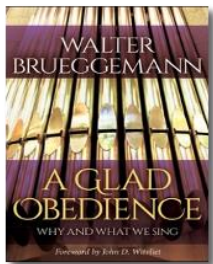


[Review] *A Glad Obedience: Why and What We Sing*, by Walter Brueggemann



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In *A Glad Obedience: Why and What We Sing*, Walter Brueggemann explores the power and purpose of singing the psalms in worship. His book is not just for those interested in music and music-making. He invites us to understand the creativity and role of these ancient songs, which are important to our lives and faith.

The book is divided into two parts. In the first, Brueggemann offers an in-depth analysis of four pivotal psalms: 104 (praise; creation psalm), 105 (praise; general hymns), 106 (lament; community psalm), and 107 (thanksgiving; community psalm). In the second part, Brueggemann focuses on fifteen widely embraced hymns, spanning both traditional and contemporary musical styles. Based on these psalms and hymns, Brueggemann endeavors to answer the question: “Why do we sing?” Singing has a special and deep meaning in liturgy. It symbolizes celebration because it allows individuals to envision who they aspire to be and elevate themselves toward becoming more wholesome versions of themselves. Brueggemann also emphasizes that church singing is “an act of emancipation” (13). It is a liberating act that moves away from expecting something in return (often linked with forgiveness) and away from self-sufficiency (a lack of gratitude). Singing transforms the church environment.

In the second chapter, Brueggemann gives readers ten reasons for singing derived from Psalm 107. When we examine Psalm 107 (especially verses 4–9), we find four crucial elements: characterization of trouble, turning to God, God’s response, and giving thanks (22). Brueggemann appropriately quotes Claus Westermann’s explanation that “thanks is a subordinate to praise . . . because it can become a duty” (18). Often, *thanks* can mix with bargaining. This reminds me of my experience witnessing the grand celebrations held at large Taoist temples in Taiwan when the community gathers to express gratitude to their gods for their prosperity and health. People come together to chant and host the banquets. They also commemorate the deities’ birthdays with significant cultural festival celebrations that have become deeply ingrained rituals. Their gods did something good for them, so they felt compelled to thank them in return.

When thanksgiving is mixed with exchanges of bargaining, it becomes disingenuous. The nature of thanksgiving should be a sincere inner spiritual agency of appreciating faith, not motivated by seeking material gain.

Although Brueggemann thoroughly analyzes why we sing in adversity in Psalm 107, his treatment of the last two verses (42–43) is relatively brief.

42 The upright see it and are glad,
 And all wickedness stops its mouth.
 43 Let those who are wise pay attention to these things
 And consider the steadfast love of the Lord (NRSV).

According to Bellinger (2012), “the narrative psalms of praise also reflect the hope for the future that we have seen in much of the Psalter. These texts not only suggest thanks for deliverance accomplished but also, based on that experience, seek to encourage a community that lives between promise and fulfillment” (84). The conclusion of this psalm has shifted from thanksgiving to wisdom. Psalm 107, much like Psalm 120, concludes with a note of lamentation, serving as a poignant reminder of the importance of wisdom. This theme urges us to be wise and encourages reflection on our actions to foster positive outcomes.

Most importantly, a wise person follows the laws of God and meditates on them day and night, as emphasized in Psalm 1:2. Many of us want to be wise, and that is why we need to sing—because singing can protest, comfort, encourage, educate, proclaim, and, most importantly, heal and reconcile people’s hearts. People sing because they hope for healing and transformation—a better life. Singing should mediate and contribute to healing through a process of liturgical pastoral care (Calitz 2017, 3). Singing lamentations can be another level of praise, all while expressing faith and trust in God and his grace.

Brueggemann’s book compellingly argues that singing in church transcends mere performance, embodying a deep connection between music, faith, and community. Through the lens of Psalms 104–107 and an insightful examination of fifteen popular hymns, he invites us to explore the depth of meaning in our worship music, much like the Israelites expressed their hope and faith through the Song of Miriam.

Singing is not merely about demonstrating how well we can perform. We sing because we want to learn what the psalmist teaches us. The psalms contain God’s words, and singing reflects what we believe. Thus, Brueggemann encourages us to perceive singing as an act of “glad obedience,” offering a way and means to connect with God’s words and with each other, affirming our faith and community.

References

- Bellinger, William H. Jr. *Psalms: A Guide to Studying the Psalter*. 2nd ed. Baker Academic, 2012.
- Calitz, Coenie J. “Healing Liturgy: The Role of Music and Singing.” *Verbum et Ecclesia* 38, no. 1 (2017): 1–9.