

THE PRECENTOR AND THE CONGREGATION

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INTRODUCTION: Iain Campbell has spoken to us on the topic “*Spirit-filled Worship leading to Heartfelt Praise*”. The very title forces us to think about the nature of what we’re doing as we engage in the worship of God. This is different to any other activity we can be involved in on this earth. Before even hearing his talk, I found the title suggestive and helpful: at its simplest level, it made me see that, when the Christian takes time to reflect on Who God is, and what God has done, especially through Christ, then the Spirit within him or her will inspire the soul to worship, to ascribe the greatest worth of all to the Lord – and can that be contained? Never! It must out – and the outlet which the Lord Himself has provided, is what we call ‘praise’, whereby we give back to Him the glory of the things He has shown us about Himself. Biblical praise can be expressed in prayer, but especially by singing. It can be individual, when a Christian sings on his or her own (e.g. on top of a mountain, in ‘The Sound of Music’ style, or the shower!), but praise is at its most biblical when it is corporate – expressed by members of the Body of Christ when they come together to meet Him in His Word.

So, how well do we praise as a people? And how would we know? At this point, it has to be said that questions like these are difficult to answer because the praise of God is not an exact science. Since it is a spiritual exercise, it begins in the soul, and moves to the heart and mind of the believer. However, it doesn’t stop there, but issues from the mouth in shared musical expression. It’s important to emphasise the shared aspect, because the corporate praise of God is not random or individualistic. Because we do it together, it needs to be led so as to be intelligible, and to ensure proper progression from one aspect of praise to the next. And that’s where the precentor comes in. As Alasdair Fraser has said in his paper on ‘*Selecting the Right Tune*’, there are two people involved in the leading of public worship: the minister and the precentor. [See further my article *Precenting as Ministry* on the Free Church website.] One is the minister of the Word preached, and the other is the minister of the Word sung, and for a service of worship to be fulfilling, both of these ministers should be **in a meaningful partnership with a congregation**. What, then, are the characteristics of this “meaningful partnership”?

1. THE PRECENTOR SHOULD PREPARE HIMSELF TO LEAD GOD’S PEOPLE IN THE PRAISE. In the same way that the preacher reflects beforehand on the notes of his sermon., the precentor should reflect beforehand on the words of the psalms he is to lead. This is the way he makes his final judgment on which tune to use, pitch & pace, and what dynamics should obtain at the various points of the portion to be sung. He is a leader, and as he stands to sing, he should make eye-contact with the people, to ensure that they are ready to follow him.

2. THE CONGREGATION SHOULD FOLLOW THE PRECENTOR IN THE PITCH & THE PACE. As the precentor begins in a sure manner, he should set a pitch and pace suitable for the psalm – and the congregation should follow him in these. It has become almost a time-honoured tradition for some precentors to start the psalm at a pace faster than the eventual pace of the psalm. This is because such precentors know that the congregations they are leading will pull them back and slow them down. This shouldn't be happening! The pace set by the precentor should be 'sacrosanct', and the congregation should follow that. (If a precentor himself is too slow – or indeed too fast for the psalm being sung- he should be told that by the minister.) Why do some congregations pull their precentors back in the first place? Various answers might be given to why this happens, but if it does, then the minister and precentor between them should point the problem out to the people, and basically tell them to follow the leader!

There are a few effective ways of leading a congregation in the pace. For over 30 years, I followed some precenting friends in the way they waved their psalm-book rhythmically, but over the last few years, as my eyesight has become less effective in following a moving object, I've discovered that it's better to use a basic conducting-style with the right hand, and you don't need to be a professional musician to do that. The basic thing you need to know is that most psalms can be conducted in either 3/4 or 4/4 time. The really important thing it all comes back to, is that you, the precentor, are leading the congregation, not *vice versa*.

