On June 17, 1736, a Thursday, Edwards preached a sermon, unique in his corpus, “for a singing meeting.” This sermon delivered most likely before or after members of the congregation had had a session with a singing teacher. For a couple of decades and more, singing masters had been criss-crossing New England to instruct congregations in some of the finer aspects of communal singing, initially of psalms, and then, as they became more accepted, of hymns. The old a cappella “lining out” method of psalmody, using the text of The Bay Psalm Book, had to many become increasingly uninspiring and indeed chaotic, as congregations could veer from one meter to another, and from one tune to another, in the context of one song. In all probability singing teachers had visited Northampton before, enabling the congregation to perform during the late revival, as Edwards recounted in A Faithful Narrative, impressively and in several parts; but his record of the occasion for this sermon gives us the only solid date for such a visit during this period.¹

To encourage his congregants to learn how to sing better, Edwards declares that the “public singing of God’s praises is an ordinance instituted by Christ, to be observed in the Christian church.” This practice was observed in the church of God since ancient times, as seen in the examples of Christ, the apostles, and the first Christians. Furthermore, it is a moral duty, one peculiarly suited to the gospel dispensation. The purposes of this duty are to “excite religious and holy affection” and “to manifest it.” As we see elsewhere in Edwards’ accounts of his own and of others’ religious experiences, singing was not only an important part of worship but also of raising “devout affections and frames,” both in “the heart of the singer”—“the voice has a tendency to affect the heart,” Edwards observes—and in others, such that collective singing reflects and participates in the worship
of heavenly inhabitants. Singing the praises of God also is an expression of faith in God, both to God and to others.

Singing God’s praises is therefore a duty that ought to be performed by all members of the visible church. Edwards pointedly states that “it is a duty as much incumbent on women as men,” a negative assessment of the stricture that women ought to keep silent in church. Individuals cannot merely join in “in their hearts”; they must actively participate.

Early in the Application, Edwards makes a very unusual reference to his behavior during worship services:

And here, lest any should object that my practice in this matter is not according to my precept, I will take occasion to inform those present of the reason why I sometimes neglect singing: I find I greatly need a little time to take my breath between the first prayer and preaching, and have found that if I don’t, it is a great disadvantage and hindrance to me in preaching the Word, and have not had my voice at that liberty, as if I give my spirit a little liberty in singing time. So that thereby the worship of the whole congregation is disadvantaged in hearing the Word, much more than it would be advantaged by the addition of my voice in singing.

Apparently, Edwards’ chronically weak constitution, which incapacitated him at times, impacted his ability to follow his own admonition to sing with gusto. All the same, he appreciated both the practical and the aesthetic dimensions of sacred songs.

If singing psalms and hymns is an instituted duty, then it follows that church members should equip themselves to carry out this duty as best as they can. Hence, they must first learn “the art of singing” so as to be able to join in an “assembly”—a verbal nod by the preacher to the singing master. But it is not only adults that should learn to sing: parents must take care
to instruct their children in this art (it is interesting to note that when Edwards became a missionary at Stockbridge, singing was one of the fundamentals he established for teaching Indian children). Edwards then presents a list of Motives to encourage his listeners to “gain skill in singing” and to improve that skill in singing the praises of God. Music, especially communal music, is an excellent and even a beautiful thing, a pleasant thing, and something Christians hope to do in eternity, so it behooves them to learn it here, and learn it well. The recent awakening has given special reason to praise God, as well as shown the edifying results of congregational song in sustaining and extending the revival spirit.

* * * * *

The manuscript is ten duodecimo-sized leaves, the last of which is blank. Edwards’ notation, “For a singing meeting, June 17, 1736,” heads the sermon, and beside it is a repreaching date, “+ Dec. [17]55.” In revising for repreaching, Edwards made some minor emendations and deleted a couple of passages.
A PUBLIC SINGING OF GOD’S PRAISES AN ORDINANCE INSTITUTED BY CHRIST

Colossians 3:16.

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.

