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The Christian
SERMON
With respect to the

Church Music!

PREACHED IN WESTMINSTER CHURCH.

Sunday Morning, February 20, 1859.

BY THE PASTOR,
FREDERICK T. BROWN.

CLEVELAND:
FAIRBANKS, BENEDICT & CO., PRINTERS, HERALD OFFICE,
1859.



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P R E F A C E .

I *preached* this sermon, because the choir of my church having just been re-organized and enlarged, and an organ having been procured, I wished to guard against the choir evils I had seen in some other churches in the land: and, in the outset, establish the principles that should, as it seems to me, govern church music.— As the reader will see, I expressly exculpated the Choir of my own church from censure; and it is but just and truthful to myself to say, that I was not hitting at the choirs of other churches in particular.

I *publish* this sermon, because, in the congregation to which I minister, it has been much talked about since it was preached; and because I hope the truths it teaches may do good to others, not members of my church or congregation. The sermon as published is verbatim as it was preached. I dedicate it to all who believe it to be the duty of the people to *praise* God, the duty of *all* the people to praise God and the duty of the choir to *help* the people to praise God.

FREDERICK T. BROWN.

WESTMINSTER PARSONAGE,
Feb. 24th, 1859.

S E R M O N .

EPHESIANS, v:19.—Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns, and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord.

PSALMS, lxvii:3.—Let the people praise thee, O God ; let all the people praise thee.

PSALM cl.—Praise ye the Lord. Praise God in his sanctuary : praise him in the firmament of his power.—Praise him for his mighty acts : praise him according to his excellent greatness.—Praise him with the sound of the trumpet : praise him with the psaltery and harp.—Praise him with the timbrel and dance : praise him with stringed instruments and organs.—Praise him upon the loud cymbals : praise him upon the high-sounding cymbals.—Let every thing that hath breath praise the Lord.—Praise ye the Lord.

ALL these exhortations for praise, are for praise in connection with, or rather as part of, the public worship of the sanctuary. They are exhortations to praise God by a church choir, in singing, and with instruments of music of many kinds. They are exhortations to praise God by the congregation, in singing psalms, and hymns, and spiritual songs. They are exhortations to praise God with instruments and in singing, by the choir, and the whole congregation, conjointly playing and singing. These seem to me to be the leading principles of the several passages of Scripture I have taken for my text ; and from which I wish to preach a sermon on *Church Music*, as part of the public worship and service of the sanctuary.

I have before this, in the Old Round Church, preached on the subject of church music, though not from this text, nor in the form of presentation I shall use to-day. It has seemed to me that it might be to edification to preach on the subject again, in this house, in view of the high importance of the subject, and of the interest that is felt in it among all classes of the people.

Of the three portions of Scripture composing my text, two are from the Old Testament, and refer to and are descriptive of a part of the temple service:—of course, I am aware of the difficulty and danger of reasoning from what was customary and enjoined as part of the temple service under the old ceremonial dispensation, to what should be part of the church service under the new Christian dispensation. The other portion of the text is from the New Testament, and may be supposed to refer to the customary mode of praising God in the primitive Apostolical Churches:—of course, I do not suppose that the singing of psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, in the primitive places of worship of the primitive Christians, should be held to be the only proper mode of praising God in the Christian Church. In both cases, however, the danger of making some serious mistake, is greater in seeming than in fact—the exercise of a little plain common sense readily bringing order out of confusion, and separating the truth from the falsehood. How any Christian, taking the whole Scriptures for his guide, can draw the conclusion from them that choirs are forbidden in the Christian Church, and that instruments of music of all kinds are especially forbidden, I cannot see. I know that it is not likely there were choirs in the Christian Churches when they were first planted by the Apostles; and more unlikely still, that there were instruments of music: but there were not, as I

conceive, for other reasons than because choirs and instruments of music were sinful and forbidden things. And, on the other hand, how any Christian, taking the whole Scriptures for his guide, can draw the conclusion from them, that, in the public worship of God in the Christian Church, choirs of singers with all manner of musical instruments, should take into their hands the whole duty of praising God, making silent auditors of the congregation, I cannot see. I know, that in the Temple service the choir, of singers with all manner of musical instruments, chosen of God and set apart to this very duty, had in charge chiefly the public praises of the sanctuary, the people making only responses, and singing in the choruses. But there was a reason for this then and there that does not exist here and now. The Temple and the temple-service have passed away forever: and it were every whit as unnatural to seek to introduce that feature of the temple service into our churches, as to seek to introduce the burning of incense, or the offering of the morning and evening sacrifices.