3. THE CONGREGATION SHOULD FOLLOW THE PRECENTOR IN THE TUNE. This should go without saying, but often it doesn't. Firstly, if the precentor gives an uncertain note, then who can follow? Of course, if the precentor him or herself is unsure of the tune, then the congregation will not improve matters. (To adapt a well-known saying, "A mist in the precentor's desk will become a fog in the pew".) By and large, precentors, precentors should be following the tune as printed – but that is sometimes the beginning of sorrows, as far as the precentor is concerned. As one precentor, one hears all manner of differences between what the precentor is giving out, and what the congregation is actually singing! (e.g. the 3rd line of *St Denio*, or the last line of *Bays of Harris*). The latter is my own particular *bête noire*. And there is a historical reason why congregations sing the last two notes of *Bays of Harris* wrongly: written by Alex Muir, this tune was popularized by Donnie Macsween, a minister who made a best-selling audio-cassette which popularised *Bays of Harris* to the traditional version of Ps. 63 ('*Lord, Thee my God, I'll early seek*'). It was a sell-out in the Highlands and Islands. The thing was that Donnie changed the last two notes from D-D to E-D, and ever since, congregations, and many precentors themselves, have sung Donnie's 'bootleg' version, instead of what Alex actually wrote. And when precentors are doing their job properly, it sounds horrendous! (I'm pleased to say that, when the Caithness Psalm-Singers produced a CD recently, they sang it correctly. Maybe that track should be circulated throughout the Church as compulsory listening!)

4. THE CONGREGATION SHOULD FOLLOW THE PRECENTOR IN THE DYNAMIC . Like Alasdair Fraser, I have three ideal requirements for acceptable psalmody – only mine are PITCH, PACE & *PASSION*, by which I mean the dynamic, or feeling that should be conveyed through the psalm at any given point. The psalms are not all the same –

some psalms are joyful, others are plaintive. And, it also happens that, at certain parts of a psalm, the mood shifts from sad to joyous. That shift should be reflected in the way the psalm is sung, and the lead in this has to be given by the precentor, who should be heard by the congregation as necessary. (If the precentor is wearing a radio-microphone, then this will help.) The congregation should be aware of any shift in dynamic, and try to adjust their own singing accordingly, from softer to louder, or vice versa. This sounds idealistic, but if we're aiming for excellence in our praise, then it should be said. Otherwise, we end up with a 'one size fits all', uninterpreted approach to psalm-singing. By the way, another device which can be used to good effect to mark the change of mood in a psalm, is a change in key upwards. I do this fairly often at St Columba's (e.g. Ps. 13 at v.5, Ps. 142 at v. 7, Ps. 139 at v. 17. *Amazing Grace* and *Land of Rest* virtually do this by themselves at such points). The important thing is for the precentor, as the minister of praise, to flag up to the congregation that this will be happening, and if they are following him properly, there should be no difficulty.

4. BOTH PRECENTOR AND PEOPLE SHOULD NOT BE AFRAID OF BEING MOVED BY THE SENTIMENTS OF THE PSALM. We are meant to engage with the psalm as those whom it is addressing. Quite a number of psalms require us to do theological gymnastics as we translate Jewish imagery into Christian language, in order to discover their relevance to us personally. But with others, the personal application is more immediately relevant to our own experience (e.g. Ps. 51:3-4 – *“For I know my own transgressions; I can see my sinful plight. You, You only, I've offended, and done evil in Your sight...”*) If we are moved by the psalm, whether to weep, or to rejoice, we should not be ashamed to show it. Rather, we should be concerned when we don't show it! The psalmist says in Ps. 103:1 – *“Praise God, my soul! With all my heart (literally, ‘with all my being’) let me exalt His holy Name.”* The psalmist David was not ashamed to let His feelings about God be known as he took the ark of God up to Jerusalem with great rejoicing. But we are so stoical, and so outwardly unmoved as we sing of the even greater victories and glories of great David's greater Son! The two ministers in the worship, preacher and precentor, should be encouraging the people to open their hearts, their mouths and their personalities to God as they praise Him. We are all different, and we should naturally be sensitive to the needs of others as they worship. But the beautiful thing is, that the Lord accepts us for who we are, with our different personalities, and He wants our worship and praise to be real, more concerned about how we respond to Him than about what others think of us.

CONCLUSION Assuming that precentors are doing what they do out of a sense of calling and service to the Lord and His people, and that they are naturally equipped to do so, then the main thing is that the congregation should be following them in a meaningful partnership as regards PITCH, PACE, TUNE, DYNAMIC AND SENTIMENTS of each psalm that is sung. When these things coalesce in a service of worship, then the way is prepared for a truly meaningful encounter between God and His people.