In these words I would observe:

1. What is the duty that is here commanded: singing praises to God. Here is the use of psalms and hymns and spiritual songs prescribed, and the use of them that is here directed to is not merely reading them or meditating on them, but to be sung; or, as 'tis here expressed, "singing to the Lord."

2. 'Tis a public singing of God’s praises that is here commanded. 'Tis not singing alone by ourselves, for our own edification only, but for one another’s edification, "teaching and admonishing one another." This is one way wherein we are to be the means of each other’s instruction, and one means whereby the Word of God, particularly that part of the Word that consists in "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs," is to dwell in us "richly in all wisdom." Singing of psalms is a great help to a spiritual understanding of the psalms. The mind of the Holy Ghost in the psalms, is oftentimes conveyed to the mind while the psalm is a singing. And as it is a means of a spiritual understanding to ourselves of that excellent part of the Word of God, so public singing is a means to help one another to such a spiritual understanding. And thus by public singing, we have a means of teaching and admonishing, or instructing one another. Not but that private singing or saying God’s praises alone, if persons have convenient opportunity, is very suitable and profitable, and what a spirit of divine faith and love tends to dispose persons to. This singing by ourselves, seems to be recommended in Eph. 5:18-19, "And be not drunk with wine [. . .] but be filled with the
Spirit; speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord." When persons are filled with the Spirit, it oftentimes naturally disposes persons to singing of praises, even when they are alone.

But it is public singing that is here spoken, not speaking to ourselves, but "teaching and admonishing one another."

3. What should be sung: viz., "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs." What seems to be here intended, at least chiefly, is the psalms and spiritual songs that are contained in the Word of God, for the Apostle is speaking of the Word of God. "Let the word of God," says he, "dwell in you richly in all wisdom," and then he mentions singing as a means. But then, it must be singing some part of the Word of God.

4. We may observe the manner in which we should sing: viz., "with grace in our hearts"; for "God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth" [John 4:24]. 'Tis the heart God looks at in all religious duties. "Bodily exercise profiteth little: but godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come," I Tim. 4:8. The external melody is not the thing which God looks at or is pleased with, but 'tis the internal melody; and the external is good for nothing, but as the means or expression of the internal.

DOCTRINE.

That a public singing of God’s praises is an ordinance instituted by Christ, to be observed in the Christian church.

There are but few that call themselves Christians that deny this. But the Quakers deny it: they own that singing was commanded under the old testament, but deny that 'tis to be observed under the new, and say that 'tis only singing in the heart. But the text is full against them, for that speaks
of singing to psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, so as thereby to teach and admonish one another. But it will be a difficult thing to show how we should do this, only by the secret meditations of our own hearts.

But here I would show:

I. That singing divine songs to God’s praise, is an institution to be observed in the church of God, in the new testament as well as old.

II. Give the reason why it seems a proper duty of Christian worship.

III. Show the ends of the institution.

I. That singing divine [songs to God’s praise, is an institution to be observed in the church of God, in the new testament as well as old]. And this is evident four ways: viz.,

[First. By the] example of Christ.

[Second. By the] example of [the] apostles.

[Third. By the] example of [the] church in [the] apostles’ days.

[Fourth. By the] precept of Christ by the apostles.

First. 'Tis evident by the example of Christ. We read in the 26th [chapter] of Matthew, 30th [verse], of Christ and his disciples singing an hymn at the first sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, when that ordinance was instituted: "And when they had sung an hymn, they went out to the mount of Olives"; so Mark 14:26. This example does fully prove it to be an institution of Christ to be observed in the Christian church, for the ordinance that they were attending was no ordinance of the old testament. It was not any of the rites and ceremonies of the law of Moses, but it was the ordinance of the Lord’s Supper, that is, an ordinance purely Christian, and belonging only to the new-testament dispensation.

So that we have Christ’s own example: our blessed Lord and Master himself, sang praises to God; not only alone, but with the little flock of
his disciples, just before he was going to be crucified for them. And they sang with their dear Lord, which should be example to Christ's disciples in all ages, to sing praises to God as Christ did, or as his disciples did with him. We ought to fall in with the practice of our glorious Redeemer, as well as the disciples that were with him when he was on the earth; and as much as if Christ was now with us on the earth.