The three leading truths taught me by the three passages of Scripture composing my text, and that I propose to teach you, are First, the duty of praising God, as part of the public worship of the Church. Second, the duty of all the people engaging in praising God. Third, the duty, if need be, of having choirs of singers, with musical instruments, to lead and assist the people, that the praises of the sanctuary may be as nearly perfect as can be.

First, the duty of *praising God in God's house*. Of course, by "praising God," I mean, singing God's praises. And of course, by "singing God's praises," I mean all that is included in singing Psalms, Hymns and spiritual

songs, to the praise of God, and to Christian edification. Many of the Psalms, Hymns, and sacred songs, sung in our churches, and most approved by the people, do not offer ascriptions of praise to God directly: some are didactic, some are descriptive, some are historical, some are doctrinal, some hortatory, etc., etc. But nevertheless, they all do, directly or indirectly, offer ascriptions of praise to God. And it is referring to these things when I say, that it is a duty to praise God in God's house, by singing.

How or why God is praised by *singing* over his praises, rather than by speaking of them simply, or by silently meditating upon them, is one of those questions we are not required to trouble ourselves to answer. The fact is that he *is*: and that settles the question, and at the same time determines our duty respecting it. One of the principal things in the temple service was offering praises to God by the choir and by the congregation of the people: and the praises that were so sung there, under the golden ceilings, and before the Holy of holies, were of the same miscellaneous character as the Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs, we sing in our humbler churches. And that that stands out prominently chiefest in the earliest account we have of the worship of the Christians in the age succeeding the apostolic, is their praises sung to God in Christ. It is God's will that in His House the people should call to mind *Himself*, His character, His attributes, love, mercy, truth, justice, compassion, power, wisdom,—and sing them over to His praise: that they should call to mind His *doings*,—His dealings with them, with theirs, with others, with His church, with His enemies, with nations, and sing them over to His praise: that they should call to mind His *Gospel*,—its doctrines, its blessings, its conflicts, its tri-

umphs,—and sing of it to His praise: that they should call to mind His *church*,—its planting, its growth, its strength, its beauty, its glory,—and sing of it to His praise: that they should call to mind His *people*,—their faith, their love, their zeal, their patience, their prayers, their good works, their trials and temptations, their joys and doubts and fears,—and sing of them to His praise. It pleases God and glorifies Him to have these his praises sung in the public congregation: and therefore it is the duty of the people to sing them. And there is a reflex influence for good on the people: the very act of praising God by singing, in these various ways, opens the heart of him who sings these praises, mellows it, draws it, and prepares it by the grace of God accompanying every duty done, to do still further of God's good pleasure. And this, in fact, may be the reason why it is God's will that His praises should be *sung*—not spoken, nor meditated upon, but *sung* in the congregation: the very act of singing them—according to the constitution of our nature to be more or less moved by the melodies we sing and hear sung—bringing us to the state of mind in sympathy with what we sing: and therefore most pleasing to God that we should have. But this anticipates what I shall have to say under another head. Without further remark therefore, I leave here the duty of singing God's praise in God's house, to speak,

Second, of the *duty of all the people to praise God*. “Let all the people praise thee, O God: let all the people praise thee.” This is emphatic; and expresses, no doubt, the very mind of God in the matter. If it is—as it was shown to be—the duty of the people to praise God in the sanctuary, then it is the duty of *all* the people to praise him, unless some can show good

and sufficient cause why they, in particular, should not. I will not say that there may not be exceptions: but I will say that they should be held as "exceptions," not as the rule: and I will say also this, that the rule properly applied, the exceptions will be found to be few. For the full performance of this duty, there are two or three prerequisites, which I will notice. One of these prerequisites, is the *ability* of the people to praise God. And here there will be great diversity of opinion as to what constitutes ability. I may think I have the ability to praise God in singing: and my brother, whose ear is more finely attuned than mine, and better cultivated, may think I have not. Or I may think I have not the ability to praise God by singing: and my brother, whose sense of the divine harmonies of music is less perfect than mine, may think that I have. How shall we decide concerning this thing? As to this, the standard of ability not being given by divine authority, I can only say as Paul said of a certain thing, I have no *commandment* of the Lord: yet I give my *judgment*, as one that hath obtained mercy of the Lord to be faithful. My "judgment" is, that the standard of ability to praise God by singing *may be a very low one*: so low, as to include, even now, ninety-nine hundredths of every promiscuous congregation of worshippers. Not that it would not be better if there were no necessity for bringing the standard down so low: and not that it is not the duty of the people to raise the standard as high and as fast as they can; but that, taking the people as they are, the standard of ability to sing God's praises, may be very low, and nearly all-comprehending.

