestant History and Theology*, ed. Richard J. Mouw and Mark A. Noll [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004], 39).


38 Ibid., III/20:492.

39 Ibid., III/16:199.

40 In *Expositions*, III/18:424, Augustine writes: “The desires of the flesh sing an old song, but the charity of God sings a song that is new. . . . The new song your heart is singing reaching the ears of God who make you a new person.”
Augustine argues further that the new song of Christ is matched by “the new music of charity.” What sort of melody characterizes this charity? Augustine answers: “Peace, the bond of holy society, spiritual union, a building made of living stones.” Thus to sing this new song of love is to sing an ever-renewing song “because it never grows old.” It never grows old, in point of fact, because we have been caught up in the inertia of Christ’s resurrected life (Col 3:17), a life that belongs to the new creation (2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15). For the church’s songwriters the invitation, then, is not chiefly to attend to the “new thing” of the present moment. The invitation instead is to create songs that enable the faithful to imagine their life “in Christ” and compel the faithful to live their life “as Christ” in the world. This, of course, is not a solitary task; it is a communal task.

The New Community that Belongs to Christ, Not the Isolated or Parochial Community

A fourth implication for contemporary worship music involves the corporate dimension of a new song. To sing a new song, in the context of the Psalter, is to sing it in the assembly of the people, before the face of the congregation. In a new covenantal perspective, to sing a new song is to sing it as the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. Augustine is, again, helpful on this account. He writes, “the new song is a universal song, not the property of some exclusive region.” To sing a new song is to sing together as a unified Body of Christ. “People who separate themselves from the fellowship of the saints,” he argues, “are not singing the new song; they are following the score of old animosity, not the new music of charity.”

Augustine, of course, has in mind here the Donatists; yet all who refuse to sing with the universal church, for Augustine, have not properly understood the meaning of the Psalter. “It is the world

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41 Ibid., III/20:492–93.
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid., III/18:459.
44 Ibid., III/20:492.
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that constitutes the Lord’s field,” Augustine writes forcefully, “not just Africa!”

Anyone who refuses to join in this new song with all the rest of the world may use whatever words he chooses, but it will make no difference. He may shout “Alleluia” all day long and all night, but I am not inclined to listen to the singer’s voice; I am looking for the agent’s deeds. I ask him, “What are you singing?” and he replies, “Alleluia.” But what does Alleluia mean? “Praise the Lord.” Fine: let us praise the Lord together. If you praise the Lord and I praise the Lord, why aren’t we in tune? Charity praises the Lord, but discord blasphemates him.

For contemporary worship songwriters this becomes an invitation to make music in the light of the global church and in the company of the global church. To sing a new song is to sing alongside the church from every tribe, tongue, and nation. It is to sing the song of the church throughout the ages and of the age to come.

An Eschatological Perspective, Not the “New Thing” or the “Next Thing”

A final implication of the psalmic new song for contemporary worship songwriters points to the inability of the church to fully realize Augustine’s vision—which is of course chiefly God’s vi-

45 Ibid., III/20:495. St. Basil the Great, in a letter he penned to the “Clergy of Neocaesarea” against the Arian tendencies in the East, defended the practice of psalm singing with this final statement: “If, then, you shun us on this account, you will shun the Egyptians, and also those of both Libyas, the Thebans, Palestinians, Arabsians, Phoenicians, Syrians, and those dwelling beside the Euphrates—in one word, all those among whom night watches and prayers and psalmody in common have been held in esteem” (cited in David W. Music, Hymnology: A Collection of Source Readings [Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 1996], 13).

46 Ibid., III/20:493. Commenting on Ps 96:1, in Expositions, III/18:424, he writes: “The entire earth is God’s house. But if this is the case, anyone who does not cling to fellowship with the whole earth is not the house, but a ruin—an ancient ruin, foreshadowed by that ancient temple. In that temple the old order was in process of being demolished so that the new order might be built.”
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sion—namely full unity in Christ. To sing a new song is not ultimately to sing a “new thing” or the “next thing.” It is to sing an eschatological vision: to sing in light of the reality of God’s good future, made present and palpable to God’s people by the Holy Spirit, who makes us partakers of Christ himself, who both announces and enacts the praise of the new creation.

The phrase “new song” appears three times outside the Psalter. Not coincidentally they appear in eschatologically oriented texts. Isaiah 42:10 says, “Sing to the Lord a new song. Sing his praise from the end of the earth.” Where Israel has borne an “old” name of reproach, God gives her a “new” name (Isa 62:2). Where Israel has labored under an “old” spirit, entangled and corrupted by idolatry, Yahweh promises a “new” spirit and a “new” heart (Ez 11:19; 18:31; 36:26). And in place of the “old” heavens and earth, Yahweh promises to create a new heaven and a new earth (Isa 65:17). With the new song on their lips, the company of heaven, as the Book of Revelation tells it (Rev 5:8–9; 14:2–3), sings of the cosmic fulfillment of God’s promises.

Conclusion

In 2015, contemporary worship music represented nearly 14% of all Christian music. From a business standpoint, the prodigious output represented a wildly successful venture. For plenty of songwriters and worship leaders this represented uncommonly

47 “Revelation 5:8–9 and 14:2–3, where the words ‘new song’ and ‘harp’ occur together, contain songs of praise to God and to the Lamb. The songs consist of praise to God’s sovereignty and judgment, thanksgiving for God’s answer to the petition of the suffering of saints and his redemption and proclamation of an eschatological reign. The two Revelation texts are textually and contextually connected with Pss. 33(32), 98(97), 144(143), and 149. Though, in some details, Ps. 144(143) can be deemed as relatively less strong than the other psalmic texts. Also, Rev. 5:8–9 is viewed closer to Ps. 98 while Rev. 14:2–3 to Pss. 33 and 149. By alluding to the four psalms in Rev. 5:8–9 and 14:2–3, John accentuates the eschatological and kingly reign of God and the Lamb, instantly entailing the final judgment of all the world and the salvation of his people” (Sungkuk Kim, “Psalms in the Book of Revelation” [Ph.D. diss., University of Edinburgh, 2014], 77).

good news. From the perspective of the psalms, the idea of newness for newness’ sake represents a shortfall of sorts. And to justify the creation of new works of music on the language of the Psalter represents, at best, a deficient reading of the text and, at worst, a defective reading. If contemporary worship wishes to take its liturgical cue from the command to sing a new song in the psalms, then it must attend carefully to the richly complex sense of this phrase.

When it does so, its songwriters will embrace tradition as a positive resource, not something to escape; they will seek to sing the whole counsel of God in the psalms, not to make a piecemeal offering of it; they will make music that accords to the new self and the new community that belong to Christ, not the “new thing” of the present moment, nor the thing of an isolated and idiosyncratic community; and they will sing in a Spirit-attuned eschatological perspective, not about the “next thing.” And they will do so, as Paul Westermeyer rightly puts it, trusting that the new song of the psalms in Christ is “the song of the church that pours itself out for the life of the world in praise to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit from age to age and forever.”