Second. We have the example of the apostles for it, after Christ's resurrection and ascension. Thus we read, Acts 16:25, of Paul and Silas when in prison, sang praises to God: "And at midnight Paul and Silas ... sang praises to God: and the prisoners heard them." This was no singing only in the heart, but with the voice: "the other prisoners heard them."

God did give a miraculous testimony of his approbation of their so doing, for then while they were singing, "suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken: and immediately all the doors were opened, and every one's bands were loosed" [Acts 16:26].

This was after the resurrection and ascension, and when the Jewish ceremonies were abolished.

Third. We have the example of the churches in the apostles' times, as particularly the church of the Corinthians. This is evident by the First [of] Corinthians, 14:26, "How is it then, brethren? when ye come together, every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation." The Apostle here, seems to blame them for singing, as well as speaking, in an unknown tongue. He don't blame them for singing, but only the manner of their doing of it. He approves of their singing, but only he would have them do it so that others can understand. [So the] 15th verse: "What is it then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will pray with the understanding also: I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also."
This shows what was the practice of churches in the apostles' times. The church of Corinth was a church planted by the apostle Paul. The duties of their public worship were set up under his instruction.

**Fourth.** 'Tis by the precept of Christ by his apostles. Singing psalms in general, is commanded by the Apostle in the forementioned Eph. 5:18-19, and Jas. 5:13, "Is any merry? let him sing psalms." And public singing in particular is prescribed in the text. This singing here spoken of, can't be merely singing in the heart, but a singing with the voice, for it would be a difficult thing to show how they should teach and admonish one another by their singing, if it were only in the secret meditations of their own hearts.

II. I proceed to give the Reasons why it is a duty to be attended in the Christian church and under the new testament.

**First.** 'Tis a moral duty. Singing God's praises is a duty of morality, as well as prayer. 'Tis a duty founded in the reason of things; 'tis becoming of God's perfections and our relation to him.

God ought to be praised and glorified for mercies received, as well as sought to for mercies needed. And that he should be praised with singing it, is a duty arising from the reason of things. 'Tis proper and suitable to our frame, and is a natural expression of that admiration of and joy in God that we ought to have, and has a tendency to excite holy affections.

As it [is] a moral duty, so it is never abolished, but continues under the new testament as well as the old. Though their manner of praising with a great variety of musical instruments and the like is abolished, as being suited to that dispensation wherein was much more of outward pomp and ceremony, yet praising God with the music of the voice is moral, and never was abolished.

**Second.** 'Tis a duty more peculiarly suitable to the dispensation under the new testament. Instead of being unsuitable for the new-testament dispensation, it is more abundantly suitable to this than the old-testament...
dispensation, because 'tis an abundantly more glorious and blessed and joyful dispensation than the other. The glory of that, has no glory in comparison of this, II Cor. 3:10.

We have now a more clear and abundant revelation of the glorious and rich grace of God in man's redemption. {It was revealed} then, only in types and shadows. {The old-testament dispensation}, it was a dark time. It was a time of night in comparison {of the new-testament dispensation}. And therefore, the introducing of the gospel dispensation is compared to the day's dawning, and the dayspring from on high visiting the earth, Luke 1:78-79.

Now, there is abundantly more cause of joy and praise given under this dispensation, than ever before under the other {dispensation. The} gospel is glad tidings: glad "tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people," Luke 2:10; {glad tidings of} great and glorious and joyful things: of God's giving his only begotten Son, {and of} his purchasing {salvation, is} now clearly revealed. [The] church now has more abundant cause for the duty of praise, and to employ itself as the church in it, than under the old testament.

When they sang praises under the old testament, those things they chiefly insisted on were gospel things. Because the new-testament dispensation [is] so glorious and joyful, therefore at the first introducing of it, the angels in heaven set us an example: they sang praises on our account, Luke 2:13-14. If they sang praises on our account, surely {it becomes us to do so as well}.

As that dispensation began in the singing of angels, so it will end in eternal songs of praise in glory, as 'tis often represented in Scripture.