This may very possibly seem, to some of the musically gifted and highly cultivated of my audience, as a vulgar, if not indeed a profane judgment, concerning as it does

the public worship of Almighty God. Be that as it may, it is the judgment deliberately and solemnly formed, of one whose ear for music is not as that of the "deaf adder": who is passionately fond of music: who has had many opportunities of hearing the best music, in the New and in the Old World, sacred and profane. If the judgment be a sin against good taste, and a sin against the reverence due to the majesty of God, it is, in both cases, a sin of peculiar aggravation, being committed deliberately in the broad daylight. And I am prepared to add to it the further sin of this declaration, many times made in private, and now made in public, that, if need be—if the congregation have the will to sing, and are singing to the best of their ability, and one or the other must be foregone—I had rather, in the house of God, have congregational singing, even of the most "boisterous Methodist character," than a dumb congregation and the finest choir performance that was ever heard within the walls of a church. Of course I am speaking of the habitual church service. I am prepared to admit every thing to the advocates of exclusive choir singing as to the *artistic* superiority of the music of the choir: but, in my judgment, nothing of the kind does or can compensate for the absence of congregational singing:—an ounce of gold is, in the market, a hundred times more valuable than a pound of bread; but on the table, for eating, to them who are famishing with hunger, the pound of bread is a thousand times more valuable than the ounce of gold. The question between exclusive choir, and congregational singing, is not one of "artistic merit," but of *fitness*: tried by this rule, the rudest singing by the whole congregation, must bear off the palm from the most perfect musical performance of an exclusive choir.

I need say no more to convince you, that, in my judgment, the standard of ability of the congregation "to praise God by singing, may be a very low one: so low as to include, even now, ninety-nine hundredths of every promiscuous assembly of worshippers." But I would not that you should infer from this, that congregations of worshippers should not increase their ability to sing God's praises more worthily than they can sing them now. All I mean by what was said is this, that even now, they have ability sufficient to make it their duty to praise God by singing in the public congregation. Then to this, I will add, that it is the duty of all, as far as it can be done, to increase their ability to praise God: by studying music, those who can, by practicing singing, by learning new tunes, and in all other ways that occur to them. So that the standard of congregational singing, though as widely inclusive as before, may not necessarily be a "low" one.

Another prerequisite to the performance of the duty of praising God by all the people, is *a willing mind*. Many more people are unwilling to sing than are unable to sing. Some have got out of the habit of singing; some do not feel like singing; some will not sing, because others are singing; some are afraid to sing; some are ashamed to sing; some are too proud to sing; some do not sing because a mock modesty tells them they sing better than most, and that if they sing everybody will be listening to them; and some do not sing because they wish to enjoy the harmonies and skillful executions of the choir, or to criticise their discords and failures. In looking over a congregation during singing, I have seen before me musical ability enough, and more than enough, to fill the house with melody; but the willing mind was wanting; and, though God

was bending his ear to catch their praises, there was silence nearly the same as in an assembly of the dumb. Ah yes, there must be willingness to sing; the hearty willingness of each man, woman and child to do what they can, denying self, and putting off the fear or man, or the duty of praising God by all the people will not be done.

And one other prerequisite to the duty of praising God by all the people, is *the permission of the choir*. The choir in some churches is the first estate of the realm; supreme, in majestic dignity and authority, over the pulpit and the congregation. That the congregation are silent as the grave from praising God, is a thing of no moment; that the pulpit "plays second fiddle to their first," is a matter of small moment; but that the choir make a magnificent performance, is a matter of the highest moment! "*Fiat chorus; ruat coelum!*" is their motto; and, it must be confessed, they are consistent in living up to it. There are many churches in which the command of God to all the people to praise Him, cannot be obeyed, because the choirs have the congregations by the throat, and say to them, "You shall not sing a note, under penalty of our grand displeasure!" condescendingly adding, "Little people should be seen, not heard." When preaching in some of these churches, I have also had the kindness done me by the choirs to have my hymns selected for me, and sent into the pulpit, without even troubling me to ask my permission! Of course, under such a *regime*, neither pastor nor people can praise God except by *permission*. How this permission is to be obtained, where it is denied, by a petition for a restoration of rights, or by a *coup d'etat*, as in France, followed by the guillotine, or a decree of banishment against the tyrants, the

