

John Wesley, Hymns, and “Directions for Singing”

<http://exploringchurchhistory.com/john-wesley-hymns-directions-singing/>

In *Select Hymns: with Tunes Annexed* (1761), John Wesley included a short guide to singing this collection of Methodist hymns. Titled “Directions for Singing,” Wesley lays out seven principles when it comes to hymns.

1. Learn these tunes before you learn any others, afterwards learn as many as you please.
2. Sing them exactly as they are printed here, without altering or mending them at all; and if you have learned to sing them otherwise, unlearn it as soon as you can.
3. Sing All – see that you join the congregation as frequently as you can. Let not a slight degree of weakness or weariness hinder you. If it is a cross to you, take it up and you will find a blessing.
4. Sing Lustily – and with good courage. Beware of singing as if you were half-dead or half-asleep; but lift up your voice with strength. Be no more afraid of your voice now, nor more ashamed of its being heard, than when you sang the songs of Satan.
5. Sing Modestly – do not bawl so as to be heard above or distinct from the rest of the congregation that you may not destroy the harmony, but strive to unite your voices together so as to make one melodious sound.
6. Sing in time – whatever time is sung, be sure to keep with it. Do not run before and do not stay behind it; but attend closely to the leading voices and move therewith as exactly as you can and take care not to sing too slow. This drawling way naturally steals on all who are lazy; and it is high time to drive it out from among us and sing all our tunes just as quick as we did at first.
7. Sing spiritually – have an eye to God in every word you sing. Aim at pleasing Him more than yourself, or any other creature. In order to attend strictly to the sense of what you sing, and see that your heart is not carried away with the sound, but offered to God continually; so



shall your singing be such as the Lord will approve here, and reward when he cometh in the clouds of heaven.

Though brief, Wesley's principles provide important theological criteria for worship through singing. Addressing the importance of upholding a musical standard, Wesley relates the efficiency of theological teaching through the act of singing. The congregation will benefit spiritually from the sermon as well as the songs of the church. Hence, certain measures must be taken to ensure the musicality and "singability" of the songs, which contain rich theological themes.

Singing has both an individual and corporate dimension. Wesley states that all are to sing. This is not only so that one participates in corporate worship, but simply for the personal edification and sanctification of the individual. As worship is not merely for the glorification of God but also beneficial to the worshiper, singing these hymns is an act of spiritual development for the worshiper.

As corporate worship, singing must be done with an eye towards God and his church and not merely inwardly. For Wesley, singing is a harmonious act of worship in tune, tempo, and sound, but also in spiritual unity for love of God and one another.

Collectively, Wesley's principles foster a deeper understanding of the priesthood of all believers. We take courage as a body of priests. Not laying our confidence in the sound of our voices, but in knowing as priests our words of praise glorify God through the mediation of Christ.

For further study of the hymns of John and Charles Wesley, consult Wesley's Hymns and the Methodist Sunday-School Hymn-Book, A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists, and J. Ernest Rattenbury's classic The Eucharistic Hymns of John And Charles Wesley.