I proceed now,

III. To show what are the ends of this duty. And the ends of it are two: viz.,

[First.] To excite religious and holy affection; and,
Secondly. To manifest it.

First. One end of it is to excite and raise devout frames of soul. The duty has an excellent tendency to this, if it be seriously and diligently attended. It has a tendency to help the understanding, and give persons suitable ideas of divine things.

It is oftentimes a means, to give a due sense in the heart, of God and his perfections, and Christ, the grace and love of God through him, and of heavenly enjoyments. There is an excellent and glorious harmony in divine things, of which the harmony that is in singing, seems to give some shadow; and by the resemblance, helps the mind the better to conceive of that sweet harmony that is in divine things. It tends to give the mind an idea of the joyfulness and happiness that there is to be had in God and divine things, for [there] is some shadow of this joyfulness and exultation of soul, and that sweet inward pleasure and peace and delight that holy soul has in God, in the harmoniousness of the voice of music. And so it has a tendency to cast the soul into the same frame and disposition, and to raise suitable ideas and a suitable sense of divine things.

And our singing according to Christ’s appointment, has a tendency to raise devout affections and frames:

1. In ourselves, in the heart of the singer. The voice has a tendency to affect the heart.

2. In others. And this is a great end of public singing, as is intimated in the text: "teaching and admonishing one another in psalms." And there is something that does peculiarly tend to excite holy frames and affections, by hearing an whole assembly joining together with one voice, to sing praise to God. And joining with them, it seems to have some resemblance of the joyful worship of the blessed heavenly inhabitants above.
Second. The second end of this duty, is to express and manifest devout and gracious affections. Holy affections ought in suitable ways to be expressed both before God and before men, though not in an hypocritical and pharisaical and ostentatious manner. Yet there are ways wherein it ought to be done according to divine appointment.

Prayer is appointed that we might express our adoration and dependence {upon God}, and singing is appointed that we may manifest [our devout and gracious affections to him, that we may]:

1. Express [it] to God.
2. Profess it before men.

1. That we may express {our adoration and devotion} to God. And therefore we sing to God. We are directed in the text, to sing "to the Lord." Though God don’t want to be informed, yet 'tis but a proper honor due to God, that should be our own act, to express and declare before God our reverence and esteem of him, and love to him, and desires after him, and thankfulness to him, and the like.

2. To profess it before men. This is one end of all public duties of religion: that therein we might openly profess respect to God. And therefore there is a profession of religion in attending on public duties of religion. Public prayer is appointed that we therein might publicly profess our {respect to God}; attending [God’s] Word preached {is appointed that men might be converted}; baptism {is appointed to signify and seal our ingrafting into Christ}; [the] Lord’s Supper {is appointed that Christ’s death is showed forth}; singing praises {to the Lord is appointed to declare our love, esteem and thankfulness to God}.

APPLICATION.

[Use I.]
First. If it be so that singing God's praises is a duty appointed to be maintained in the Christian church, hence we learn that it is a duty that ought to be performed by all that are members of the visible Christian church that are capable of it. 'Tis as much an appointment of Christ, or a duty that Christ has commanded Christians to do, as coming to meeting is, and attending the preaching of the Word, and therefore ought to be attended by everyone that is capable of it as much, and they are no more excused from it. It is a duty as much incumbent on women as men, and they are not at all more excused from it. And it is not sufficient to answer the appointment of Christ, to join in our minds with others, if we are capable of performing [this duty] ourselves. Of public duties, there are some that we are to attend only in joining with the minister, especially public prayers. And there [are] others that all are to perform them: such is attending on the Lord's Supper, the eating and drinking the bread and wine. 'Tis not sufficient in this that we should only look on and join in our hearts. And so it is also with singing God's praises. If we are capable, we ought not only to join in our hearts {with others}, but should perform ourselves. If one may excuse himself, all may excuse themselves.