people must determine. And, to my thinking, when mild remonstrances are scorned, any measure, not in itself sinful, may be used by a people against a choir that has gagged them into silence, to get back their right to praise God. I have seen congregations assemble in the spirit of true devotion, having it in their hearts, and almost bubbling from their lips to praise God as with one voice; and whose wish was when the hymn was given out, "O that it was permitted us here to sing!" or, "O that the choir would sing some thing we know, and in which we could join!" But the law of that church was that the choir alone shall sing; or, the choir sing something the people do not know, are not expected to know, are not even desired to know; and there the congregation sit or stand *voiceless*, staring at their books like silent fools, the spirit of praise dying out in their hearts, and in the hearts of not a few a spirit of malediction rising that utters curses, not loud but deep, against the wrong. The blindness of choirs to the profane injustice of not permitting the people to praise God; and to the exceeding folly of making men and women angry prejudiced critics before performing before them, is most amazing. With this, however, here, I have nothing to do; only with the fact, that, where it exists, the prerequisite of permission from the choir must be obtained before the command of God to all the people to praise him can be obeyed.

The three prerequisites are, "ability," "willingness," "permission;" a congregation possessing all these, is in a condition to receive the command: *Let all the people praise thee, O God; let all the people praise thee!*

The Third truth from the text, is the duty, if need be, of having choirs of singers with players on instruments, to lead and assist the people, that the praises of the sanctuary may be as nearly perfect as can be. To this truth too objections are made.

One of the objections is made by those who are opposed to choirs, and are especially opposed to instruments of music in choirs, on the ground that God's praises cannot thereby be played or sung; and, what is singular, this objection comes most frequently from those who sing only David's Psalms, that, in the ancient church, were always sung by a *choir*, accompanied by *all manner of musical instruments*. To me the objection has no force, in fact no meaning. I know that God's praises have been played and sung by choirs; I know that it was done by God's own express command; and I cannot understand why what was praise then, should be profanity now. Furthermore, I see God's blessing resting, and resting largely, and lovingly, on those churchēs in which there are choirs of singers with instruments of music, and I cannot believe that this would be if choirs and their adjuncts were profane.

The other objection to choirs is, that they are open to abuse. This objection I understand. But when will the time come when it need no longer be said, that the abuse of a thing is no valid objection to its use? Where is the good thing that has not been abused? That there is a tendency in choirs, in good choirs especially, to a concentration of power, and to an abuse of their privileges, all the world knows; but it does not therefore follow, that choirs should be abated as nuisances. I understand a choir to be to a church very much what a wife is to a man, "a helpmeet;" something for

every worthy man to have; something for every good church to have; and the better the wife, and the choir, the more fortunate the man and the church. Now that wives do sometimes abuse their privileges, and lord it over their husbands, there is no doubt; but this would be no sufficient reason to those who have good wives to seek to be rid of them; nor to those unhappy men who have no wives, but might get good ones, to refuse to marry. I have no sympathy with the objection to choirs, that they may, aye, that there is even a tendency in them to abuse their privileges and lord it over the congregations. If it could be shown that choirs cannot be controlled, will not keep their place, and, that, even under judicious management, the resulting evils are greater than the good, then I would join in the hue and cry to hunt choirs out of every church in the land; but this has not and cannot be shown. The objection is clearly one that has two sides; and the better side is just as clearly on the side of choirs. They are open to abuses, to abuses that may make them curses to the churches, but these abuses need not continue to exist; choirs without the abuses, are not only a possibility, but an actuality. Great practical difficulties are also in the way of their perfection, and of the perfection of their working; difficulties that have seemed insurmountable to some; but these difficulties have been overcome by some choirs in some churches, and their practical working proved to the satisfaction of all. In the settling of all these questions, very much depends on a right apprehension of the position of the choir in the church, and of its duties.

If the choir were an independent power in the church, elected to perform the music of the church to the best of its ability, then it were not difficult to know both

its position and duties. But the choir is no such "independent power," and is not elected to make any such "performance." The "position" of the choir is at the musical head of the congregation; its "duties" are to lead and assist the people, to the end that the praises of the house of God may be as nearly perfect as can be.

I have spoken of the choir as a "helpmeet" to the congregation in singing, just as the wife is the helpmeet of the husband in the duties of life. I will now use another illustration. So far as congregational singing to any good purpose is concerned, the choir is to the church what the locomotive is to the train of cars; the locomotive is nothing of itself, it is everything to draw the train swiftly and safely to its place of destination; the choir is nothing of itself, it is everything to lead and assist the congregation to praise God worthily. To be sure, the locomotive is a master piece of ingenuity and skill, the mechanical wonder and glory of the age; but to what end was it made? Certainly not for itself. Certainly not to go snorting up and down the rails, now fast, now slow, to show off its action and speed. Certainly George Stephenson did not invent the locomotive for such fantastic displays as these. But there was work to be done, a great work to be done, work that only the locomotive could do; *therefore it was invented*. And the locomotive's place is at the head of a train of cars; and its glory is to draw that heavily laden train swiftly and safely over the rails to its destination. And, to be sure a choir, of gifted and trained singers, with instruments of music, is something most admirable, a joy, a pride, a power, to any church; but to what end? Certainly not for itself. Certainly not to make splendid performances to gaping audiences in church. Certainly God did not design the choir for such foolish displays as these. But there was a work

to be done in the church—a great work to be done—a work that only the choir could do; *therefore the choir is*. Its place is at the musical head of the congregation; and its work and glory are to lead and assist the people to praise God worthily. The locomotive that would disdain to be coupled to its train, and draw its load, would be above its business, would be unworthy of its place, and should be taken from the road. The choir that disdains to be coupled to its congregation, and help the people praise God, is above its business, is unworthy of its place, and should be taken from the church. Lord Palmerston defined dirt to be “Anything out of place;” a capital definition; according to which the choir galleries of not a few churches are badly in need of sweeping. I am happy to know, that, by the same definition, *the gallery of this church is clean*. God grant that it may remain so.

It is quite a common thing to denounce choirs, and to throw the blame of poor singing in church on the choirs. This is both unjust and unkind, in many instances. There are few positions so thankless as that of chorister in a choir that wishes to perform its duty for a congregation that is indifferent to *its* duty; sing as that choir may, and sing what it may, there will still be some to find fault. I know of nothing, then, to meet all the difficulties in the case—difficulties in the congregation and difficulties in the choir—but to go back and get down to the three great truths taught in the text, viz: Of “the duty to praise God;” of “the duty of all the people to praise God:” of “the duty of choirs to help the people to praise God.” These three duties faithfully and lovingly attended to, all difficulties will vanish; congregations will not hang as dead weights on choirs; choirs will not cut themselves off from congregations; and, uniting together as true yoke-

fellows, God's praises will be sung by choir and congregation so as not unfitly to typify the praises of the redeemed in heaven.

Permit me now, in conclusion, to say a few words concerning the importance of this part of the public worship of God.

Of the power of music, I need say nothing ; we have all felt it—we all know what it is.

But have we duly considered the *effects of music before preaching, on the preacher and on the hearers* ? I speak but simple truth when I say, that so constituted are some preachers, that they cannot preach with any satisfaction after bad or inappropriate singing ; and that so constituted are some hearers, that they cannot hear to advantage after such singing. To all such, good and appropriate singing acts as a charm, bringing their minds and hearts into the happiest sympathetic relations with the subject under consideration, and the people with the preacher and the preacher with the people, and lifting preacher and people out of themselves and above themselves. Surely, this is worth considering by all. And, when the sermon is ended, the impression it shall leave on the hearers depends much on the singing of the last hymn. Surely this, too, is worth considering by all. Many a good sermon has been killed by the singing of the last hymn. Many a poor sermon has been made living by the singing of the last hymn.—And, independent of the preaching, whether that be good or bad, the singing may be, and in innumerable instances has been, a means of grace. Many sinners, who stood out boldly against the *preaching* of the cross, have been won to Jesus by the *singing* of the cross. Conviction, teaching, penitence, faith, love,—God has again and again given all these through the psalms, hymns

and spiritual songs, sung by the congregations in his house. I need not tell you that the singing of these psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, are as the bread and water of life to God's own people, strengthening them, encouraging them, gladdening them, drawing them close together round their common Lord, and drawing out their hearts in unspeakable love to Jesus their glorious Saviour. Surely, by all this is also worth considering. The power, for good or for evil, there is in church music, is one no thoughtful man — no thoughtful Christian man, especially — can lightly disregard. I counsel, then :

1. A thoughtful consideration of the whole subject, by the whole congregation, and by the choir.

2. An earnest purpose, on the part of all, to do the thing that is for the best common good.

3. The charity that thinketh no evil, and is ready to make concessions, including the cordial working together of those who lead in singing and of those who are led. And

4. In and with all these things, a devout reverence for God, the Father, Son and Holy Ghost, making His will the supreme law, and seeking His glory first and chiefest in every song of praise we sing.

We need, in all our churches, better church music.— The taste of the community demands better church music. The glory of God demands better church music. And if, in the right spirit, we of this church go to work to secure it — pastor, people and choir, working together with a hearty good will — God's blessing will surely crown our work. I wish to have a choir, of singers and players on instruments, second to none. And I wish to hear every man, woman and child, in the congregation, singing with the choir, and making melody in their hearts to the Lord.