And' here, lest any should object that my practice in this matter is not according to my precept, I will take occasion to inform those present of the reason why I sometimes neglect singing: I find I greatly need a little time to take my breath between the first prayer and preaching, and have found that if I don't, it is a great disadvantage and hindrance to me in preaching the Word, and have not had my voice at that liberty, as if I give my spirit a little liberty in singing time. So that thereby the worship of the whole congregation is disadvantaged in hearing the Word, much more than it would be advantaged by the addition of my voice in singing.
Second. Hence, all ought to take good care, to render themselves capable of performing this duty. If it be a duty that we should do, then it is a duty to put ourselves under a capacity to do it.

And in that none are capable of it unless they first learn to sing, hence 'tis the duty of all that are capable, to endeavor to learn to sing. No man whatsoever can be capable of this duty, without first learning something of the art of singing. Singing is an art that none can have, so as to join with an assembly in singing, without learning. We ben't born with this skill, and therefore persons ought to endeavor to learn, especially those that are young, that are most capable of it.

Hence we read of God’s people being taught and instructed how to sing in old times, and having some skillful persons to teach others. I Chron. 15:22, "And Chenaniah, chief of the Levites, was for song: he instructed about the song, because he was skillful."

[Use] II. Hence parents ought to take care that their children should, in due time, be learned to sing. Seeing it is a duty for all Christians, Christian parents certainly ought to take care that their children shall be capable of performing all the duties of Christians.

Christian parents stand bound, as they have offered their children to God in baptism, to bring up their children for God and Christ. And if so, certainly they are bound to take care to bring 'em [up] in God’s worship and service, and therefore to take care that they shall be capable of performing all the required duties of God’s worship.

They offer their children to baptism as members of the visible church, and therefore certainly they ought to take care that they be brought up as members of the visible church, viz., so as to be capable of performing that worship that is required of 'em in the visible church.

'Tis as real a duty for Christian parents to take care that their children be taught to sing, as that they be taught to read.
Use III of Exhortation, to exhort both to gain skill in singing, and improve it in singing God’s praises.

First Motive. [The] excellency of the duty. [It is a] beautiful thing for persons in a Christian assembly to join together {their voices} with one accord, to lift God’s name on high to celebrate his praises. [It is a] resemblance of heaven, as was observed before.

Second [Motive]. The pleasantness of it. Ps. 147[:1], "Praise the Lord: for it is good to sing praises to the Lord; for it is pleasant; and praise is comely."

Third [Motive]. This is the employment in which you hope to spend much of your eternity in.

Fourth [Motive]. Consider what cause God has given you in his providence to praise him: the great mercies [he has shown to you], and even [to] those that are most afflicted.

If you are negligent of his praises, how justly might God be negligent of bestowing mercy on you.

Fifth [Motive]. [Consider] what special and extraordinary cause God has given us in this town, to employ ourselves in this holy exercise. God and Christ have been wonderfully amongst us. There may well be "the shout of a King amongst" us [Num. 23:21]. Many, by the great and saving and infinite mercies that are bestowed on them, have great occasion to spend their lives, and their eternity, in singing praises to God.

Sixth [Motive]. This is a duty of divine worship, that has of late been remarkably blessed [to] many.

And this ought to be looked on as a divine signification to us, to endeavor constantly and diligently to wait on God in this duty.

Directions.

1. Diligently attend to what is sung.
Don’t let your mind be on the ends of the earth, or regarding only the music of the voice.

2. Labor to direct your heart to God in what you sing.

3. Seek earnestly that you may sing with grace in your heart, [that you] may give your heart to God in that duty. [Seek that there] may be inward praise, filled with the spirit.

Seek grace, [and] strength of grace, [and] much of the lively exercise of grace.

[Seek that there may be] much love [and] admiring thoughts of God; much holy joy in God; [and] much thankfulness.
Notes


2 In revising for repreaching, JE deleted the previous portion of this sentence starting with "here is the use of psalms . . . ."

3 In revising for repreaching, JE deleted the remainder of the paragraph.

4 In the MS, this paragraph was marked with a vertical bar in the left margin.

5 In the MS, this Motive was marked with a vertical bar in the left margin.

6 In the MS, this Motive was marked with a vertical bar in the left margin.